



THE BEST
SUPERNATURAL STORIES

of
**WILKIE
COLLINS**

Selected and introduced by
PETER HAINING

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Wilkie Collins (1824–89) was one of the most successful and gifted writers of the Victorian age. Besides such enduring classics as *The Moonstone* and *The Woman In White*, he wrote masterful tales of the supernatural, mystery and detection, which established his reputation as one of the great storytellers of his time. Many critics, including T.S. Eliot, have praised Collins' genius for innovation. He developed the sensation novel into one of the most popular of Victorian literary forms and, for a time, was ranked beside his close friend Charles Dickens in popularity.

Despite a traumatic personal life, including two mistresses and a debilitating dependence on opium, he continued to work almost to the end. From his impressive array of short stories, the best are gathered here. Besides such classic tales as 'A Terribly Strange Bed', 'Mad Monkton', and 'The Dead Hand', Peter Haining's collection includes several rarities like 'My Black Mirror', a humorous tale of the occult, and 'The Ghost's Touch', one of the earliest stories to link sex and the supernatural.

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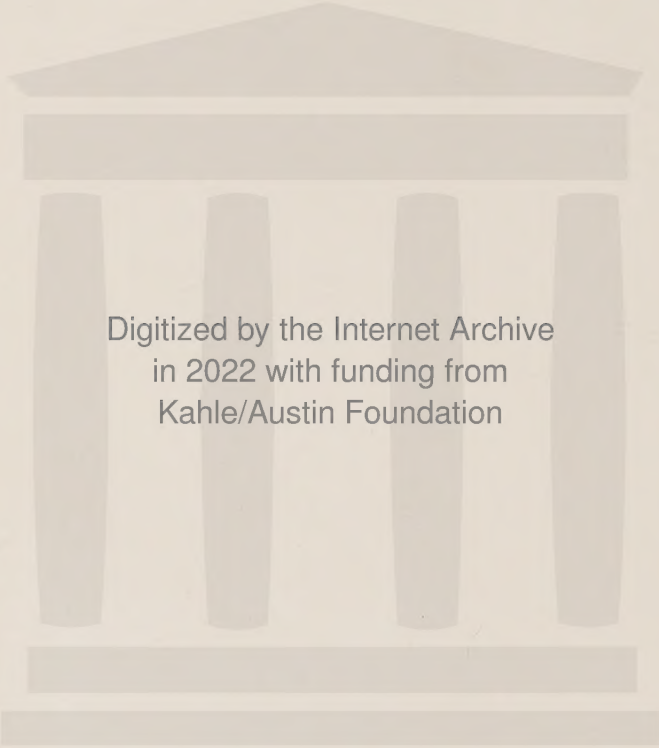
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The Best Supernatural Stories of WILKIE COLLINS

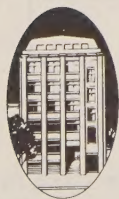
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*The Best Supernatural
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WILKIE COLLINS

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PETER HAINING



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Introduction

'Wilkie Collins,' an anonymous reviewer wrote in the *Pall Mall Gazette* just over a hundred years ago, 'is a master of the creepy effect, as of pounded ice dropped down the back.' According to Edith Birkhead in her seminal work, *The Tale of Terror* (1921), Collins was also a creator of 'elaborate plots of hair-raising events . . . he made a cult of terror'. Yet, despite the fact Miss Birkhead maintains that among his literary descendants may be numbered Bram Stoker, Sax Rohmer, and even Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, it has been Collins's fate in the years which have followed to be best remembered as the friend and collaborator of the great Charles Dickens.

Such, surely, is scarcely fair to the man who wrote the first detective novel in English, *The Moonstone*; was one of the founders of the school of 'Sensation Novels' typified by his thriller, *The Woman in White*; and, as this collection demonstrates, was also a master of the supernatural and mystery short story. On the centenary of his death, it is, therefore, a satisfying task for any enthusiast of these two genres to have the opportunity to select and introduce some of the best tales from the pen of such a gifted and remarkable man.

Collins himself has spared me the essential task of sketching in his early history, for in 1862 he wrote the following interesting short biography of himself for one of his London publishers:

I was born in London in the year 1824. I am the eldest son of the late William Collins, Member of the English Royal Academy of Arts, and famous as a painter of English life and scenery. My godfather, after whom I was named, was Sir David Wilkie, the illustrious Scottish Painter.

I was educated at a private school. At the age of thirteen, I went with my father and mother to reside for two years in Italy—where I learnt more which has since been of use to me, among the pictures, the scenery and the people, than I ever learnt at school. After my return to England, my father proposed sending me to Oxford University with a view to my entering

the Church. But I had no vocation for that way of life, and I preferred trying mercantile pursuits. I had already begun to write in secret, and mercantile pursuits lost all attraction for me. My father—uniformly kind and considerate to his children—tried making me a Barrister next. I went through the customary forms (with little or no serious study), and was ‘called to the Bar’ at Lincoln’s Inn. But I have never practised my profession. An author I was to be, and an author I became in the year 1848.

I had, in the year 1847, completed the first volume of a classical romance, called *Antonina; or, The Fall of Rome*, when my father died. I put aside the romance to do honour to my father’s genius, to the best of my ability, by writing the history of his Life and his pictures. This was my first published book. I then returned to my classical romance, completed it in three volumes, and found a publisher for it. The success (in England) of *Antonina* decided my career. I became what I am now, a writer by profession.

Besides my novels such as *Basil*, *The Dead Secret* and *The Woman in White*, I have written a number of short stories, essays, sketches and etc in the periodicals conducted by Charles Dickens called *Household Words* and *All The Year Round*. I am also the author of three stage Dramas, *The Lighthouse*, *The Frozen Deep* and *The Red Vial*. *The Lighthouse* was first acted by Amateurs at the house of Charles Dickens who played the principal character. *The Frozen Deep* was also acted by the same company before The Queen, and afterwards in public for charitable purpose. *The Red Vial* was performed at The Olypmic Theatre and though not successful with the public was greatly liked by the actors.

These are the only events worth noticing in my life. My father’s position as a painter made my early-home circumstances easy ones. He left his family (his widow, myself and my brother Charles) with an income to live on—which, though not the income of rich people, was sufficient for all their wants. Apart from my books—my life presents no events which have any claim on the public interest, or on your attention.

Like many authors before and since, Wilkie Collins is guilty in that last sentence of unjustified self-depreciation; for—his literary achievements apart—he can now be revealed as a man who scorned Victorian conventions, never married but took two mistresses, and for many years was a prodigious addict to opium.

The portraits and photographs that have survived of Wilkie Collins the author also tend to rather mellow the man—if we are to believe the following description of him written by Julian Hawthorne, the son of the American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, who met Wilkie in London in 1870 at the height of his fame. For here is a real warts-and-all description of the man whom the critics then described as the leading popular author of the day, second only to Dickens. Hawthorne wrote:

He was soft, plump and pale, suffered from various ailments, his liver was

wrong, his heart weak, his lungs faint, his stomach incompetent, he ate too much and the wrong things. He had a big head, a dingy complexion, was somewhat bald, and his full beard was of a light brown colour. His air was of mild discomfort and fractiousness; he had a queer way of holding his hand, which was small, plump, and unclean, hanging up by the wrist, like a rabbit on its hind legs. He had strong opinions and prejudices, but his nature was obviously kind and lovable, and a humorous vein would occasionally be manifest. One felt he was unfortunate and needed succour.

Succour, though, was actually *not* something that Collins was in need of. Not only had he enjoyed the close friendship and encouragement of Charles Dickens since they had first met in 1851, but from the same time had lived first with one mistress, Caroline Elizabeth Graves, and then, when Caroline left him to marry another man in 1868, had cohabited with a certain Martha Rudd, by whom he had three illegitimate children—two daughters, Marian and Harriet, and in 1874 a son, William Charles. All the children were given the surname Dawson, and though Collins never denied this morganatic family to his close friends, those in society who knew of it were scandalized. When, later in his life, it became known that Collins was also heavily dependent on opium the image of him as an immoral bohemian was complete, in the eyes of ‘respectable’ society.*

Such a life could not, though, have been lived without its cost, and this was clearly in evidence when Julian Hawthorne visited Collins’s London residence in Gloucester Place. Yet it had also provided him with the experiences and insights to fire his story-teller’s imagination and therewith create, among other things, several of the tales collected here. I have deliberately selected stories which span virtually all of Wilkie Collins’s writing life and are, in a number of cases, a direct result of the life he was leading.

As Wilkie Collins has admitted in his autobiographical sketch, he was interested in becoming a writer from an early age and, indeed, had revealed a talent for story-telling while still at boarding school in London. One of the senior boys, who was ‘as fond of hearing stories when he retired for the night as the oriental despot to whose literary tastes we are indebted for *The Arabian Nights*’ (according to Collins writing some years later), made the quaking youngster entertain him each evening. The price of refusal or dissatisfaction was, apparently, a beating with a cat-o’-nine-tails!

Collins astutely realized that he could utilize his own fear by telling

* The full story of Collins’s private life has at last been uncovered for the first time as a result of painstaking research by William M. Clarke, who is married to the author’s great granddaughter, and published in *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins* (1988) to which the interested reader is referred.

ghost stories, and there is evidence that he drew on some of the classic accounts of haunting to keep the bullying older boy happy. Some of these stories he even began to scribble down, and by the time he was in his teens was sending what he considered to be the best of these efforts to magazines—without, however, much success. Undeterred, he continued to enliven his hours when studying law by writing, and in August 1843 the first essay to bear his name was published in *The Illuminated Magazine*.

The item was entitled ‘The Last Stage Coach’, and though it was ostensibly a description of how the railways were inexorably taking over from the old stage coaches, it also revealed the nineteen-year-old author’s interest in fantasy. Several passages were enlivened by wildly imaginative descriptions—such as a futuristic stage coach riding across the skies ‘with a Railway Director strapped fast to each wheel and a stoker between the teeth of each of four horses’. Earlier writers than Collins had predicted flight, but in this brief reference we can see an imagination that, had it chosen, might just have become a pioneer writer of science fiction as well as mystery and detection.

Two years later, when visiting Paris, Collins experienced a perhaps more significant event in his life. While wandering through the back streets of the capital he came across a morgue and, unable to restrain his curiosity, went in. Lying on a slab, and only recently brought in, was a corpse from which the young Englishman could not tear his eyes. ‘It was the body of a young girl,’ he was to write years later, ‘that had just been fished out of the river. As her bosom was black and blue I suppose she had been beaten into a state of insensibility and then flung into the Seine.’

The sight of that pathetic corpse was indelibly fixed on Collins’s mind, and some fifteen years later he was to use the self-same setting for one of the climactic scenes of his great novel, *The Woman in White*. He also made a point of visiting other morgues, and from his visit to the Frankfurt morgue—or ‘Deadhouse’ as he like to call these places—he gained the inspiration for one of the plays he mentioned in his preamble, *The Red Vial* (1858). In this morgue, he was told, because of a prevailing fear in Germany about burying people who might not be dead, it was common practice to tie the fingers of each corpse to a bell so that any movement would make the attendants aware that all life had not quite been extinguished. It may have seemed like a good idea for a dramatic incident, but it only brought forth laughter from the audience—in particular a scene where a naked arm appeared around a mortuary door to pull one of the alarm bells! Although Collins had to accept failure with *The Red Vial*, he salvaged the basic idea and later used the idea in a novel, *Jezebel’s Daughter*,

published in 1880.

The stage, in fact, had also exerted a fascination for Collins from his youth, and following appearances in the drawing-rooms of London friends in the late 1840s he made his debut on the public stage in February 1850 at the Soho Theatre in Dean Street, playing a small role in a French play called *A Court Duel* which he himself had adapted for the stage.

Though Collins had no way of knowing it at the time, his latent writing skill had already come to the notice of the man who was to crucially affect his future. For one of the first subscribers to his biography of his father, *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, R.A.*, published in 1848, had been none other than Charles Dickens. It was, though, the theatre which actually first brought the two men face-to-face and began a friendship which endured for the rest of Dickens's life.


It was a man with the curious name of Augustus Egg, who had appeared with Collins in some of his drawing-room productions—and in similar engagements with the equally stage-struck Charles Dickens—who effected the introduction in March 1851. Dickens was then forty years old, had already written several of what were to prove his most popular works including *Pickwick Papers* (1836), *Oliver Twist* (1839), and *David Copperfield* (1850), and for two years had been editing his own successful weekly magazine, *Household Words*.

Though Collins was some thirteen years younger than the great writer, an immediate affinity developed between them. Both were fascinated by the stage, were gregarious by nature, like travel, and loved having a good time. Collins soon became one of that famous circle of 'Dickens's young men' who contributed to his publications. The friendship was sealed when the two men appeared on stage together, first in a comedy aptly titled, *Not So Bad As We Seem*, and then a double-bill, *Used Up*, by Charles Mathews, and a farce, *Mr Nightingale's Diary*, which Dickens himself had co-written with Mark Lemon, the editor of *Punch*. As the playbill for these productions which is reproduced here shows, Collins had substantial roles in both.

Not surprisingly, his friendship with Dickens redoubled Collins's determination to make a career for himself as a successful writer—and at the same time presented him with an entrée to his new friend's magazine. Even in the short time they had known each other, Collins had soon realized that Dickens was just as fascinated by mystery and the supernatural as he was—his novels and the kind of tales he featured in *Household Words* also emphasized the fact—and consequently he sat down to write a story in this vein. What became his debut story for the magazine has since been adjudged to be among the most

memorable he ever wrote. It was called 'A Terribly Strange Bed' and appeared in the issue of 24 April 1852. Appropriately, then, it opens this collection.

It is a sinister tale which provides an interesting link with the Gothic tales of horror of the previous century, featuring as it does a narrator who finds himself in a situation of mounting terror at the mercy of a terrible machine of torture. George Locke in his *Spectrum of Fantasy* (1980) has called the tale 'a locked room mystery classic', while Jack Sullivan in his *Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural* (1986) claims, 'The story is deservedly famous as one of the best descriptions of terror and horror.'

According to Kenneth Robinson, Collins's biographer in *Wilkie Collins* (1951), 'A Terribly Strange Bed' is said to have been based on fact, though quite when and how the author came across the idea of a four-poster bed designed to smother anyone foolish enough to sleep in it has not come to light. As the setting for the story is Paris, it may perhaps have resulted from one of the young man's visits to the city—in between prowling around the morgue. It remains a powerful tale which has well stood the test of time. 

The story is also important because it immediately demonstrated that Collins had a special facility for describing fear and mystery, and he soon realized that this was the kind of story-telling most likely to earn him success. Indeed, once the story had been published he began a similar tale which he first called 'The Monktons of Wincot Abbey', but later changed to the much more evocative, 'Mad Monkton'.

This next story proved to be a fully fledged tale of the supernatural featuring a haunting and a family curse. The central character, Alfred Monkton, is in danger of being haunted by the ghost of his uncle—who has just died abroad—unless the corpse is returned to England for burial. Tragically, the corpse is lost at sea on the return journey and the hapless Monkton awaits to see what fate has in store for him. As soon as Dickens read this second contribution from his new friend, he decided it was quite unsuitable for *Household Words*. The reason was simple: the tale dealt with hereditary insanity. Dickens felt that such a theme could easily upset any reader from 'among those numerous families in which there is such a taint'. In rejecting the story for his magazine, however, he was at pains to praise Collins's style and inventiveness and assure him that the pages of *Household Words* were open for other less controversial work.

It is perhaps due to this emphatic rider from his mentor that Collins did not destroy the story of 'Mad Monkton', but put it away in a drawer in the hope that one day it might prove acceptable to some other editor. He found such a man three years later when the story—

just as Collins had written it and Dickens had rejected it—appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* for December 1855. Later still Collins included it in the collection of tales he published as *The Queen of Hearts* in 1859. (Interestingly, a French review of this book in *Revue des Deux Mondes* singled out 'Mad Monkton' as evidence that the author was destined for success as a novelist.)

The year 1852 also saw the publication of Collins's first major novel, *Basil*, which again dealt with the normally taboo subject of infidelity and a young man's merciless revenge on the seducer of his worthless wife. It seems evident that Collins must have sent a copy of the book to Dickens with some trepidation—but the unqualified letter of praise he received from the older man no doubt swept away any lingering feelings of disappointment he may have felt about 'Mad Monkton'. In a letter written in December 1852 Dickens said:

The story contains admirable writing and many clear evidences of a very delicate discrimination of character. I have made Basil's acquaintance with great gratification and entertain a high respect for him. I hope that I shall become intimate with many worthy descendants of his, who are yet in the limbo of creatures waiting to be born.

Such praise was music to the ears of young Collins, and from this point on he never looked back in his writing career.

Apart from their Thespian activities together, Collins and Dickens also began taking trips abroad, and it was following one such 'Grand Tour' through Europe in 1854 that Dickens began to plan his Christmas Number of *Household Words*. The issue was to be entitled 'The Seven Poor Travellers' and he invited Collins to imagine himself as one of these men and contribute a story for inclusion. What he produced under the unprepossessing original title of 'The Fourth Poor Traveller' was, in fact, his first excursion into the realm of detective fiction.

It seems clear that this story—better known now as 'A Stolen Letter'—was influenced by the work of the American, Edgar Allan Poe, whose recent books both Collins and Dickens had read and admired. In his collection *Tales* (1845) Poe had written what are acknowledged as the first detective short stories in literature, and Collins undoubtedly drew his inspiration for the fourth traveller's tale from the American's 'The Purloined Letter'. This said, the story was none the less the spark that ignited Collins's interest in the tale of 'ratiocination' (as Poe called his first detective stories) and was later to inspire what is without question the first detective novel, *The Moonstone*.

The following year, Collins took another leaf from Poe's book to

write a novella called 'The Yellow Mask' which he based on the American's story 'The Masque of the Red Death'. Running to over one hundred pages it appeared in *Household Words* from 7 to 28 July. An even longer story he wrote about the French revolution, entitled 'Sister Rose', also appeared in 1855. Again in his biography of Collins, Kenneth Robinson has made an interesting observation about this last story:

There are striking similarities between Dickens's novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and Wilkie's story of 'Sister Rose' which appeared in 1855. It is also clear from their correspondence that Wilkie was more than once consulted during the writing of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and that his suggestions were always carefully considered. All this indicates, not of course that the novel is derivative in any but a minor way, but that Wilkie Collins was beginning to exercise a certain influence upon his friend's work.

For Christmas 1855, Dickens again planned a special Christmas issue of his magazine, to be called 'The Holly Tree Inn', and he invited Collins to contribute. The result, a story called, 'The Ostler', was to prove another significant piece of work. The story concerns an ostler who has a frightening premonitory dream in which he is threatened by a woman with a knife. Later, he meets the woman in real life . . .

Dickens was delighted with the story; and so was Collins. So pleased, in fact, that when he decided to include it in a later collection, *The Queen of Hearts*, he expanded it considerably and retitled it 'The Dream Woman'. Later still, he rewrote it again for use during his public readings in the United States, introduced new characters and incidents and called it 'The Dream Woman: A Mystery in Four Narratives'. To add to this complex situation, the last version has also appeared in America under the title 'Alice Warlock'.

Both of these two later versions of the story have been readily available in the intervening years, while the original in *Household Words* has not to my knowledge ever been reprinted. I believe Collins's first version of the haunted ostler to be the most effective telling of the story and have therefore included it in this selection.

In 1856, Collins was approached by the London publishing house of Smith, Elder & Co for a collection of his stories. He duly obliged by selecting the best of his *Household Words* contributions, adding a specially written tale of double identity, 'The Lady of Glenwith Grange', and devising a connecting thread linking all the stories together by way of little introductions. The book, entitled *After Dark*, not only pleased British readers, but also caught the eye of the American publishing house of Harper Brothers, who issued their own edition and asked Collins if he would like to contribute stories direct

to their own prestigious publication, *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. Collins was excited at the thought of breaking into the American market, and in February 1857 he submitted the tale of 'The Siege of the Black Cottage' to Harper's ahead of any UK publication.

It is an impressive horror story—the experiences of a young girl trapped inside an old cottage on her own with two sinister villains outside trying to break in and rob the premises. What makes it notable is that the story is told by the girl herself, and Collins demonstrates a remarkable ability to get inside the female psyche in such a terrifying situation. I am surprised to discover that this will mark the story's first appearance in an anthology.

That same year Dickens confirmed the high opinion he now held of Collins's talent when he suggested they might collaborate on a book together. Dickens asked him whether he had any suggestions on what the theme might be. Because both men loved travel, Collins came up with the idea of a walking tour in Cumberland which would surely provide some excellent material. He proposed that they might both augment the text with a story or two.

'The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices'—as Dickens and Collins called their collaboration—ran for several weeks in *Household Words* in October 1857 and was, once again, a tremendous success with readers. And, perhaps equally predictably, Collins's added story was another excursion into the macabre, inserted into Chapter Two of the adventures. It has since become known as 'The Dead Hand' and is reprinted here from that original magazine appearance.

Just how close the two men were was demonstrated even more dramatically early in 1859 when Dickens, after a quarrel with the publishers of *Household Words*, resigned his editorship and started his own rival magazine. Without a second thought, Collins (and most of Dickens's other 'young men') decamped with their chief and threw all their energies into making the new magazine, *All The Year Round*, even more successful. For the first Christmas issue, which Dickens entitled 'The Haunted House', Collins came up with yet another departure in style—a ghost story that mixed thrills with wry humour. He called it 'The Ghost in the Cupboard Room' and Dickens was later to tell his friend that he numbered this story among his favourites. The author himself said, when asked if he had a formula for his short stories, 'Make 'em laugh, make 'em weep, make 'em wait!' and the reader will find all these elements in this tale. (It is perhaps not altogether surprising that Collins should have occasionally enjoyed writing humour, for he was also a close friend of Edward Lear, the creator of the famous 'Nonsense Rhymes', and indeed so alike physically were the two men that Collins was several times mistaken for Lear!)

That same year, Collins assembled the second book of his short stories, *The Queen of Hearts*, in which he again linked the tales with a chain of narrative and included a specially written new story. This was 'The Biter Bit', which has the distinction of being the very first humorous detective short story. It represents another milestone in its author's career and is also included in this collection. Collins has taken the genre that Poe had initiated another step further forward; it now merely remained for him to give it the first full-length novel.

An even more profound change occurred in Collins's life at this time when, returning home by moonlight from a dinner in north London, he was suddenly startled by the figure of a beautiful young woman in white robes who ran screaming from an old house. Collins set off in pursuit of her—and by so doing irrevocably affected the course of his life. For the woman, when he caught up with her, was to become first his mistress and then the inspiration for one of his most famous novels.

The pretty fugitive's name was Caroline Graves and she had apparently been kept a virtual prisoner in the house by her deranged husband from whom she had finally managed to escape. Although Collins had long decried the institution of marriage, he immediately fell in love with the girl and took her into his home. Here she was to stay as his mistress until 1868, when she left him as suddenly as she had appeared for another man.

The couple's meeting seemed like a drama straight from the pages of fiction—and Collins seized on the idea as the basis for a novel which he understandably entitled *The Woman in White*. This famous mystery story, with the unforgettable figure of the villainous Count Fosco, requires no discussion here other than to affirm that it helped create a whole school of 'Sensation Novels'—a genre, as Winifred Hughes has written in her study *The Maniac in the Cellar* (1980), that 'had no perceptible infancy; its greatest triumph, as well as its masterpieces, coincided with its initial appearance. It sprang full-blown, nearly simultaneously, from the minds of Wilkie Collins, Mrs Henry Wood and M.E. Braddon.'

The success of this book made Wilkie Collins a household name almost overnight, a man to be ranked beside his mentor, Charles Dickens. But though it brought him wealth and acclaim, in his private life the poor health which had nagged at him for years was now turning into a torture, with chronic gout being the worst of his complaints. Prescribed opium to ease his pain, this rapidly progressed from being a comfort to an addiction, as Kenneth Robinson has explained:

As his general health deteriorated, so his reliance upon the drug became

more absolute. Then he began to need more opium to counteract the effect of opium itself and soon the faithful servant had become the tyrannical master. So Wilkie Collins came with tragic inevitability to join the company of Coleridge and de Quincey. What is extraordinary is that so frail a constitution could stand up to excessive drug-taking for so long, and that he was able to earn a good living by his pen right up to the end.

Collins did not hide his addiction from his friends, and indeed admitted that he wrote what was to prove his second masterpiece, *The Moonstone*, in 1868, while actually under the influence of the drug. He confessed to a friend, the actress Mary Anderson, 'When the book was finished, I was not only pleased and astonished at the finale, but did not recognise it as my own!' Opium itself forms an important thread throughout the book as it unfolds the story of the search for the missing moonstone of the title and the tireless enquiries of Sergeant Cuff, 'the first and most significant detective in English literature', according to Chris Steinbrunner and Otto Penzler in their *Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection* (1976). Cuff was, in fact, based on a real Scotland Yard detective named Jonathan Whicher. (As a matter of note, *The Moonstone* has been filmed twice, in 1915 and 1934, although it has not yet enjoyed the distinction of *The Woman in White*—filmed three times in 1917, 1929, and 1949—of also being adapted for the stage and television.)

Among other stories from this period of Collins's life in which the influence of 'opium dreams' can be sensed is the tale 'My Black Mirror', which is to be found in a collection entitled *My Miscellanies* (1863) that appeared between *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. It is a fascinating little story utilizing the legend of the occultist Dr John Dee, and it has the hallucinatory quality about it of a drug-induced dream. It is another of Collins's stories included herein that I have never seen anthologized before.

Yet, as Kenneth Robinson observed, despite all his heavy use of opium—and one account by the novelist, Hall Caine, says that in the last years of his life Collins was taking as much as a *wineglass* full of laudanum several times a day—he continued to write busily. Following the departure of Caroline Graves in 1868 he brought into his home Martha Rudd, a less pretty and quieter woman than his previous mistress. She, however, ran his household with unobtrusive efficiency and gave him three children. The only real unhappiness to strike him at this time was the death of Dickens in June 1870.

Although the two men had seen less of each other in the previous few years because of the demands of their work, they remained close friends to the end. Collins was devastated by the death of the man who had played such an influential part in his life—he missed his

companionship, too, the days of travel, the occasional riotous living and, as seems very likely, the odd secret dalliance with other women.

Collins was intrigued to discover that the last book his friend had been working on had been the kind of 'Sensation Novel' at which he was so practised. Had Dickens been trying to match Collins at his own game with the unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood*? Collins would never know—but *we* know that when Collins was approached to complete the book because, it was believed, he knew what had been in his friend's mind, he politely but firmly refused.

Shortly afterwards, however, Collins found himself being invited to go on the same kind of reading tours Dickens had so successfully undertaken. In 1873, he crossed to America and, helped by his earlier Thespian activities, was soon as widely popular with audiences as his friend had been. It was while he was delivering his revised version of 'The Dream Woman' that he came across an account of a most unusual crime which had occurred in the USA early in the nineteenth century and which gave him the idea for 'John Jago's Ghost; or, The Dead Alive.'

The account was contained in a pamphlet entitled *The Trial, Confessions and Conviction of Jesse and Stephen Boorn for the Murder of Russell Colvin, and the Return of the Man Supposed to have been Murdered*, written by the former Lieutenant Governor of Vermont, Leonard Sergeant. From the report, Collins learned what a sensation the trial had caused, and in between his engagements as he criss-crossed America he dashed off the story of John Jago. Appropriately, the story was first published in an American magazine, *The Home Journal* in December 1873, where Collins prefaced it with these remarks:

It may not be amiss to add, for the benefit of incredulous readers, that all the 'improbable events' in the story are matters of fact, taken from the printed narrative. Anything which 'looks like the truth' is, in nine cases out of ten, the invention of the author.

Returning once again to England, Collins now confined himself more and more to his home in Gloucester Place. His health was declining rapidly and his use of opium made it difficult to move freely in public. His pen was never still, however, and though he did not reach the heights of *The Woman in White* or *The Moonstone* again, three of his later works, *The Haunted Hotel* (1879), *The Evil Genius* (1886), and *Blind Love* (1890), were well reviewed and still repay reading today. The last of these stories, *Blind Love*, a story of forbidden love and lust, had distinct echoes about it of *The Woman in White*. In fact, it was incomplete at the time of Collins's death. It was completed by the novelist Walter Besant—a fact which, when Collins's opium addiction became

known, led to suggestions that Besant had ghosted several other of Collins's later novels. This charge has since been effectively rebutted.

Collins did not abandon the short story field in his last years—and I have selected two further items to complete this volume. 'Who Killed Zebedee?' represents another 'first' for Collins. It is the dying confession of a man who as a young and ambitious police detective had effectively concealed the solution of a murder case—and with it, Collins created what has since become a whole school of stories about police corruption. The tale made its first appearance in print in the *Seaside Library* of 26 January 1881, and though later collected in the final volume of Collins's stories entitled *Little Novels* (1887) has rarely been reprinted.

The last story, 'The Ghost's Touch', which he submitted to *Harper's Weekly* for the issue of 23 October 1885, explored one of his most enduring themes, the supernatural, and combined it with his other abiding interest in sexuality. The story concerns a woman who is protected from being sexually molested by her brother-in-law by the ghost of her dead husband, and is to a degree an early working of the theme which Collins explored in his last novel, *Blind Love*. It is also a remarkable story in its own right and one that the passage of a hundred years has done little to diminish.

Collins ended his days in a haze of pain made bearable only by opium, though attempts were obviously being made to prevent his over-indulgence. In a note scribbled to Frank Beard on Saturday 21 September 1889 we read, 'I am dying, good friend—come if you can. I am too muddled to write. They are driving me mad by forbidding the laudanum.'

Collins told another friend that he sometimes saw 'a green woman with tusks waiting to bite a piece out of my shoulder'. His eyes, too, had become cruelly distended and by his own description looked like 'enormous bags of blood'. In truth, he ended his days as someone looking perhaps stranger and more terrifying than anything he had ever invented in his fiction.

Wilkie Collins died on Monday 23 September 1889, his name as a novelist already eclipsed by others and his contributions to the mystery and supernatural genres growing dim in the public mind. It has taken many years for his achievements to be fully recognized, and I for one tend to share the opinion of anthologist James Carpenter writing in his *Cabinet of Gems* (1958):

Wilkie Collins suffered the misfortune of being born before his time. Not that he lived and died unknown and unappreciated—he was for many years a partner and collaborator of Charles Dickens—but in his day the vogue for mystery fiction had not yet become a passion. The detective story was

Collins's special gift, and I have no doubt that were he living today he would be the most popular writer. This because among conventional plotters he would have the inestimable advantage of being a writer. Few people who like a good mystery have not been captivated by *The Woman in White*; no one ever resisted *The Moonstone*. The latter is the masterpiece of the genre.

Nor should the acclaim for Collins end there—for other critics have equally applauded his skill with the supernatural: Benjamin Fisher in *Horror Literature* (1981) declaring: 'All these stories reveal Collins's technique of grounding his horrors in fact, and domesticating the old ghost-in-a-bedsheet into realistic characters.' And David Pryce-Jones added in his essay, 'Man of Mystery' (1982), 'Other writers of the day like Edgar Allan Poe or Sheridan Le Fanu also dealt in spectral appearances and melodrama of every kind, but Wilkie Collins paid attention to correct detail as well.'

The American anthologist, Dilys Winn, in her excellent collection, *Murder Ink* (1984), has also suggested that Collins is one of the few writers whose stories still deserve to be read aloud. 'Draw your chair close to the fire and gather the family round', she has written. 'These are stories that somehow sound wonderful if you emote for all you're worth. So much the better if it's storming outside, the phone wires are down and you have to read by gaslight. A lap rug thrown over your knees is not inappropriate either.'

To which I can only add 'Well said!'—and trust you will still be able to sleep well after enjoying the unique thrills and chills served up by Wilkie Collins in the pages which follow . . .

PETER HAINING
Boxford, Suffolk
December 1988

THE ILLUSTRATED
WILKIE COLLINS

Tales of Mystery and the Supernatural by the
Father of the Detective Novel

1

A Terribly Strange Bed

The most difficult likeness I ever had to take, not even excepting my first attempt in the art of portrait-painting, was a likeness of a gentleman named Faulkner. As far as drawing and colouring went, I had no particular fault to find with my picture; it was the *expression* of the sitter which I had failed in rendering—a failure quite as much his fault as mine. Mr Faulkner, like many other persons by whom I have been employed, took it into his head that he must assume an expression, because he was sitting for his likeness; and, in consequence, contrived to look as unlike himself as possible, while I was painting him. I had tried to divert his attention from his own face, by talking with him on all sorts of topics. We had both travelled a great deal, and felt interested alike in many subjects connected with our wanderings over the same countries. Occasionally, while we were discussing our travelling experiences, the unlucky set-look left his countenance, and I began to work to some purpose; but it was always disastrously sure to return again, before I had made any great progress—or, in other words, just at the very time when I was most anxious that it should not reappear. The obstacle thus thrown in the way of the satisfactory completion of my portrait, was the more to be deplored, because Mr Faulkner's natural expression was a very remarkable one. I am not an author, so I cannot describe it. I ultimately succeeded in painting it, however; and this was the way in which I achieved my success:

On the morning when my sitter was coming to me for the fourth time, I was looking at his portrait in no very agreeable mood—looking at it, in fact, with the disheartening conviction that the picture would be a perfect failure, unless the expression in the face represented were thoroughly altered and improved from nature. The only method of accomplishing this successfully, was to make Mr Faulkner, somehow, insensibly forget that he was sitting for his picture. What topic could I lead him to talk on, which would entirely engross his attention while

I was at work on his likeness?—I was still puzzling my brains to no purpose on this subject when Mr Faulkner entered my studio; and, shortly afterwards, an accidental circumstance gained for me the very object which my own ingenuity had proven unequal to compass.

While I was 'setting' my palette, my sitter amused himself by turning over some portfolios. He happened to select one for special notice, which contained several sketches that I had made in the streets of Paris. He turned over the first five views rapidly enough; but when he came to the sixth, I saw his face flush directly; and observed that he took the drawing out of the portfolio, carried it to the window, and remained silently absorbed in the contemplation of it for full five minutes. After that, he turned round to me; and asked very anxiously, if I had any objection to part with that sketch.

It was the least interesting drawing of the series—merely a view in one of the streets running by the backs of the houses in Palais Royal. Some four or five of these houses were comprised in the view, which was of no particular use to me in any way; and which was too valueless, as a work of Art, for me to think of *selling* it to my kind patron. I begged his acceptance of it, at once. He thanked me quite warmly; and then, seeing that I looked a little surprised at the odd selection he had made from my sketches, laughingly asked me if I could guess why he had been so anxious to become possessed of the view which I had given him.

'Probably'—I answered—'there is some remarkable historical association connected with that street at the back of the Palais Royal, of which I am ignorant.'

'No'—said Mr Faulkner—'at least, none that *I* know of. The only association connected with the place in *my* mind, is a purely personal association. Look at this house in your drawing—the house with the waterpipe running down it from top to bottom. I once passed a night there—a night I shall never forget to the day of my death. I have had some awkward travelling adventures in my time; but *that* adventure—! Well, well! suppose we begin the sitting. I make but a bad return for your kindness in giving me the sketch, by thus wasting your time in mere talk.'

He had not long occupied the sitter's chair (looking pale and thoughtful), when he returned—involuntarily, as it seemed—to the subject of the house in the back street. Without, I hope, showing any undue curiosity, I contrived to let him see that I felt a deep interest in everything he now said. After two or three preliminary hesitations, he at last, to my great joy, fairly started on the narrative of his adventure. In the interest of his subject he soon completely forgot that he was sitting for his portrait—the very expression that I wanted, came over

his face—my picture proceeded towards completion, in the right direction, and to the best purpose. At every fresh touch, I felt more and more certain that I was now getting the better of my grand difficulty; and I enjoyed the additional gratification of having my work lightened by the recital of a true story, which possessed, in my estimation, all the excitement of the most exciting romance.

This, as nearly as I can recollect, is, word for word, how Mr Faulkner told me the story:

Shortly before the period when gambling-houses were suppressed by the French Government, I happened to be staying at Paris with an English friend. We were both young men then, and lived, I am afraid, a very dissipated life, in the very dissipated city of our sojourn. One night, we were idling about the neighbourhood of the Palais Royal, doubtful to what amusement we should next betake ourselves. My friend proposed a visit to Frascati's; but his suggestion was not to my taste. I knew Frascati's, as the French saying is, by heart; had lost and won plenty of five-franc pieces there, 'merely for the fun of the thing,' until it was 'fun' no longer; and was thoroughly tired, in fact, of all the ghastly respectabilities of such a social anomaly as a respectable gambling-house. 'For Heaven's sake'—said I to my friend—'let us go somewhere where we can see a little genuine, blackguard, poverty-stricken gaming, with no false gingerbread glitter thrown over it at all. Let us get away from fashionable Frascati's, to a house where they don't mind letting in a man with a ragged coat, or a man with no coat, ragged, or otherwise.'—'Very well,' said my friend, 'we needn't go out of the Palais Royal to find the sort of company you want. Here's the place, just before us; as blackguard a place, by all report, as you could possibly wish to see.' In another minute we arrived at the door, and entered the house, the back of which you have drawn in your sketch.

When we got upstairs, and had left our hats and sticks with the doorkeeper, we were admitted into the chief gambling-room. We did not find many people assembled there. But, few as the men were who looked up at us on our entrance, they were all types—miserable types—of their respective classes. We had come to see blackguards; but these men were something worse. There is a comic side, more or less appreciable, in all blackguardism—here, there was nothing but tragedy; mute, weird tragedy. The quiet in the room was horrible. The thin, haggard, long-haired young man, whose sunken eyes fiercely watched the turning up of the cards, never spoke; the flabby, fat-faced, pimply player, who pricked his piece of paste-board perseveringly, to register how often black won, and how often red—never spoke; the dirty, wrinkled old man, with the vulture eyes, and the darned great

coat, who had lost his last *sous*, and still looked on desperately, after he could play no longer—never spoke. Even the voice of the croupier sounded as if it were strangely dulled and thickened in the atmosphere of the room. I had entered the place to laugh; I felt that if I stood quietly looking on much longer, I should be more likely to weep. So, to excite myself out of the depression of spirits which was fast stealing over me, I unfortunately went to the table, and began to play. Still more unfortunately, as the event will show, I won—won prodigiously; won incredibly; won at such a rate, that the regular players at the table crowded round me; and staring at my stakes with hungry, superstitious eyes, whispered to one another, that the English stranger was going to break the bank.

The game was *Rouge et Noir*. I had played at it in every city in Europe, without, however, the care or the wish to study the Theory of Chances—that philosopher's stone of all gamblers! And a gambler, in the strict sense of the word, I had never been. I was heart-whole from the corroding passion for play. My gaming was a mere idle amusement. I never resorted to it by necessity, because I never knew what it was to want money. I never practised it so incessantly as to lose more than I could afford, or to gain more than I could coolly pocket without being thrown off my balance by my good luck. In short, I had hitherto frequented gambling-tables—just as I frequented ballrooms and opera-houses—because they amused me, and because I had nothing better to do with my leisure hours.

But, on this occasion, it was very different—now, for the first time in my life, I felt what the passion for play really was. My success first bewildered, and then, in the most literal meaning of the word, intoxicated me. Incredible as it may appear, it is nevertheless true, that I only lost, when I attempted to estimate chances, and played according to previous calculation. If I left everything to luck, and staked without any care or consideration, I was sure to win—to win in the face of every recognized probability in favour of the bank. At first, some of the men present ventured their money safely enough on my colour; but I speedily increased my stakes to sums which they dared not risk. One after another they left off playing, and breathlessly looked on at my game. Still, time after time, I staked higher and higher; and still won. The excitement in the room rose to fever pitch. The silence was interrupted by a deep, muttered chorus of oaths and exclamations in different languages, every time the gold was shovelled across to my side of the table—even the imperturbable croupier dashed his rake on the floor in a (French) fury of astonishment at my success. But one man present preserved his self-possession; and that man was my friend. He came to my side, and whispering in English,

begged me to leave the place, satisfied with what I had already gained. I must do him the justice to say, that he repeated his warnings and entreaties several times; and only left me and went away, after I had rejected his advice (I was to all intents and purposes gambling-drunk) in terms which rendered it impossible for him to address me again that night.

Shortly after he had gone, a hoarse voice behind me cried:—‘Permit me, my dear sir!—permit me to restore to their proper place two Napoleons which you have dropped. Wonderful luck, sir!—I pledge you my word of honour as an old soldier, in the course of my long experience in this sort of thing, I never saw such luck as yours!—never! Go on, sir—*Sacré mille bombes!* Go on boldly, and break the bank!’

I turned round and saw, nodding and smiling at me with inveterate civility, a tall man, dressed in a frogged and braided surtout. If I had been in my senses, I should have considered him, personally, as being rather a suspicious specimen of an old soldier. He had goggling bloodshot eyes, mangy mustachios, and a broken nose. His voice betrayed a barrack-room intonation of the worst order, and he had the dirtiest pair of hands I ever saw—even in France. These little personal peculiarities exercised, however, no repelling influence on me. In the mad excitement, the reckless triumph of that moment, I was ready to ‘fraternize’ with anybody who encouraged me in my game. I accepted the old soldier’s offered pinch of snuff; clapped him on the back, and swore he was the honestest fellow in the world; the most glorious relic of the Grand Army that I had ever met with. ‘Go on!’ cried my military friend, snapping his fingers in ecstasy,—‘Go on, and win! Break the bank—*Mille tonnerres!* my gallant English comrade, break the bank!’

And I *did* go on—went on at such a rate, that in another quarter of an hour the croupier called out: ‘Gentlemen! the bank has discontinued for tonight.’ All the notes, and all the gold in that ‘bank,’ now lay in a heap under my hands; the whole floating capital of the gambling-house was waiting to pour into my pockets!

‘Tie up the money in your pocket-handkerchief, my worthy sir,’ said the old soldier, as I wildly plunged my hands into my heap of gold. ‘Tie it up, as we used to tie up a bit of dinner in the Grand Army; your winnings are too heavy for any breeches pockets that ever were sown. There! that’s it!—shovel them in, notes and all! *Credié!* what luck!—Stop! another Napoleon on the floor! *Ah! sacré petit polisson de Napoleon!* have I found thee at last? Now then, sir—two tight double knots each way with your honourable permission, and the money’s safe. Feel it! feel it, fortunate sir! hard and round as a cannon ball—*Ah, bah!* if they had only fired such cannon balls at us, at Austerlitz—*nom d’une pipe!*

if they only had! And now, as an ancient grenadier, as an ex-brave of the French Army, what remains for me to do? I ask what? Simply this: to entreat my valued English friend to drink a bottle of champagne with me, and toast the goddess Fortune in foaming goblets before we part!

'Excellent ex-brave! Convivial ancient grenadier! Champagne by all means! An English cheer for an old soldier! Hurrah! hurrah! Another English cheer for the goddess Fortune! Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!'

'Bravo! the Englishman; the amiable, gracious Englishman, in whose veins circulates the vivacious blood of France! Another glass? *Ah, bah!*—the bottle is empty! Never mind! *Vive le vin!* I, the old soldier, order another bottle, and half-a-pound of *bon-bons* with it!'

'No, no, ex-brave; never—ancient grenadier! *Your* bottle last time; *my* bottle this. Behold it! Toast away! The French Army!—the great Napoleon!—the present company! the croupier! the honest croupier's wife and daughters—if he has any! the Ladies generally! Everybody in the world!'

By the time the second bottle of champagne was emptied, I felt as if I had been drinking liquid fire—my brain seemed all a-flame. No excess in wine had ever had this effect on me before in my life. Was it the result of a stimulant acting upon my system when I was in a highly excited state? Was my stomach in a particularly disordered condition? Or was the champagne particularly strong?

'Ex-brave of the French Army!' cried I, in a mad state of exhilaration. 'I am on fire! how are *you*? You have set me on fire! Do you hear; my hero of Austerlitz? Let us have a third bottle of champagne to put the flame out!' The old soldier wagged his head, rolled his goggle-eyes, until I expected to see them slip out of their sockets; placed his dirty forefinger by the side of his broken nose; solemnly ejaculated 'Coffee!' and immediately ran off into an inner room.

The word pronounced by the eccentric veteran, seemed to have a magical effect on the rest of the company present. With one accord they all rose to depart. Probably they had expected to profit by my intoxication; but finding that my new friend was benevolently bent on preventing me from getting dead drunk, had now abandoned all hope of thriving pleasantly on my winnings. Whatever their motive might be, at any rate they went away in a body. When the old soldier returned, and sat down again opposite to me at the table, we had the room to ourselves. I could see the croupier, in a sort of vestibule which opened out of it, eating his supper in solitude. The silence was now deeper than ever.

A sudden change, too, had come over the 'ex-brave'. He assumed a portentously solemn look; and when he spoke to me again, his speech was ornamented by no oaths, enforced by no finger-snapping, enlivened by no apostrophes, or exclamations.

'Listen, my dear sir,' said he, in mysteriously confidential tones—'listen to an old soldier's advice. I have been to the mistress of the house (a very charming woman, with a genius for cookery!) to impress on her the necessity of making us some particularly strong and good coffee. You must drink this coffee in order to get rid of your little amiable exaltation of spirits, before you think of going home—you *must*, my good and gracious friend! With all that money to take home tonight, it is a sacred duty to yourself to have your wits about you. You are known to be a winner to an enormous extent, by several gentlemen present tonight, who, in a certain point of view, are very worthy and excellent fellows; but they are mortal men, my dear sir, and they have their amiable weaknesses! Need I say more? Ah, no, no! you understand me! Now, this is what you must do—send for a cabriolet when you feel quite well again—draw up all the windows when you get into it—and tell the driver to take you home only through the large and well-lighted thoroughfares. Do this; and you and your money will be safe. Do this; and tomorrow you will thank an old soldier for giving you a word of honest advice.'

Just as the ex-brave ended his oration in very lachrymose tones, the coffee came in, ready poured out in two cups. My attentive friend handed me one of the cups, with a bow. I was parched with thirst, and drank it off at a draught. Almost instantly afterwards, I was seized with a fit of giddiness, and felt more completely intoxicated than ever. The room whirled round and round furiously; the old soldier seemed to be regularly bobbing up and down before me, like the piston of a steam-engine. I was half deafened by a violent singing in my ears; a feeling of utter bewilderment, helplessness, idiocy, overcame me. I rose from my chair, holding on by the table to keep my balance; and stammered out, that I felt dreadfully unwell—so unwell, that I did not know how I was to get home.


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'My dear friend,' answered the old soldier; and even his voice seemed to be bobbing up and down, as he spoke—'My dear friend, it would be madness to go home, in *your* state. You would be sure to lose your money; you might be robbed and murdered with the greatest ease. *I* am going to sleep here: do *you* sleep here, too—they

make up capital beds in this house—take one; sleep off the effects of the wine, and go home safely with your winnings, tomorrow—tomorrow, in broad daylight.’

I had no power of thinking, no feeling of any kind, but the feeling that I must lie down somewhere, immediately, and fall off into a cool, refreshing, comfortable sleep. So I agreed eagerly to the proposal about the bed, and took the offered arms of the old soldier and the croupier—the latter having been summoned to show the way. They led me along some passages and up a short flight of stairs into the bedroom which I was to occupy. The ex-brave shook me warmly by the hand; proposed that we should breakfast together the next morning; and then, followed by the croupier, left me for the night.

I ran to the wash-hand-stand; drank some of the water in my jug; poured the rest out, and plunged my face into it—then sat down in a chair, and tried to compose myself. I soon felt better. The change for my lungs, from the fetid atmosphere of the gambling-room to the cool air of the apartment I now occupied; the almost equally refreshing change for my eyes, from the glaring gaslights of the ‘Salon’ to the dim, quiet flicker of one bedroom candle; aided wonderfully the restorative effects of cold water. The giddiness left me, and I began to feel a little like a reasonable being again. My first thought was of the risk of sleeping all night in a gambling-house; my second, of the still greater risk of trying to get out after the house was closed, and of going home alone at night, through the streets of Paris, with a large sum of money about me. I had slept in worse places than this, in the course of my travels; so I determined to lock, bolt, and barricade my door.

Accordingly, I secured myself against all intrusion; looked under the bed, and into the cupboard; tried the fastening of the window; and then, satisfied that I had taken every proper precaution, pulled off my upper clothing, put my light, which was a dim one, on the hearth among a feathery litter of wood ashes: and got into bed, with the handkerchief full of money under my pillow.

I soon felt, not only that I could not go to sleep, but that I could not even close my eyes. I was wide awake, and in a high fever. Every nerve in my body trembled—every one of my senses seemed to be preternaturally sharpened. I tossed, and rolled, and tried every kind of position, and perseveringly sought out the cold corners of the bed, and all to no purpose. Now, I thrust my arms over the clothes; now, I poked them under the clothes; now, I violently shot my legs straight out, down to the bottom of the bed; now, I convulsively coiled them up as near my chin as they would go; now, I shook out my crumpled pillow, changed it to the cool side, patted it flat, and lay down quietly

on my back; now, I fiercely doubled it in two, set it up on end, thrust it against the board of the bed, and tried a sitting posture. Every effort was in vain; I groaned with vexation, as I felt that I was in for a sleepless night.

What could I do? I had no book to read. And yet, unless I found out some method of diverting my mind, I felt certain that I was in the condition to imagine all sorts of horrors; to rack my brains with forebodings of every possible and impossible danger; in short, to pass the night in suffering all conceivable varieties of nervous terror. I raised myself on my elbow, and looked about the room—which was brightened by a lovely moonlight pouring straight through the window—to see if it contained any pictures or ornaments, that I could at all clearly distinguish. While my eyes wandered from wall to wall, a remembrance of *Le Maistre's* delightful little book, 'Voyage autour de Ma Chambre', occurred to me. I resolved to imitate the French author, and find occupation and amusement enough to relieve the tedium of my wakefulness, by making a mental inventory of every article of furniture I could see, and by following up to their sources the multitude of associations which even a chair, a table, or a wash-hand-stand, may be made to call forth.

In the nervous unsettled state of my mind at that moment, I found it much easier to make my proposed inventory, than to make my proposed reflections, and soon gave up all hope of thinking in *Le Maistre's* fanciful track—or, indeed, thinking at all. I looked about the room at the different articles of furniture, and did nothing more. There was, first, the bed I was lying in—a four-post bed, of all things in the world to meet with in Paris!—yes, a thorough clumsy British four-poster, with the regular top lined with chintz—the regular fringed valance all round—the regular stifling, unwholesome curtains, which I remembered having mechanically drawn back against the posts without particularly noticing the bed when I first got into the room. Then, there was the marble-topped wash-hand-stand, from which the water I had spilt, in my hurry to pour it out, was still dripping, slowly and more slowly, on to the brick floor. Then, two small chairs, with my coat, waistcoat, and trousers flung on them. Then, a large elbow chair covered with dirty-white dimity: with my cravat and shirt-collar thrown over the back. Then, a chest of drawers, with two of the brass handles off, and a tawdry, broken china inkstand placed on it by way of ornament for the top. Then, the dressing-table, adorned by a very small looking-glass, and a very large pincushion. Then, the window—an unusually large window. Then, a dark old picture, which the feeble candle dimly showed me. It was the picture of a fellow in a high Spanish hat, crowned with a plume of towering

feathers. A swarthy sinister ruffian, looking upward; shading his eyes with his hand, and looking intently upward—it might be at some tall gallows at which he was going to be hanged. At any rate he had the appearance of thoroughly deserving it.

This picture put a kind of constraint upon me to look upward too—at the top of the bed. It was a gloomy and not an interesting object, and I looked back at the picture. I counted the feathers in the man's hat; they stood out in relief; three, white; two, green. I observed the crown of his hat, which was of a conical shape, according to the fashion supposed to have been favoured by Guido Fawkes. I wondered what he was looking up at. It couldn't be at the stars; such a desperado was neither astrologer nor astronomer. It must be at the high gallows, and he was going to be hanged presently. Would the executioner come into possession of his conical crowned hat, and plume of feathers? I counted the feathers again; three, white; two, green.

While I still lingered over this very improving and intellectual employment, my thoughts insensibly began to wander. The moonlight shining into the room reminded me of a certain moonlight night in England—the night after a picnic party in a Welsh valley. Every incident of the drive homeward through lovely scenery, which the moonlight made lovelier than ever, came back to my remembrance, though I had never given the picnic a thought for years; though, if I had *tried* to recollect it, I could certainly have recalled little or nothing of that scene long past. Of all the wonderful faculties that help to tell us we are immortal, which speaks the sublime truth more eloquently than memory? Here was I, in a strange house of the most suspicious character, in a situation of uncertainty, and even of peril, which might seem to make the cool exercise of my recollection almost out of the question; nevertheless remembering, quite involuntarily, places, people, conversations, minute circumstances of every kind, which I had thought forgotten for ever, which I could not possibly have recalled at will, even under the most favourable auspices. And what cause had produced in a moment the whole of this strange, complicated, mysterious effect? Nothing but some rays of moonlight shining in at my bedroom window.

I was still thinking of the picnic; of our merriment on the drive home; of the sentimental young lady who *would* quote Childe Harold, because it was moonlight. I was absorbed by these past scenes and past amusements, when, in an instant, the thread on which my memories hung, snapped asunder; my attention immediately came back to present things, more vividly than ever, and I found myself, I neither new why nor wherefore, looking hard at the picture again.

Looking for what? Good God, the man had pulled his hat down on

his brows!—No! The hat itself was gone! Where was the conical crown? Where the feathers; three, white; two, green? Not there! In place of the hat and feathers, what dusky object was it that now hid his forehead—his eyes—his shading hand? Was the bed moving?

I turned on my back, and looked up. Was I mad? drunk? dreaming? giddy again? or, was the top of the bed really moving down—sinking slowly, regularly, silently, horribly right down throughout the whole of its length and breadth—right down upon Me, as I lay underneath?

My blood seemed to stand still; a deadly paralysing coldness stole all over me, as I turned my head round on the pillow, and determined to test whether the bed-top was really moving, or not, by keeping my eye on the man in the picture. The dull, black frowsy outline of the valance above me was within an inch of being parallel with his waist. I still looked breathlessly. And steadily, and slowly—very slowly—I saw the figure, and the line of frame below the figure, vanish, as the valance moved down before it.

I am, constitutionally, anything but timid. I have been, on more than one occasion, in peril of my life, and have not lost my self-possession for an instant; but, when the conviction first settled on my mind that the bed-top was really moving, was steadily and continuously sinking down upon me, I looked up for one awful minute, or more, shuddering, helpless, panic-stricken, beneath the hideous machinery for murder, which was advancing closer and closer to suffocate me where I lay.

Then the instinct of self-preservation came, and nerved me to save my life, while there was yet time. I got out of bed very quietly, and quickly dressed myself again in my upper clothing. The candle, fully spent, went out. I sat down in the armchair that stood near, and watched the bed-top slowly descending. I was literally spell-bound by it. If I had heard footsteps behind me, I could not have turned round; if a means of escape had been miraculously provided for me, I could not have moved to take advantage of it. The whole life in me, was, at that moment, concentrated in my eyes.

It descended—the whole canopy, with the fringe round it, came down—down—close down; so close that there was not room now to squeeze my finger between the bed-top and the bed. I felt at the sides, and discovered that what had appeared to me, from beneath, to be the ordinary light canopy of a four-post bed was in reality a thick, broad mattress, the substance of which was concealed by the valance and its fringe. I looked up, and saw the four posts rising hideously bare. In the middle of the bed-top was a huge wooden screw that had evidently worked it down through a hole in the ceiling, just as ordinary presses are worked down on the substance selected for compression. The



frightful apparatus moved without making the faintest noise. There had been no creaking as it came down; there was now not the faintest sound from the room above. Amid a dead and awful silence I beheld before me—in the nineteenth century, and in the civilized capital of France—such a machine for secret murder by suffocation, as might have existed in the worst days of the Inquisition, in the lonely Inns among the Hartz Mountains, in the mysterious tribunals of Westphalia! Still, as I looked on it, I could not move; I could hardly breathe; but I began to recover the power of thinking; and, in a moment, I discovered the murderous conspiracy framed against me, in all its horror.

My cup of coffee had been drugged, and drugged too strongly. I had been saved from being smothered, by having taken an overdose of some narcotic. How I had chafed and fretted at the fever-fit which had preserved my life by keeping me awake! How recklessly I had confided myself to the two wretches who had led me into this room, determined, for the sake of my winnings, to kill me in my sleep, by the surest and most horrible contrivance for secretly accomplishing my destruction! How many men, winners like me, had slept, as I had proposed to sleep, in that bed; and never been seen or heard of more! I shuddered as I thought of it.

But, ere long, all thought was again suspended by the sight of the murderous canopy moving once more. After it had remained on the bed—as nearly as I could guess—about ten minutes, it began to move up again. The villains who worked it from above, evidently believed that their purpose was now accomplished. Slowly and silently, as it had descended, that horrible bed-top rose towards its former place. When it reached the upper extremities of the four posts, it reached the ceiling too. Neither hole nor screw could be seen—the bed became, in appearance, an ordinary bed again, the canopy, an ordinary canopy, even to the most suspicious eyes.

Now, for the first time, I was able to move, to rise from my chair, to consider of how I should escape. If I betrayed, by the smallest noise, that the attempt to suffocate me had failed, I was certain to be murdered. Had I made any noise already? I listened intently, looking towards the door. No! no footsteps in the passage outside; no sound of a tread, light or heavy, in the room above—absolute silence everywhere. Besides locking and bolting my door, I had moved an old wooden chest against it, which I had found under the bed. To remove this chest (my blood ran cold, as I thought what its contents *might* be!) without making some disturbance, was impossible; and, moreover, to think of escaping through the house, now barred-up for the night, was sheer insanity. Only one chance was left me—the window. I stole to

it on tiptoe.

My bedroom was on the first floor, above an *entresol*, and looked into the back street, which you have sketched in your view. I raised my hand to open the window, knowing that on that action hung, by the merest hair's-breadth, my chance of safety. They keep vigilant watch in a House of Murder—if any part of the frame cracked, if the hinge creaked, I was, perhaps, a lost man! It must have occupied me at least five minutes, reckoning by time—five *hours*, reckoning by suspense—to open that window. I succeeded in doing it silently, in doing it with all the dexterity of a house-breaker: and then looked down into the street. To leap the distance beneath me, would be almost certain destruction! Next, I looked round at the sides of the house. Down the left side, ran the thick water-pipe which you have drawn—it passed close by the outer edge of the window. The moment I saw the pipe, I knew I was saved; my breath came and went freely for the first time since I had seen the canopy of the bed moving down upon me!

To some men, the means of escape which I had discovered might have seemed difficult and dangerous enough—to *me*, the prospect of slipping down the pipe into the street did not suggest even a thought of peril. I had always been accustomed, by the practice of gymnastics, to keep up my schoolboy powers as a daring and expert climber; and knew that my head, hands, and feet would serve me faithfully in any hazards of ascent or descent. I had already got one leg over the window-sill, when I remembered the handkerchief, filled with money, under my pillow. I could well have afforded to leave it behind me; but I was revengefully determined that the miscreants of the gambling-house should miss their plunder as well as their victim. So I went back to the bed, and tied the heavy handkerchief at my back by my cravat. Just as I had made it tight, and fixed it in a comfortable place, I thought I heard a sound of breathing outside the door. The chill feeling of horror ran through me again as I listened. No! dead silence still in the passage—I had only heard the night air blowing softly into the room. The next moment I was on the window-sill—and the next, I had a firm grip on the water-pipe with my hands and knees.

I slid down into the street easily and quietly, as I thought I should, and immediately set off, at the top of my speed, to a branch 'Prefecture' of Police, which I knew was situated in the immediate neighbourhood. A 'Sub-Prefect' and several picked men among his subordinates, happened to be up, maturing, I believe, some scheme for discovering the perpetrator of a mysterious murder, which all Paris was talking of just then. When I began my story, in a breathless hurry

and in very bad French, I could see that the Sub-Prefect suspected me of being a drunken Englishman, who had robbed somebody, but he soon altered his opinion, as I went on; and before I had anything like concluded, he shoved all the papers before him into a drawer, put on his hat, supplied me with another (for I was bare-headed), ordered a file of soldiers, desired his expert followers to get ready all sorts of tools for breaking open doors and ripping-up brick flooring, and took my arm, in the most friendly and familiar manner possible, to lead me with him out of the house. I will venture to say, that when the Sub-Prefect was a little boy, and was taken for the first time to the Play, he was not half as much pleased as he was now at the job in prospect for him at the 'Gambling-House'!

Away we went through the streets, the Sub-Prefect cross-examining and congratulating me in the same breath, as we marched at the head of our formidable *posse comitatus*. Sentinels were placed at the back and front of the gambling-house the moment we got to it; a tremendous battery of knocks was directed against the door; a light appeared at a window; I waited to conceal myself behind the police—then came more knocks, and a cry of 'Open in the name of the law!' At that terrible summons, bolts and locks gave way before an invisible hand, and the moment after, the Sub-Prefect was in the passage, confronting a waiter, half-dressed and ghastly pale. This was the short dialogue which immediately took place.

'We want to see the Englishman who is sleeping in this house?'

'He went away hours ago.'

'He did no such thing. His friend went away; *he* remained. Show us to his bedroom!'

'I swear to you, Monsieur le Sous-Prefet, he is not here! he —'

'I swear to you, Monsieur le Garcon, he is. He slept here—he didn't find your bed comfortable—he came to us to complain of it—here he is, among my men—and here am I, ready to look for a flea or two in his bedstead. Picard!' (calling to one of the subordinates, and pointing to the waiter) 'collar that man, and tie his hands behind him. Now, then, gentlemen, let us walk upstairs!'

Every man and woman in the house was secured—the 'Old Soldier', the first. Then I identified the bed in which I had slept; and then we went into the room above. No object that was at all extraordinary appeared in any part of it. The Sub-Prefect looked round the place, commanded everybody to be silent, stamped twice on the floor, called for a candle, looked attentively at the spot he had stamped on, and ordered the flooring there to be carefully taken up. This was done in no time. Lights were produced, and we saw a deep raftered cavity between the floor of this room and the ceiling of the

room beneath. Through this cavity there ran perpendicularly a sort of case of iron, thickly greased; and inside the case, appeared the screw, which communicated with the bed-top below. Extra lengths of screw, freshly oiled—levers covered with felt—all the complete upper works of a heavy press, constructed with infernal ingenuity so as to join the fixtures below—and, when taken to pieces again, to go into the smallest possible compass, were next discovered, and pulled out on the floor. After some little difficulty, the Sub-Prefect succeeded in putting the machinery together, and, leaving his men to work it, descended with me to the bedroom. The smother canopy was then lowered, but not so noiselessly as I had seen it lowered. When I mentioned this to the Sub-Prefect, his answer, simple as it was, had a terrible significance. ‘My men,’ said he, ‘are working down the bed-top for the first time—the men whose money you won, were in better practice.’

We left the house in the sole possession of two police agents—every one of the inmates being removed to prison on the spot. The Sub-Prefect, after taking down my ‘*procès-verbal*’ in his office, returned with me to my hotel to get my passport. ‘Do you think,’ I asked, as I gave it to him, ‘that any men have really been smothered in that bed, as they tried to smother *me*?’

‘I have seen dozens of drowned men laid out at the Morgue,’ answered the Sub-Prefect, ‘in whose pocket-books were found letters, stating that they had committed suicide in the Seine, because they had lost everything at the gaming-table. Do I know how many of those men entered the same gambling-house that *you* entered? won as *you* won? took that bed as *you* took it? slept in it? were smothered in it? and were privately thrown into the river, with a letter of explanation written by the murderers and placed in their pocket-books? No man can say how many, or how few, have suffered the fate from which you have escaped. The people of the gambling-house kept their bedstead machinery a secret from *us*—even from the police! The dead kept the rest of the secret for them. Good-night, or rather good-morning, Monsieur Faulkner! Be at my office again at nine o’clock—in the meantime, *au revoir!*’

The rest of my story is soon told. I was examined, and re-examined; the gambling-house was strictly searched all through, from top to bottom; the prisoners were separately interrogated; and two of the less guilty among them made a confession. *I* discovered that the Old Soldier was the master of the gambling-house—*justice* discovered that he had been drummed out of the army, as a vagabond, years ago; that he had been guilty of all sorts of villanies since; that he was in possession of stolen property, which the owners identified; and that he, the croupier, another accomplice, and the woman who had made

my cup of coffee, were all in the secret of the bedstead. There appeared some reason to doubt whether the inferior persons attached to the house knew anything of the suffocating machinery; and they received the benefit of that doubt, by being treated simply as thieves and vagabonds. As for the Old Soldier and his two head-myrmidons, they went to the galleys; the woman who had drugged my coffee was imprisoned for I forget how many years; the regular attendants at the gambling-house were considered 'suspicious', and placed under 'surveillance'; and I became, for one whole week (which is a long time), the head 'lion' in Parisian society. My adventure was dramatized by three illustrious playwrights, but never saw theatrical daylight; for the censorship forbade the introduction on the stage of a correct copy of the gambling-house bedstead.

Two good results were produced by my adventure, which any censorship must have approved. In the first place, it helped to justify the Government in forthwith carrying out their determination to put down all gambling-houses; in the second place, it cured me of ever again trying 'Rouge et Noir' as an amusement. The sight of a green cloth, with packs of cards and heaps of money on it, will henceforth be for ever associated in my mind with the sight of a bed-canopy descending to suffocate me, in the silence and darkness of the night.

Just as Mr Faulkner pronounced the last words, he started in his chair, and assumed a stiff, dignified position, in a great hurry. 'Bless my soul!' cried he—with a comic look of astonishment and vexation—'while I have been telling you what is the real secret of my interest in the sketch you have so kindly given to me, I have altogether forgotten that I came here to sit for my portrait. For the last hour, or more, I must have been the worst model you ever had to paint from!'

'On the contrary, you have been the best,' said I. 'I have been painting from your expression; and, while telling your story, you have unconsciously shown me the natural expression I wanted.'

2

Mad Monkton

I

The Monktons of Wincot Abbey bore a sad character for want of sociability in our county. They held no friendly intercourse with their neighbours; and, excepting my father, and a lady and her daughter living near them, they never received anyone under their own roof.

Proud as they all certainly were, it was not pride but dread which kept them thus apart from their neighbours. The family had suffered for generations past from the horrible affliction of hereditary insanity, and the members of it shrank from exposing their calamity to others, as they must have exposed it if they had mingled with the busy little world around them. There is a frightful story of a crime committed in past times by two of the Monktons, near relatives, from which the first appearance of the insanity was always supposed to date, but it is needless for me to shock anyone by repeating it. It is enough to say that at intervals almost every form of madness appeared in the family; monomania being the most frequent manifestation of the affliction among them. I have these particulars, and one or two yet to be related, from my father.

At the period of my youth but three of the Monktons were left at the Abbey: Mr and Mrs Monkton, and their only child, Alfred, heir to the property. The one other member of this, the elder, branch of the family who was then alive, was Mr Monkton's younger brother, Stephen. He was an unmarried man, possessing a fine estate in Scotland; but he lived almost entirely on the Continent, and bore the reputation of being a shameless profligate. The family at Wincot held almost as little communication with him as with their neighbours.

I have already mentioned my father, and a lady and her daughter, as the only privileged people who were admitted into Wincot Abbey.

My father had been an old school and college friend of Mr Monkton, and accident had brought them so much together in later life, that their continued intimacy at Wincot was quite intelligible. I am

not so well able to account for the friendly terms on which Mrs Elmslie (the lady to whom I have already alluded) lived with the Monktons. Her late husband had been distantly related to Mrs Monkton, and my father was her daughter's guardian. But even these claims to friendship and regard never seemed to me strong enough to explain the intimacy between Mrs Elmslie and the inhabitants of the Abbey. Intimate, however, they certainly were, and one result of the constant interchange of visits between two families in due time declared itself—Mr Monkton's son and Mrs Elmslie's daughter became attached to each other.

I had no opportunities of seeing much of the young lady; I only remember her at that time as a delicate, gentle, lovable girl, the very opposite in appearance, and apparently in character also, to Alfred Monkton. But perhaps that was one reason why they fell in love with each other. The attachment was soon discovered, and was far from being disapproved by the parents on either side. In all essential points, except that of wealth, the Elmslies were nearly the equals of the Monktons, and want of money in a bride was of no consequence to the heir of Wincot. Alfred, it was well known, would succeed to thirty thousand a year on his father's death.

Thus, though the parents on both sides thought the young people not old enough to be married at once, they saw no reason why Ada and Alfred should not be engaged to each other, with the understanding that they should be united when young Monkton came of age, in two years' time. The person to be consulted in the matter, after the parents, was my father in his capacity of Ada's guardian. He knew that the family misery had shown itself many years ago in Mrs Monkton, who was her husband's cousin. The *illness*, as it was significantly called, had been palliated by careful treatment, and was reported to have passed away. But my father was not to be deceived. He knew where the hereditary taint still lurked; he viewed with horror the bare possibility of its reappearing one day in the children of his friend's only daughter; and he positively refused his consent to the marriage engagement.

The result was that the doors of the Abbey and the doors of Mrs Elmslie's house were closed to him. This suspension of friendly intercourse had lasted but a very short time, when Mrs Monkton died. Her husband, who was fondly attached to her, caught a violent cold while attending her funeral. The cold was neglected, and settled on his lungs. In a few months' time, he followed his wife to the grave, and Alfred was left master of the grand old Abbey, and the fair lands that spread all around it.

At this period Mrs Elmslie had the indelicacy to endeavour a second

time to procure my father's consent to the marriage engagement. He refused it again more positively than before. More than a year passed away. The time was approaching fast when Alfred would be of age. I returned from college to spend the long vacation at home, and made some advances towards bettering my acquaintance with young Monkton. They were evaded—certainly with perfect politeness, but still in such a way as to prevent me from offering my friendship to him again. Any mortification I might have felt at this petty repulse, under ordinary circumstances, was dismissed from my mind by the occurrence of a real misfortune in our household. For some months past my father's health had been failing, and, just at the time of which I am now writing, his sons had to mourn the irreparable calamity of his death.

This event (through some informality or error in the late Mr Elmslie's will) left the future of Ada's life entirely at her mother's disposal. The consequence was the immediate ratification of the marriage engagement to which my father had so steadily refused his consent. As soon as the fact was publicly announced, some of Mrs Elmslie's more intimate friends, who were acquainted with the reports affecting the Monkton family, ventured to mingle with their former congratulations one or two significant references to the late Mrs Monkton, and some searching inquiries as to the disposition of her son.

Mrs Elmslie always met these polite hints with one bold form of answer. She first admitted the existence of those reports about the Monktons which her friends were unwilling to specify distinctly; and then declared that they were infamous calumnies. The hereditary taint had died out of the family generations back. Alfred was the best, the kindest, the sanest of human beings. He loved study and retirement; Ada sympathized with his tastes, and had made her choice unbiassed; if any more hints were dropped about sacrificing her by her marriage, those hints would be viewed as so many insults to her mother, whose affection for her it was monstrous to call in question. This way of talking silenced people, but did not convince them. They began to suspect what was indeed the actual truth, that Mrs Elmslie was a selfish, worldly, grasping woman, who wanted to get her daughter well married, and cared nothing for consequences as long as she saw Ada mistress of the greatest establishment in the whole county.

It seemed, however, as if there was some fatality at work to prevent the attainment of Mrs Elmslie's great object in life. Hardly was one obstacle to the ill-omened marriage removed by my father's death, before another succeeded it, in the shape of anxieties and difficulties caused by the delicate state of Ada's health. Doctors were consulted in

all directions, and the result of their advice was that the marriage must be deferred, and that Miss Elmslie must leave England for a certain time, to reside in a warmer climate; the South of France, if I remember rightly. Thus it happened that just before Alfred came of age, Ada and her mother departed for the Continent, and the union of the two young people was understood to be indefinitely postponed.

Some curiosity was felt in the neighbourhood as to what Alfred Monkton would do under these circumstances. Would he follow his lady-love? Would he go yachting? Would he throw open the doors of the old Abbey at last, and endeavour to forget the absence of Ada and the postponement of his marriage, in a round of gaieties? He did none of these things. He simply remained at Wincot, living as suspiciously strange and solitary a life as his father had lived before him. Literally, there was now no companion for him at the Abbey but the old priest (the Monktons, I should have mentioned before, were Roman Catholics) who had held the office of tutor to Alfred from his earliest years. He came of age, and there was not even so much as a private dinner-party at Wincot to celebrate the event. Families in the neighbourhood determined to forget the offence which his father's reserve had given them, and invited him to their houses. The invitations were politely declined. Civil visitors called resolutely at the Abbey, and were resolutely bowed away from the doors as soon as they had left their cards. Under this combination of sinister and aggravating circumstances, people in all directions took to shaking their heads mysteriously when the name of Mr Alfred Monkton was mentioned, hinting at the family calamity, and wondering peevisly or sadly, as their tempers inclined them, what he could possibly do to occupy himself month after month in the lonely old house.

The right answer to this question was not easy to find. It was quite useless, for example, to apply to the priest for it. He was a very quiet, polite old gentleman; his replies were always excessively ready and civil, and appeared at the time to convey a reasonable amount of information; but when they were tested by after-reflection, it was universally observed that nothing tangible could be extracted from them. The housekeeper, a weird old woman, with a very abrupt and repelling manner, was too fierce and taciturn to be safely approached. The few indoor servants had all been long enough in the family to have learnt to hold their tongues in public as a regular habit. It was only from the farm servants who supplied the table at the Abbey, that any information could be obtained; and vague enough it was when they came to communicate it.

Some of them had observed the 'young master' walking about the library with heaps of dusty papers in his hands. Others had heard odd

noises in the uninhabited parts of the Abbey, had looked up, and had seen him forcing open the old windows, as if to let light and air into rooms supposed to have been shut closed for years and years; or had discovered him standing on the perilous summit of one of the crumbling turrets, never ascended before within their memories, and popularly considered to be inhabited by the ghosts of the monks who had once possessed the building. The result of these observations and discoveries, when they were communicated to others, was of course to impress every one with a firm belief that 'poor young Monkton was going the way that the rest of the family had gone before him': which opinion always appeared to be immensely strengthened in the popular mind by a conviction—founded on no particle of evidence—that the priest was at the bottom of all the mischief.

Thus far I have spoken from hearsay evidence mostly. What I have next to tell will be the result of my own personal experience.

II

About five months after Alfred Monkton came of age I left college, and resolved to amuse and instruct myself a little by travelling abroad.

At the time when I quitted England, young Monkton was still leading his secluded life at the Abbey, and was, in the opinion of everybody, sinking rapidly, if he had not already succumbed, under the hereditary curse of his family. As to the Elmslies, report said that Ada had benefited by her sojourn abroad, and that mother and daughter were on their way back to England to resume their old relations with the heir of Wincot. Before they returned, I was away on my travels, and wandered half over Europe, hardly ever planning whither I should shape my course beforehand. Chance, which thus led me everywhere, led me at last to Naples. There I met with an old school friend, who was one of the attachés at the English embassy; and there began the extraordinary events in connexion with Alfred Monkton which form the main interest of the story I am now relating.

I was idling away the time one morning with my friend the attaché, in the garden of the Villa Reale, when we were passed by a young man, walking alone, who exchanged bows with my friend.

I thought I recognized the dark eager eyes, the colourless cheeks, the strangely vigilant, anxious expression which I remembered in past times as characteristic of Alfred Monkton's face, and was about to question my friend on the subject, when he gave me unasked the information of which I was in search.

'That is Alfred Monkton,' said he; 'he comes from your part of England. You ought to know him.'

'I do know a little of him,' I answered; 'he was engaged to Miss Elmslie when I was last in the neighbourhood of Wincot. Is he married to her yet?'

'No; and he never ought to be. He has gone the way of the rest of the family; or, in plainer words, he has gone mad.'

'Mad! But I ought not to be surprised at hearing that, after the reports about him in England.'

'I speak from no reports; I speak from what he has said and done here before me, and before hundreds of other people. Surely you must have heard of it?'

'Never. I have been out of the way of news from Naples or England for months past.'

'Then I have a very extraordinary story to tell you. You know, of course, that Alfred had an uncle, Stephen Monkton. Well, some time ago, this uncle fought a duel in the Roman states, with a Frenchman, who shot him dead. The seconds and the Frenchman (who was unhurt) took to flight in different directions, as it is supposed. We heard nothing here of the details of the duel till a month after it happened, when one of the French journals published an account of it, taken from papers left by Monkton's second, who died at Paris of consumption. These papers stated the manner in which the duel was fought, and how it terminated, but nothing more. The surviving second and the Frenchman have never been traced from that time to this. All that anybody knows, therefore, of the duel is that Stephen Monkton was shot; an event which nobody can regret, for a greater scoundrel never existed. The exact place where he died, and what was done with his body, are still mysteries not to be penetrated.'

'But what has all this to do with Alfred?'

'Wait a moment, and you will hear. Soon after the news of his uncle's death reached England, what do you think Alfred did? He actually put off his marriage with Miss Elmslie, which was then about to be celebrated, to come out here in search of the burial-place of his wretched scamp of an uncle. And no power on earth will now induce him to return to England and to Miss Elmslie, until he has found the body and can take it back with him to be buried with all the other dead Monktons, in the vault under Wincot Abbey Chapel. He has squandered his money, pestered the police, exposed himself to the ridicule of the men and the indignation of the women for the last three months, in trying to achieve his insane purpose, and is now as far from it as ever. He will not assign to anybody the smallest motive for his conduct. You can't laugh him out of it, or reason him out of it. When we met him just now, I happen to know that he was on his way to the office of the police minister, to send out fresh agents to search and

inquire through the Roman states for the place where his uncle was shot. And mind, all this time professes to be passionately in love with Miss Elmslie, and to be miserable at his separation from her. Just think of that! And then think of his self-imposed absence from her here, to hunt after the remains of a wretch who was a disgrace to the family, and whom he never saw but once or twice in his life. Of all the "Mad Monktons", as they used to call them in England, Alfred is the maddest. He is actually our principal excitement in this dull opera season, though, for my own part, when I think of the poor girl in England, I am a great deal more ready to despise him than to laugh at him.'

'You know the Elmslies, then?'

'Intimately. The other day, my mother wrote to me from England, after having seen Ada. This escapade of Monkton's has outraged all her friends. They have been entreating her to break off the match, which it seems she could do if she liked. Even her mother, sordid and selfish as she is, has been obliged at last, in common decency, to side with the rest of the family; but the good faithful girl won't give Monkton up. She humours his insanity, declares he gave her a good reason, in secret, for going away; says she could always make him happy when they were together in the old Abbey, and can make him still happier when they are married; in short, she loves him dearly, and will therefore believe in him to the last. Nothing shakes her; she has made up her mind to throw away her life on him, and she will do it.'

'I hope not. Mad as his conduct looks to us, he may have some sensible reason for it that we cannot imagine. Does his mind seem at all disordered when he talks on ordinary topics?'

'Not in the least. When you can get him to say anything, which is not often, he talks like a sensible, well-educated man. Keep silence about his precious errand here, and you would fancy him the gentlest and most temperate of human beings. But touch the subject of his vagabond of an uncle, and the Monkton madness comes out directly. The other night a lady asked him, jestingly of course, whether he had ever seen his uncle's ghost. He scowled at her like a perfect fiend, and said that he and his uncle would answer her question together some day, if they came from hell to do it. We laughed at his words, but the lady fainted at his looks, and we had a scene of hysterics and hartshorn in consequence. Any other man would have been kicked out of the room for nearly frightening a pretty woman to death in that way; but "Mad Monkton", as we have christened him, is a privileged lunatic in Neapolitan society, because he is English, good-looking, and worth thirty thousand a year. He goes out everywhere, under the impression that he may meet with somebody who has been let into the secret of

the place where the mysterious duel was fought. If you are introduced to him, he is sure to ask you whether you know anything about it; but beware of following up the subject after you have answered him, unless you want to make sure that he is out of his senses. In that case, only talk of his uncle, and the result will rather more than satisfy you.'

A day or two after this conversation with my friend the attaché, I met Monkton at an evening party.

The moment he heard my name mentioned, his face flushed up; he drew me away into a corner, and referring to his cool reception of my advance, years ago, towards making his acquaintance, asked my pardon for what he termed his inexcusable ingratitude, with an earnestness and an agitation which utterly astonished me. His next proceeding was to question me, as my friend had said he would, about the place of the mysterious duel.

An extraordinary change came over him while he interrogated me on this point. Instead of looking into my face as they had looked hitherto, his eyes wandered away, and fixed themselves intensely, almost fiercely, either on the perfectly empty wall at our side, or on the vacant space between the wall and ourselves—it was impossible to say which. I had come to Naples from Spain by sea, and briefly told him so, as the best way of satisfying him that I could not assist his inquiries. He pursued them no further; and mindful of my friend's warning, I took care to lead the conversation to general topics. He looked back at me directly, and as long as we stood in our corner, his eyes never wandered away again to the empty wall or the vacant space at our side.

Though more ready to listen than to speak, his conversation, when he did talk, had no trace of anything the least like insanity about it. He had evidently read, not generally only, but deeply as well, and could apply his reading with singular felicity to the illustration of almost any subject under discussion, neither obtruding his knowledge absurdly, nor concealing it affectedly. His manner was in itself a standing protest against such a nickname as 'Mad Monkton'. He was so shy, so quiet, so composed and gentle in all his actions, that at times I should have been almost inclined to call him effeminate. We had a long talk together on the first evening of our meeting; we often saw each other afterwards, and never lost a single opportunity of bettering our acquaintance. I felt that he had taken a liking to me; and in spite of what I had heard about his behaviour to Miss Elmslie, in spite of the suspicions which the history of his family and his own conduct had arrayed against him, I began to like 'Mad Monkton' as much as he liked me. We took many a quiet ride together in the country, and sailed often along the shores of the Bay on either side. But for two

eccentricities in his conduct, which I could not at all understand, I should soon have felt as much at my ease in his society as if he had been my own brother.

The first of these eccentricities consisted in the reappearance on several occasions of the odd expression in his eyes, which I had first seen when he asked me whether I knew anything about the duel. No matter what we were talking about, or where we happened to be, there were times when he would suddenly look away from my face, now on one side of me, now on the other, but always where there was nothing to see, and always with the same intensity and fierceness in his eyes. This looked so like madness—or hypochondria, at the least—that I felt afraid to ask him about it, and always pretended not to observe him.

The second peculiarity in his conduct was that he never referred, while in my company, to the reports about his errand at Naples, and never once spoke of Miss Elmslie, or of his life at Wincot Abbey. This not only astonished me, but amazed those who had noticed our intimacy, and who had made sure that I must be the depositary of all his secrets. But the time was near at hand when this mystery, and some other mysteries of which I had no suspicion at this period, were all to be revealed.

I met him one night at a large ball, given by a Russian nobleman, whose name I could not pronounce then, and cannot remember now. I had wandered away from reception-room, ballroom, and card-room to a small apartment at one extremity of the palace, which was half conservatory, half boudoir, and which had been prettily illuminated for the occasion with Chinese lanthorns. Nobody was in the room when I got there. The view over the Mediterranean, bathed in the bright softness of Italian moonlight, was so lovely, that I remained for a long time at the window, looking out, and listening to the dance music which faintly reached me from the ballroom. My thoughts were far away with the relations I had left in England, when I was startled out of them by hearing my name softly pronounced.

I looked round directly, and saw Monkton standing in the room. A livid paleness overspread his face, and his eyes were turned away from me with the same extraordinary expression in them to which I have already alluded.

‘Do you mind leaving the ball early tonight?’ he asked, still not looking at me.

‘Not at all,’ said I. ‘Can I do anything for you? Are you ill?’

‘No, at least nothing to speak of. Will you come to my rooms?’

‘At once, if you like.’

‘No, not at once. *I* must go home directly; but don’t you come to

me for half an hour yet. You have not been at my rooms before, I know; but you will easily find them out, they are close by. There is a card with my address. I *must* speak to you tonight; my life depends on it. Pray come! for God's sake come when the half hour is up!

I promised to be punctual, and he left me directly.

Most people will be easily able to imagine the state of nervous impatience and vague expectation in which I passed the allotted period of delay, after hearing such words as those Monkton had spoken to me. Before the half hour had quite expired, I began to make my way out through the ballroom.

At the head of the staircase, my friend the attaché met me.

'What! going away already?' said he.

'Yes; and on a very curious expedition. I am going to Monkton's room, by his own invitation.'

'You don't mean it! Upon my honour, you're a bold fellow to trust yourself alone with "Mad Monkton" when the moon is at the full.'

'He is ill, poor fellow. Besides, I don't think him half as mad as you do.'

'We won't dispute about that: but mark my words, he has not asked you to go where no visitor has ever been admitted before, without a special purpose. I predict that you will see or hear something tonight which you will remember for the rest of your life.'

We parted. When I knocked at the courtyard gate of the house where Monkton lived, my friend's last words on the palace staircase occurred to me; and though I had laughed at him when he had spoke them, I began to suspect even then that his prediction would be fulfilled.

III

The porter who let me into the house where Monkton lived, directed me to the floor on which his rooms were situated. On getting upstairs, I found his door on the landing ajar. He heard my footsteps, I suppose, for he called to me to come in before I could knock.

I entered, and found him sitting by the table, with some loose letters in his hand, which he was just tying together in a packet. I noticed, as he asked me to sit down, that his expression looked more composed, though the paleness had not yet left his face. He thanked me for coming; repeated that he had something very important to say to me; and then stopped short, apparently too much embarrassed to proceed. I tried to set him at his ease by assuring him that if my assistance or advice could be of any use, I was ready to place myself and my time heartily and unreservedly at his service.

As I said this, I saw his eyes beginning to wander away from my face—to wander slowly, inch by inch as it were, until they stopped at a certain point, with the same fixed stare into vacancy which had so often startled me on former occasions. The whole expression of his face altered as I had never yet seen it alter; he sat before me, looking like a man in a death-trance.

‘You are very kind,’ he said, slowly and faintly, speaking, not to me, but in the direction in which his eyes were still fixed. ‘I know you can help me; but——’

He stopped; his face whitened horribly, and the perspiration broke out all over it. He tried to continue; said a word or two; then stopped again. Seriously alarmed about him, I rose from my chair, with the intention of getting him some water from a jug which I saw standing on a side table.

He sprang up at the same moment. All the suspicions I had ever heard whispered against his sanity flashed over my mind in an instant; and I involuntarily stepped back a pace or two.

‘Stop,’ he said, seating himself again; ‘don’t mind me; and don’t leave your chair. I want—I wish, if you please, to make a little alteration, before we say anything more. Do you mind sitting in a strong light?’

‘Not in the least.’

I had hitherto been seated in the shade of his reading-lamp, the only light in the room.

As I answered him, he rose again; and going into another apartment, returned with a large lamp in his hand; then took two candles from the side table, and two others from the chimney-piece; placed them all, to my amazement, together, so as to stand exactly between us; and then tried to light them. His hand trembled so, that he was obliged to give up the attempt, and allow me to come to his assistance. By his direction I took the shade off the reading-lamp, after I had lit the other lamp and the four candles. When he sat down again, with this concentration of light between us, his better and gentler manner began to return: and while he now addressed me, he spoke without the slightest hesitation.

‘It is useless to ask whether you have heard the reports about me,’ he said; ‘I know that you have. My purpose tonight is to give you some reasonable explanation of the conduct which has produced those reports. My secret has been hitherto confided to one person only; I am now about to trust it to your keeping, with a special object which will appear as I go on. First, however, I must begin by telling you exactly what the great difficulty is which obliges me to be still absent from England. I want your advice and your help; and, to conceal nothing from you, I want also to test your forbearance and your friendly

sympathy, before I can venture on thrusting my miserable secret into your keeping. Will you pardon this apparent distrust of your frank and open character—this apparent ingratitude for your kindness towards me ever since we first met?’

I begged him not to speak of these things, but to go on.

‘You know,’ he proceeded, ‘that I am here to recover the body of my Uncle Stephen, and to carry it back with me to our family burial place in England; and you must also be aware that I have not yet succeeded in discovering his remains. Try to pass over for the present whatever may seem extraordinary and incomprehensible in such a purpose as mine is; and read this newspaper article, where the ink-line is traced. It is the only evidence hitherto obtained on the subject of the fatal duel in which my uncle fell; and I want to hear what course of proceeding the perusal of it may suggest to you as likely to be best on my part.’

He handed me an old French newspaper. The substance of what I read there is still so firmly impressed on my memory, that I am certain of being able to repeat correctly, at this distance of time, all the facts which it is necessary for me to communicate to the reader.

The article began, I remember, with editorial remarks on the great curiosity then felt in regard to the fatal duel between the Count St Lo and Mr Stephen Monkton, an English gentleman. The writer proceeded to dwell at great length on the extraordinary secrecy in which the whole affair had been involved from first to last; and to express a hope that the publication of a certain manuscript, to which his introductory observations referred, might lead to the production of fresh evidence from other and better informed quarters. The manuscript had been found among the papers of Monsieur Foulon, Mr Monkton’s second, who had died at Paris of a rapid decline, shortly after returning to his home in that city from the scene of the duel. The document was unfinished, having been left incomplete at the very place where the reader would most wish to find it continued. No reason could be discovered for this, and no second manuscript bearing on the all-important subject had been found, after the strictest search among the papers left by the deceased.

The document itself then followed.

It purported to be an agreement privately drawn up between Mr Monkton’s second, Monsieur Foulon, and the Count St Lo’s second, Monsieur Dalville; and contained a statement of all the arrangements for conducting the duel. The paper was dated ‘Naples, February 22nd’ and was divided into some seven or eight clauses.

The first clause described the origin and nature of the quarrel—a very disgraceful affair on both sides, worth neither remembering nor repeating. The second clause stated that the challenged man having

chosen the pistol as his weapon, and the challenger (an excellent swordsman) having, on his side, thereupon insisted that the duel should be fought in such a manner as to make the first fire decisive in its results, the seconds, seeing that fatal consequences must inevitably follow the hostile meeting, determined, first of all, that the duel should be kept a profound secret from everybody, and that the place where it was to be fought should not be made known beforehand, even to the principals themselves. It was added that this excess of precaution had been rendered absolutely necessary, in consequence of a recent address from the Pope to the ruling powers in Italy, commenting on the scandalous frequency of the practice of duelling, and urgently desiring that the laws against duellists should be enforced for the future with the utmost rigour.

The third clause detailed the manner in which it had been arranged that the duel should be fought.

The pistols having been loaded by the seconds on the ground, the combatants were to be placed thirty paces apart, and were to toss up for the first fire. The man who won was to advance ten paces—marked out for him beforehand—and was then to discharge his pistol. If he missed, or failed to disable his opponent, the latter was free to advance, if he chose, the whole remaining twenty paces before he fired in his turn. This arrangement ensured the decisive termination of the duel at the first discharge of the pistols, and both principals and seconds pledged themselves on either side to abide by it.

The fourth clause stated that the seconds had agreed that the duel should be fought *out* of the Neapolitan States, but left themselves to be guided by circumstances as to the exact locality in which it should take place. The remaining clauses, so far as I remember them, were devoted to detailing the different precautions to be adopted for avoiding discovery. The duellists and their seconds were to leave Naples in separate parties; were to change carriages several times; were to meet at a certain town, or, failing that, at a certain post-house on the high road from Naples to Rome; were to carry drawing-books, colour-boxes, and camp-stools, as if they had been artists out on a sketching tour; and were to proceed to the place of the duel on foot, employing no guides, for fear of treachery. Such general arrangements as these, and others for facilitating the flight of the survivors after the affair was over, formed the conclusion of this extraordinary document, which was signed, in initials only, by both the seconds.

Just below the initials, appeared the beginning of a narrative, dated 'Paris', and evidently intended to describe the duel itself with extreme minuteness. The handwriting was that of the deceased second.

Monsieur Foulon, the gentleman in question, stated his belief that

circumstances might transpire which would render an account by an eye-witness of the hostile meeting between St Lo and Mr Monkton an important document. He proposed, therefore, as one of the seconds, to testify that the duel had been fought in exact accordance with the terms of the agreement, both the principals conducting themselves like men of gallantry and honour(!). And he further announced that, in order not to compromise anyone, he should place the paper containing his testimony in safe hands, with strict directions that it was on no account to be opened, except in a case of the last emergency.

After this preamble, Monsieur Foulon related that the duel had been fought two days after the drawing up of the agreement, in a locality to which accident had conducted the duelling party. (The name of the place was not mentioned, nor even the neighbourhood in which it was situated.) The men having been placed according to previous arrangement, the Count St Lo had won the toss for the first fire, had advanced his ten paces, and had shot his opponent in the body. Mr Monkton did not immediately fall, but staggered forward some six or seven paces, discharged his pistol ineffectually at the count, and dropped to the ground a dead man. Monsieur Foulon then stated that he tore a leaf from his pocket-book, wrote on it a brief description of the manner in which Mr Monkton had died, and pinned the paper to his clothes; this proceeding having been rendered necessary by the peculiar nature of the plan organized on the spot for safely disposing of the dead body. What this plan was, or what was done with the corpse, did not appear, for at this important point the narrative abruptly broke off.

A footnote in the newspaper merely stated the manner in which the document had been obtained for publication, and repeated the announcement contained in the editor's introductory remarks, that no continuation had been found by the persons entrusted with the care of Monsieur Foulon's papers. I have now given the whole substance of what I read, and have mentioned all that was then known of Mr Stephen Monkton's death.

When I gave the newspaper back to Alfred, he was too much agitated to speak; but he reminded me by a sign that he was anxiously awaiting to hear what I had to say. My position was a very trying and a very painful one. I could hardly tell what consequences might not follow any want of caution on my part, and could think at first of no safer plan than questioning him carefully before I committed myself either one way or the other.

'Will you excuse me if I ask you a question or two before I give you my advice?' I said.

He nodded impatiently.

'Yes, yes; any questions you like.'

'Were you at any time in the habit of seeing your uncle frequently?'

'I never saw him more than twice in my life; on each occasion, when I was a mere child.'

'Then you could have had no very strong personal regard for him?'

'Regard for him! I should have been ashamed to feel any regard for him. He disgraced us wherever he went.'

'May I ask if any family motive is involved in your anxiety to recover his remains?'

'Family motives may enter into it among others—but why do you ask?'

'Because, having heard that you employ the police to assist your search, I was anxious to know whether you had stimulated their superiors to make them do their best in your service, by giving some strong personal reasons at headquarters for the very unusual project which has brought you here.'

'I give no reasons. I pay for the work I want done, and in return for my liberality I am treated with the most infamous indifference on all sides. A stranger in the country, and badly acquainted with the language, I can do nothing to help myself. The authorities, both at Rome and in this place, pretend to assist me, pretend to search and inquire as I would have them search and inquire, and do nothing more. I am insulted, laughed at almost to my face.'

'Do you not think it possible—mind, I have no wish to excuse the misconduct of the authorities, and do not share in any such opinion myself—but do you not think it likely that the police may doubt whether you are in earnest?'

'Not in earnest!' he cried, starting up and confronting me fiercely, with wild eyes and quickened breath. 'Not in earnest! *You* think I'm not in earnest, too. I know you think it, though you tell me you don't. Stop! before we say another word, your own eyes shall convince you. Come here—only for a minute—only for one minute!'

I followed him into his bedroom, which opened out of the sitting-room. At one side of his bed stood a large packing case of plain wood, upwards of seven feet in length.

'Open the lid, and look in,' he said, 'while I hold the candle so that you can see.'

I obeyed his directions, and discovered, to my astonishment, that the packing case contained a leaden coffin, magnificently emblazoned with the arms of the Monkton family, and inscribed in old-fashioned letters with the name of 'Stephen Monkton', his age and the manner of his death being added underneath.

'I keep his coffin ready for him,' whispered Alfred, close at my ear. 'Does that look like earnest?'

It looked more like insanity—so like, that I shrank from answering him.

'Yes! yes! I see you are convinced,' he continued, quickly; 'we may go back into the next room, and may talk without restraint on either side now.'

On returning to our places, I mechanically moved my chair away from the table. My mind was by this time in such a state of confusion and uncertainty about what it would be best for me to say or do next, that I forgot for the moment the position he had assigned to me when we lit the candles. He reminded me of this directly.

'Don't move away,' he said, very earnestly; 'keep on sitting in the light; pray do! I'll soon tell you why I am so particular about that. But first give me your advice; help me in my great distress and suspense. Remember, you promised me you would.'

I made an effort to collect my thoughts, and succeeded. It was useless to treat the affair otherwise than seriously in his presence; it would have been cruel not to have advised him as I best could.

'You know,' I said, 'that two days after the drawing up of the agreement at Naples, the duel was fought out of the Neapolitan States. This fact has of course led you to the conclusion that all inquiries about localities had better be confined to the Roman territory?'

'Certainly: the search, such as it is, has been made there, and there only. If I can believe the police, they and their agents have inquired for the place where the duel was fought (offering a large reward in my name to the person who can discover it), all along the high-road from Naples to Rome. They have also circulated—at least, so they tell me—descriptions of the duellists and their seconds; have left an agent to superintend investigations at the post-house, and another at the town mentioned as meeting-points in the agreement; and have endeavoured by correspondence with foreign authorities to trace the Count St Lo and Monsieur Dalville to their place or places of refuge. All these efforts, supposing them to have been really made, have hitherto proved utterly fruitless.'

'My impression is,' said I, after a moment's consideration, 'that all inquiries made along the high-road, or anywhere near Rome, are likely to be made in vain. As to the discovery of your uncle's remains, that is, I think, identical with the discovery of the place where he was shot; for those engaged in the duel would certainly not risk detection by carrying a corpse any distance with them in their flight. The place, then, is all that we want to find out. Now, let us consider for a moment. The duelling-party changed carriages; travelled separately,

two and two; doubtless took roundabout roads; stopped at the post-house and the town as a blind; walked, perhaps, a considerable distance unguided. Depend upon it, such precautions as these (which we know they must have employed) left them very little time out of the two days—though they might start at sunrise, and not stop at nightfall—for straightforward travelling. My belief therefore is, that the duel was fought somewhere near the Neapolitan frontier; and if I had been the police agent who conducted the search, I should only have pursued it parallel with the frontier, starting from west to east till I got up among the lonely places in the mountains. That is my idea: do you think it worth anything?’

His face flushed all over in an instant. ‘I think it an inspiration!’ he cried. ‘Not a day is to be lost in carrying out our plan. The police are not to be trusted with it. I must start myself, tomorrow morning; and you——’

He stopped; his face grew suddenly pale; he sighed heavily; his eyes wandered once more into the fixed look at vacancy; and the rigid, deathly expression fastened again upon all his features.

‘I must tell you my secret before I talk of tomorrow,’ he proceeded, faintly. ‘If I hesitated any longer at confessing everything, I should be unworthy of your past kindness, unworthy of the help which it is my last hope that you will gladly give me when you have heard all.’

I begged him to wait until he was more composed, until he was better able to speak; but he did not appear to notice what I said. Slowly, and struggling as it seemed against himself, he turned a little away from me; and bending his head over the table, supported it on his hand. The packet of letters with which I had seen him occupied when I came in, lay just beneath his eyes. He looked down on it steadfastly when he next spoke to me.

IV

‘You were born, I believe, in our county,’ he said; ‘perhaps therefore you may have heard at some time of a curious old prophecy about our family, which is still preserved among the traditions of Wincot Abbey?’

‘I have heard of such a prophecy,’ I answered; ‘but I never knew in what terms it was expressed. It professed to predict the extinction of your family, or something of that sort, did it not?’

‘No inquiries,’ he went on, ‘have traced back that prophecy to the time when it was first made; none of our family records tell us anything of its origin. Old servants and old tenants of ours remember to have heard it from their fathers and grandfathers. The monks,

whom we succeeded in the Abbey in Henry the Eighth's time, got knowledge of it in some way; for I myself discovered the rhymes in which we know the prophecy to have been preserved from a very remote period, written on a blank leaf of one of the Abbey manuscripts. These are the verses, if verses they deserve to be called:

When in Wincot vault a place
Waits for one of Monkton's race;
When that one forlorn shall lie
Graveless under open sky,
Beggared of six feet of earth,
Though lord of acres from his birth—
That shall be a certain sign
Of the end of Monkton's line.
Dwindling ever faster, faster,
Dwindling to the last-left master;
From mortal ken, from light of day,
Monkton's race shall pass away.'

'The prediction seems almost vague enough to have been uttered by an ancient oracle,' said I, observing that he waited, after repeating the verses, as if expecting me to say something.

'Vague or not, it is being accomplished,' he returned. 'I am now the "Last-left Master"—the last of that elder line of our family at which the prediction points; and the corpse of Stephen Monkton is not in the vaults of Wincot Abbey. Wait, before you exclaim against me! I have more to say about this. Long before the Abbey was ours, when we lived in the ancient manor house near it (the very ruins of which have long since disappeared), the family burying place was in the vault under the Abbey chapel. Whether in those remote times the prediction against us was known and dreaded, or not, this much is certain: every one of the Monktons (whether living at the Abbey or on the smaller estate in Scotland) was buried in Wincot vault, no matter at what risk or what sacrifice. In the fierce fighting days of the olden time, the bodies of my ancestors who fell in foreign places were recovered and brought back to Wincot, though it often cost, not heavy ransom only, but desperate bloodshed as well, to obtain them. This superstition, if you please to call it so, has never died out of the family from that time to the present day; for centuries the succession of the dead in the vault at the Abbey has been unbroken—absolutely unbroken—until now. The place mentioned in the prediction as waiting to be filled, is Stephen Monkton's place; the voice that cries vainly to the earth for shelter is the voice of the dead. As surely as if I saw it, I know that they have left him unburied on the ground where he fell!'

He stopped me before I could utter a word in remonstrance, by

slowly rising to his feet, and pointing in the same direction towards which his eyes had wandered a short time since.

'I can guess what you want to ask me,' he exclaimed, sternly and loudly; 'you want to ask me how I can be mad enough to believe in a doggerel prophecy, uttered in an age of superstition to awe the most ignorant hearers. I answer' (at those words his voice sank suddenly to a whisper), 'I answer, because *Stephen Monkton himself stands there at this moment, confirming me in my belief.*

Whether it was the awe and horror that looked out ghastly from his face as he confronted me, whether it was that I had never hitherto fairly believed in the reports about his madness, and that the conviction of their truth now forced itself upon me on a sudden, I know not; but I felt my blood curdling as he spoke, and I knew in my own heart, as I sat there speechless, that I dare not turn round and look where he was still pointing close at my side.

'I see there,' he went on in the same whispering voice, 'the figure of a dark-complexioned man, standing up with his head uncovered. One of his hands, still clutching a pistol, has fallen to his side; the other presses a bloody handkerchief over his mouth. The spasm of mortal agony convulses his features; but I know them for the features of a swarthy man, who twice frightened me by taking me up in his arms when I was a child, at Wincot Abbey. I asked the nurses at the time who that man was, and they told me it was my uncle, Stephen Monkton. Plainly, as if he stood there living, I see him now at your side, with the death-glare in his great black eyes; and so have I ever seen him since the moment when he was shot; at home and abroad, waking or sleeping, day and night, we are always together wherever I go!'

His whispering tones sank into almost inaudible murmuring as he pronounced these last words. From the direction and expression of his eyes, I suspected that he was speaking to the apparition. If I had beheld it myself at that moment, it would have been, I think, a less horrible sight to witness than to see him, as I saw him now, muttering inarticulately at vacancy. My own nerves were more shaken than I could have thought possible by what had passed. A vague dread of being near him in his present mood came over me, and I moved back a step or two.

He noticed the action instantly.

'Don't go!—pray, pray don't go! Have I alarmed you? Don't you believe me? Do the lights make your eyes ache? I only asked you to sit in the glare of the candles, because I could not bear to see the light that always shines from the phantom there at dusk, shining over you as you sat in the shadow. Don't go—don't leave me yet!'

There was an utter forlornness, an unspeakable misery in his face as he said those words, which gave me back my self-possession by the simple process of first moving me to pity. I resumed my chair, and said that I would stay with him as long as he wished.

‘Thank you a thousand times! You are patience and kindness itself,’ he said, going back to his former place and resuming his former gentleness of manner. ‘Now that I have got over my first confession of the misery that follows me in secret wherever I go, I think I can tell you calmly all that remains to be told. You see, as I said, my uncle Stephen,’—he turned away his head quickly, and looked down at the table as the name passed his lips—‘my uncle Stephen came twice to Wincot while I was a child, and on both occasions frightened me dreadfully. He only took me up in his arms, and spoke to me—very kindly, as I afterwards heard, for *him*—but he terrified me, nevertheless. Perhaps I was frightened at his great stature, his swarthy complexion, and his thick black hair and moustache, as other children might have been; perhaps the mere sight of him had some strange influence on me which I could not then understand, and cannot now explain. However it was, I used to dream of him long after he had gone away; and to fancy that he was stealing on me to catch me up in his arms, whenever I was left in the dark. The servants who took care of me found this out, and used to threaten me with my uncle Stephen whenever I was perverse and difficult to manage. As I grew up, I still retained my vague dread and abhorrence of our absent relative. I always listened intently, yet without knowing why, whenever his name was mentioned by my father or my mother—listened with an unaccountable presentiment that something terrible had happened to him, or was about to happen to me. This feeling only changed when I was left alone in the Abbey; and then it seemed to merge into the eager curiosity which had begun to grow on me, rather before that time, about the origin of the ancient prophecy predicting the extinction of our race. Are you following me?’

‘I follow every word with the closest attention.’

‘You must know, then, that I had first found out some fragments of the old rhyme, in which the prophecy occurs, quoted as a curiosity in an antiquarian book in the library. On the page opposite this quotation, had been pasted a rude old woodcut, representing a dark-haired man, whose face was so strangely like what I remembered of my uncle Stephen, that the portrait absolutely startled me. When I asked my father about this—it was then just before his death—he either knew, or pretended to know, nothing of it; and when I afterwards mentioned the prediction he fretfully changed the subject. It was just the same with our chaplain when I spoke to him. He said

the portrait had been done centuries before my uncle was born; and called the prophecy doggerel and nonsense. I used to argue with him on the latter point, asking why we Catholics, who believed that the gift of working miracles had never departed from certain favoured persons, might not just as well believe that the gift of prophecy had never departed either? He would not dispute with me; he would only say that I must not waste time in thinking of such trifles, that I had more imagination than was good for me, and must suppress instead of exciting it. Such advice as this only irritated my curiosity. I determined to work secretly to search through the oldest uninhabited part of the Abbey, and to try if I could not find out from forgotten family records what the portrait was, and when the prophecy had been first written or uttered. Did you ever pass a day alone in the long-deserted chambers of an ancient house?’

‘Never; such solitude as that is not at all to my taste.’

‘Ah! what a life it was when I began my search. I should like to live it over again! Such tempting suspense, such strange discoveries, such wild fancies, such enthralling terrors, all belonged to that life! Only think of breaking open the door of a room which no living soul had entered before you for nearly a hundred years! think of the first step forward in a region of airless, awful stillness, where the light falls faint and sickly through closed windows and rotting curtains! think of the ghostly creaking of the old floor that cries out on you for treading on it, step as softly as you will! think of arms, helmets, weird tapestries of bygone days, that seem to be moving out on you from the walls as you first walk up to them in the dim light! think of prying into great cabinets and iron-clasped chests, not knowing what horrors may appear when you tear them open! of poring over their contents till twilight stole on you, and darkness grew terrible in the lonely place! of trying to leave it, and not being able to go, as if something held you; of wind wailing at you outside; of shadows darkening round you, and closing you up in obscurity within! Only think of these things, and you may imagine the fascination of suspense and terror in such a life as mine was in those past days!’

(I shrunk from imagining that life: it was bad enough to see its results, as I saw them before me now.)

‘Well, my search lasted months and months; then it was suspended a little, then resumed. In whatever direction I pursued it, I always found something to lure me on. Terrible confessions of past crimes, shocking proofs of secret wickedness that had been hidden securely from all eyes but mine, came to light. Sometimes these discoveries were associated with particular parts of the Abbey, which have had a horrible interest of their own for me ever since. Sometimes with

certain old portraits in the picture-gallery, which I actually dreaded to look at, after what I had found out. There were periods when the results of this search of mine so horrified me, that I determined to give it up entirely; but I never could persevere in my resolution, the temptation to go on seemed at certain intervals to get too strong for me, and then I yielded to it again and again. At last I found the book that had belonged to the monks, with the whole of the prophecy written in the blank leaf. This first success encouraged me to get back further yet in the family records: I had discovered nothing hitherto of the identity of the mysterious portrait, but the same intuitive conviction which had assured me of its extraordinary resemblance to my uncle Stephen, seemed also to assure me that he must be more closely connected with the prophecy, and must know more of it than anyone else. I had no means of holding any communication with him, no means of satisfying myself whether this strange idea of mine were right or wrong, until the day when my doubts were settled for ever, by the same terrible proof which is now present to me in this very room.'

He paused for a moment and looked at me intently and suspiciously; then asked if I believed all he had said to me so far. My instant reply in the affirmative seemed to satisfy his doubts, and he went on:

'On a fine evening in February, I was standing alone in one of the deserted rooms of the western turret at the Abbey, looking at the sunset. Just before the sun went down, I felt a sensation stealing over me which it is impossible to explain. I saw nothing, heard nothing, knew nothing. This utter self-oblivion came suddenly; it was not fainting for I did not fall to the ground, did not move an inch from my place. If such a thing could be, I should say it was the temporary separation of soul and body, without death: but all description of my situation at that time is impossible. Call my state what you will, trance or catalepsy, I know that I remained standing by the window utterly unconscious—dead, mind and body—until the sun had set. Then I came to my senses again; and then, when I opened my eyes, there was the apparition of Stephen Monkton standing opposite to me, faintly luminous, just as it stands opposite me at this very moment by your side.'

'Was this before the news of the duel reached England?' I asked.

'*Two weeks before* the news of it reached us at Wincot. And even when we heard of the duel, we did not hear of the day on which it was fought. I only found that out when the document which you have read was published in the French newspaper. The date of that document, you will remember, is February 22nd, and it is stated that the duel was

fought two days afterwards. I wrote down in my pocket-book, on the evening when I saw the phantom, the day of the month on which it first appeared to me. That day was the 24th of February.'

He paused again, as if expecting me to say something. After the words he had just spoken, what could I say? what could I think?

'Even in the first horror of first seeing the apparition,' he went on, 'the prophecy against our house came to my mind, and with it the conviction that I beheld before me, in that spectral presence, the warning of my own doom. As soon as I recovered a little, I determined, nevertheless, to test the reality of what I saw—to find out whether I was the dupe of my own diseased fancy, or not. I left the turret; the phantom left it with me. I made an excuse to have the drawing-room at the Abbey brilliantly lighted up—the figure was still opposite me. I walked out into the park—it was there in the clear starlight. I went away from home, and travelled many miles to the seaside; still the tall dark man in his death-agony was with me. After this, I strove against the fatality no more. I returned to the Abbey, and tried to resign myself to my misery. But this was not to be. I had a hope that was dearer to me than my own life; I had one treasure belonging to me that I shuddered at the prospect of losing, and when the phantom presence stood a warning obstacle between me and this one treasure, this dearest hope—then my misery grew heavier than I could bear. You must know what I am alluding to; you must have heard often that I was engaged to be married?'

'Yes, often. I have some acquaintance myself with Miss Elmslie.'

'You never can know all she has sacrificed for me—never can imagine what I have felt for years and years past'—his voice trembled, and the tears came into his eyes—'but I dare not trust myself to speak of that: the thought of the old happy days in the Abbey almost breaks my heart now. Let me get back to the other subject. I must tell you that I kept the frightful vision which pursued me, at all times, and in all places, a secret from everybody; knowing the vile reports about my having inherited madness from my family, and fearing that an unfair advantage would be taken of any confession that I might make. Though the phantom always stood opposite to me, and therefore always appeared either before or by the side of any person to whom I spoke, I soon schooled myself to hide from others that I was looking at it, except on rare occasions—when I have perhaps betrayed myself to you. But my self-possession availed me nothing with Ada. The day of our marriage was approaching.'

He stopped and shuddered. I waited in silence till he had controlled himself.

'Think,' he went on, 'think of what I must have suffered at looking

always on that hideous vision, whenever I looked on my betrothed wife! Think of my taking her hand, and seeming to take it through the figure of the apparition! Think of the calm angel-face and the tortured spectre-face being always together, whenever my eyes met hers! Think of this, and you will not wonder that I betrayed my secret to her. She eagerly entreated to know the worst—nay more, she insisted on knowing it. At her bidding I told all; and then left her free to break our engagement. The thought of death was in my heart as I spoke the parting words—death by my own act, if life still held out after our separation. She suspected that thought; she knew it, and never left me till her good influence had destroyed it for ever. But for her, I should not have been alive now—but for her, I should never have attempted the project which has brought me here.'

'Do you mean that it was at Miss Elmslie's suggestion that you came to Naples?' I asked in amazement.

'I mean that what she said, suggested the design which has brought me to Naples,' he answered. 'While I believed that the phantom had appeared to me as the fatal messenger of death, there was no comfort, there was misery rather in hearing her say that no power on earth should make her desert me, and that she would live for me, and for me only, through every trial. But it was far different when we afterwards reasoned together about the purpose which the apparition had come to fulfil—far different when she showed me that its mission might be for good, instead of for evil; and that the warning it was sent to give, might be to my profit instead of to my loss. At those words, the new idea which gave the new hope of life came to me in an instant. I believed then, what I believe now, that I have a supernatural warrant for my errand here. In that faith I live; without it I should die. *She* never ridiculed it, never scorned it as insanity. Mark what I say! The spirit that appeared to me in the Abbey, that has never left me since, that stands there now by your side, warns me to escape from the fatality which hangs over our race, and commands me, if I would avoid it, to bury the unburied dead. Mortal loves and mortal interests must bow to that awful bidding. The spectre-presence will never leave me till I have sheltered the corpse that cries to the earth to cover it! I dare not return—I dare not marry till I have filled the place that is empty in Wincot vault.'

His eyes flashed and dilated; his voice deepened; a fanatic ecstasy shone in his expression as he uttered these words. Shocked and grieved as I was, I made no attempt to remonstrate or to reason with him. It would have been useless to have referred to any of the usual commonplaces about optical delusions, or diseased imaginations—worse than useless to have attempted to account by natural causes for

any of the extraordinary coincidences and events of which he had spoken. Briefly as he had referred to Miss Elmslie, he had said enough to show that the only hope of the poor girl who loved him best and had known him longest of any one, was in humouring his delusions to the last. How faithfully she still clung to the belief that she could restore him! How resolutely was she sacrificing herself to his morbid fancies, in the hope of a happy future that might never come! Little as I knew of Miss Elmslie, the mere thought of her situation, as I now reflected on it, made me feel sick at heart.

‘They call me “Mad Monkton”!’ he exclaimed, suddenly breaking the silence between us during the last few minutes. ‘Here and in England everybody believes I am out of my senses, except Ada and you. She has been my salvation; and you will be my salvation too. Something told me that, when I first met you walking in the Villa Reale. I struggled against the strong desire that was in me to trust my secret to you; but I could resist it no longer when I saw you tonight at the ball—the phantom seemed to draw me on to you, as you stood alone in the quiet room. Tell me more of that idea of yours about finding the place where the duel was fought. If I set out tomorrow to seek for it myself, where must I go to first?—where?’ He stopped; his strength was evidently becoming exhausted, and his mind was growing confused. ‘What am I to do? I can’t remember. You know everything—will you not help me? My misery has made me unable to help myself!’

He stopped, murmured something about failing if he went to the frontier alone, and spoke confusedly of delays that might be fatal; then tried to utter the name of ‘Ada’; but in pronouncing the first letter his voice faltered, and turning abruptly from me he burst into tears.

My pity for him got the better of my prudence at that moment, and without thinking of responsibilities, I promised at once to do for him whatever he asked. The wild triumph in his expression, as he started up and seized my hand, showed me that I had better have been more cautious; but it was too late now to retract what I had said. The next best thing to do was to try if I could not induce him to compose himself a little, and then to go away and think coolly over the whole affair by myself.

‘Yes, yes,’ he rejoined, in answer to the few words I now spoke to try and calm him, ‘don’t be afraid about me. After what you have said, I’ll answer for my own coolness and composure under all emergencies. I have been so long used to the apparition that I hardly feel its presence at all except on rare occasions. Besides, I have here, in this little packet of letters, the medicine for every malady of the sick heart. They are Ada’s letters; I read them to calm me whenever my

misfortune seems to get the better of my endurance. I wanted that half hour to read them in tonight, before you came, to make myself fit to see you; and I shall go through them again after you are gone. So, once more don't be afraid about me. I know I shall succeed with your help; and Ada shall thank you as you deserve to be thanked when we get back to England. If you hear the fools at Naples talk about my being mad, don't trouble yourself to contradict them: the scandal is so contemptible that it must end by contradicting itself.

I left him, promising to return early the next day.

When I got back to my hotel, I felt that any idea of sleeping after all that I had seen and heard, was out of the question. So I lit my pipe, and sitting by the window—how it refreshed my mind just then to look at the calm moonlight!—tried to think what it would be best to do. In the first place, any appeal to doctors or to Alfred's friends in England was out of the question. I could not persuade myself that his intellect was sufficiently disordered to justify me, under existing circumstances, in disclosing the secret which he had entrusted to my keeping. In the second place, all attempts on my part to induce him to abandon the idea of searching out his uncle's remains would be utterly useless after what I had incautiously said to him. Having settled these two conclusions, the only really great difficulty which remained to perplex me was whether I was justified in aiding him to execute his extraordinary purpose.

Supposing that with my help he found Mr Monkton's body, and took it back with him to England, was it right in me thus to lend myself to promoting the marriage which would most likely follow these events—a marriage which it might be the duty of every one to prevent at all hazards? This set me thinking about the extent of his madness, or, to speak more mildly and more correctly, of his delusion. Sane he certainly was on ordinary subjects; nay, in all the narrative parts of what he had said to me on this very evening he had spoken clearly and connectedly. As for the story of the apparition, other men, with intellects as clear as the intellects of their neighbours, had fancied themselves pursued by a phantom, and had even written about it in a high strain of philosophical speculation. It was plain that the real hallucination in the case now before me, lay in Monkton's conviction of the truth of the old prophecy, and in his idea that the fancied apparition was a supernatural warning to him to evade its denunciations. And it was equally clear that both delusions had been produced, in the first instance, by the lonely life he had led, acting on a naturally excitable temperament, which was rendered further liable to moral disease by an hereditary taint of insanity.

Was this curable? Miss Elmslie, who knew him far better than I did,

seemed by her conduct to think so. Had I any reason or right to determine off-hand that she was mistaken? Supposing I refused to go to the frontier with him, he would then most certainly depart by himself, so commit all sorts of errors, and perhaps to meet with all sorts of accidents; while I, an idle man, with my time entirely at my own disposal, was stopping at Naples, and leaving him to his fate after I had suggested the plan of his expedition, and had encouraged him to confide in me. In this way I kept turning the subject over and over again in my mind—being quite free, let me add, from looking at it in any other than a practical point of view. I firmly believed, as a derider of all ghost stories, that Alfred was deceiving himself in fancying that he had seen the apparition of his uncle, before the news of Mr Monkton's death reached England; and I was on this account therefore uninfluenced by the slightest infection of my unhappy friend's delusions, when I at last fairly decided to accompany him in his extraordinary search. Possibly my harum-scarum fondness for excitement at that time, biassed me a little in forming my resolution; but I must add, in common justice to myself, that I also acted from motives of real sympathy for Monkton, and from a sincere wish to allay, if I could, the anxiety of the poor girl who was still so faithfully waiting and hoping for him far away in England.

Certain arrangements preliminary to our departure, which I found myself obliged to make after a second interview with Alfred, betrayed the object of our journey to most of our Neapolitan friends. The astonishment of everybody was of course unbounded, and the nearly universal suspicion that I must be as mad in my way as Monkton himself, showed itself pretty plainly in my presence. Some people actually tried to combat my resolution by telling me what a shameless profligate Stephen Monkton had been—as if I had a strong personal interest in hunting out his remains! Ridicule moved me as little as any arguments of this sort; my mind was made up, and I was as obstinate then as I am now.

In two days' time I had got everything ready, and had ordered the travelling carriage to the door some hours earlier than we had originally settled. We were jovially threatened with 'a parting cheer' by all our English acquaintances, and I thought it desirable to avoid this on my friend's account; for he had been more excited, as it was, by the preparations for the journey than I at all liked. Accordingly, soon after sunrise, without a soul in the street to stare at us, we privately left Naples.

Nobody will wonder, I think, that I experienced some difficulty in realizing my own position, and shrank instinctively from looking forward a single day into the future, when I now found myself starting,

in company with 'Mad Monkton', to hunt for the body of a dead duellist all along the frontier line of the Roman states!

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I had settled it in my own mind that we had better make the town of Fondi, close on the frontier, our headquarters, to begin with; and I had arranged, with the assistance of the Embassy, that the leaden coffin should follow us so far, securely nailed up in its packing case. Besides our passports, we were well furnished with letters of introduction to the local authorities at most of the important frontier towns, and to crown all, we had money enough at our command (thanks to Monkton's vast fortune) to make sure of the services of anyone whom we wanted to assist us, all along our line of search. These various resources ensured us every facility for action—provided always that we succeeded in discovering the body of the dead duellist. But, in the very probable event of our failing to do this, our future prospects—more especially after the responsibility I had undertaken—were of anything but an agreeable nature to contemplate. I confess I felt uneasy, almost hopeless, as we posted, in the dazzling Italian sunshine, along the road to Fondi.

We made an easy two days' journey of it; for I had insisted, on Monkton's account, that we should travel slowly.

On the first day the excessive agitation of my companion a little alarmed me; he showed, in many ways, more symptoms of a disordered mind than I had yet observed in him. On the second day, however, he seemed to get accustomed to contemplate calmly the new idea of the search on which we were bent, and, except on one point, he was cheerful and composed enough. Whenever his dead uncle formed the subject of conversation, he still persisted—on the strength of the old prophecy, and under the influence of the apparition which he saw, or thought he saw, always—in asserting that the corpse of Stephen Monkton, wherever it was, lay yet unburied. On every other topic he deferred to me with the utmost readiness and docility; on this, he maintained his strange opinion with an obstinacy which set reason and persuasion alike at defiance.

On the third day we rested at Fondi. The packing case, with the coffin in it, reached us, and was deposited in a safe place under lock and key. We engaged some mules, and found a man to act as guide who knew the country thoroughly. It occurred to me that we had better begin by confiding the real object of our journey only to the most trustworthy people we could find among the better-educated classes. For this reason we followed, in one respect, the example of the

duelling-party, by starting, early on the morning of the fourth day, with sketch-books and colour-boxes, as if we were only artists in search of the picturesque.

After travelling some hours in a northerly direction within the Roman frontier, we halted to rest ourselves and our mules at a wild little village, far out of the track of tourists in general.

The only person of the smallest importance in the place was the priest, and to him I addressed my first inquiries, leaving Monkton to await my return with the guide. I spoke Italian quite fluently and correctly enough for my purpose, and was extremely polite and cautious in introducing my business; but, in spite of all the pains I took, I only succeeded in frightening and bewildering the poor priest more and more with every fresh word I said to him. The idea of a duelling-party and a dead man seemed to scare him out of his senses. He bowed, fidgetted, cast his eyes up to heaven, and piteously shrugging his shoulders, told me, with rapid Italian circumlocution, that he had not the faintest idea of what I was talking about. This was my first failure. I confess I was weak enough to feel a little dispirited when I joined Monkton and the guide.

After the heat of the day was over, we resumed our journey.

About three miles from the village, the road, or rather cart-track, branched off in two directions. The path to the right, our guide informed us, led up among the mountains to a convent about six miles off. If we penetrated beyond the convent, we should soon reach the Neapolitan frontier. The path to the left led far inwards on the Roman territory, and would conduct us to a small town were we could sleep for the night. Now the Roman territory presented the first and fittest field for our search, and the convent was always within reach, supposing we returned to Fondi unsuccessful. Besides, the path to the left led over the widest part of the country we were starting to explore; and I was always for vanquishing the greatest difficulty first—so we decided manfully on turning to the left. The expedition in which this resolution involved us lasted a whole week, and produced no results. We discovered absolutely nothing, and returned to our headquarters at Fondi so completely baffled that we did not know whither to turn our steps next.

I was made much more uneasy by the effect of our failure on Monkton than by the failure itself. His resolution appeared to break down altogether as soon as we began to retrace our steps. He became first fretful and capricious, then silent and desponding. Finally, he sank into a lethargy of body and mind that seriously alarmed me. On the morning after our return to Fondi, he showed a strange tendency to sleep incessantly, which made me suspect the existence of some

physical malady in his brain. The whole day he hardly exchanged a word with me, and seemed to be never fairly awake. Early the next morning I went into his room, and found him as silent and lethargic as ever. His servant, who was with us, informed me that Alfred had once or twice before exhibited such physical symptoms of mental exhaustion as we were now observing, during his father's lifetime at Wincot Abbey. This piece of information made me feel easier, and left my mind free to return to the consideration of the errand which had brought us to Fondi.

I resolved to occupy the time until my companion got better in prosecuting our search by myself. That path to the right hand which led to the convent, had not yet been explored. If I set off to trace it, I need not be away from Monkton more than one night; and I should at least be able on my return to give him the satisfaction of knowing that one more uncertainty regarding the place of the duel had been cleared up. These considerations decided me. I left a message for my friend, in case he asked where I had gone, and set out once more for the village at which we had halted when starting on our first expedition.

Intending to walk to the convent, I parted company with the guide and the mules where the track branched off, leaving them to go back to the village and await my return.

For the first four miles the path gently ascended through an open country, then became abruptly much steeper, and led me deeper and deeper among thickets and endless woods. By the time my watch informed me that I must have nearly walked my appointed distance, the view was bounded on all sides, and the sky was shut out overhead, by an impervious screen of leaves and branches. I still followed my only guide, the steep path; and in ten minutes, emerging suddenly on a plot of tolerably clear and level ground, I saw the convent before me.

It was a dark, low, sinister-looking place. Not a sign of life or movement was visible anywhere about it. Green stains streaked the once white facade of the chapel in all directions. Moss clustered thick in every crevice of the heavy scowling wall that surrounded the convent. Long lank weeds grew out of the fissures of roof and parapet, and dropping far downward, waved wearily in and out of the barred dormitory windows. The very cross opposite the entrance-gate, with a shocking life-sized figure in wood nailed to it, was so beset at the base with crawling creatures, and looked so slimy, green, and rotten all the way up, that I absolutely shrank from it.

A bell-rope with a broken handle hung by the gate. I approached it—hesitated, I hardly knew why—looked up at the convent again, and then walked round to the back of the building, partly to gain time

to consider what I had better do next; partly from an unaccountable curiosity that urged me, strangely to myself, to see all I could of the outside of the place before I attempted to gain admission at the gate.

At the back of the convent I found an outhouse, built on to the wall—a clumsy, decayed building, with the greater part of the roof fallen in, and with a jagged hole in one of its sides, where in all probability a window had once been. Behind the outhouse the trees grew thicker than ever. As I looked towards them, I could not determine whether the ground beyond me rose or fell—whether it was grassy, or earthy, or rocky. I could see nothing but the all-pervading leaves, brambles, ferns, and long grass.

Not a sound broke the oppressive stillness. No bird's note rose from the leafy wilderness around me; no voices spoke in the convent garden behind the scowling wall; no clock struck in the chapel-tower; no dog barked in the ruined outhouse. The dead silence deepened the solitude of the place inexpressibly. I began to feel it weighing on my spirits—the more because woods were never favourite places with me to walk in. The sort of pastoral happiness which poets often represent, when they sing of life in the woods, never, to my mind, has half the charm of life on the mountain or in the plain. When I am in a wood, I miss the boundless loveliness of the sky, and the delicious softness that distance gives to the earthly view beneath. I feel oppressively the change which the free air suffers when it gets imprisoned among leaves; and I am always awed, rather than pleased, by that mysterious still light which shines with such a strange dim lustre in deep places among trees. It may convict me of want of taste and absence of due feeling for the marvellous beauties of vegetation, but I must frankly own that I never penetrate far into a wood without finding that the getting out of it again is the pleasantest part of my walk—the getting out on to the barest down, the wildest hill-side, the bleakest mountain-top—the getting out anywhere so that I can see the sky over me and the view before me as far as my eye can reach.

After such a confession as I have now made, it will appear surprising to no one that I should have felt the strongest possible inclination, while I stood by the ruined outhouse, to retrace my steps at once, and make the best of my way out of the wood. I had indeed actually turned to depart, when the remembrance of the errand which had brought me to the convent suddenly stayed my feet. It seemed doubtful whether I should be admitted into the building if I rang the bell; and more than doubtful, if I were let in, whether the inhabitants would be able to afford me any clue to the information of which I was in search. However, it was my duty to Monkton to leave no means of helping him in his desperate object untried; so I resolved to go round to the

front of the convent again, and ring the gate-bell at all hazards.

By the merest chance I looked up as I passed the side of the outhouse where the jagged hole was, and noticed that it was pierced rather high in the wall.

As I stopped to observe this, the closeness of the atmosphere in the wood seemed to be affecting me more unpleasantly than ever.

I waited a minute and untied my cravat.

Closeness?—Surely it was something more than that. The air was even more distasteful to my nostrils than to my lungs. There was some faint, indescribable smell loading it—some smell of which I had never had any previous experience—some smell which I thought (now that my attention was directed to it) grew more and more certainly traceable to its source the nearer I advanced to the outhouse.

By the time I had tried the experiment two or three times, and had made myself sure of this fact, my curiosity became excited. There were plenty of fragments of stone and brick lying about me. I gathered some of them together, and piled them up below the hole, then mounted to the top, and, feeling rather ashamed of what I was doing, peeped into the outhouse.

The sight of horror that met my eyes the instant I looked through the hole, is as present to my memory now as if I had beheld it yesterday. I can hardly write of it at this distance of time without a thrill of the old terror running through me again to the heart.

The first impression conveyed to me, as I looked in, was of a long recumbent object, tinged with a lightish blue colour all over, extended on trestles, and bearing a certain hideous, half-formed resemblance to the human face and figure. I looked again, and felt certain of it. There were prominences of the forehead, nose, and chin, dimly shown as under a veil—there, the round outline of the chest, and the hollow below it—there, the points of the knees, and the stiff, ghastly, upturned feet. I looked again, yet more attentively. My eyes got accustomed to the dim light streaming in through the broken roof; and I satisfied myself, judging by the great length of the body from head to foot, that I was looking at the corpse of a man—a corpse that had apparently once had a sheet spread over it—and that had lain rotting on the trestles under the open sky long enough for the linen to take the livid, light-blue tinge of mildew and decay which now covered it.

How long I remained with my eyes fixed on that dread sight of death, on that tombless, terrible wreck of humanity, poisoning the still air, and seeming even to stain the faint descending light that disclosed it, I know not. I remember a dull, distant sound among the trees, as if the breeze were rising—the slow creeping on of the sound to near

the place where I stood—the noiseless, whirling fall of a dead leaf on the corpse below me, through the gap in the outhouse roof—and the effect of awakening my energies, or relaxing the heavy strain on my mind, which even the slight change wrought in the scene I beheld by the falling leaf, produced in me immediately. I descended to the ground, and, sitting down on the heap of stones, wiped away the thick perspiration which covered my face, and which I now became aware of for the first time. It was something more than the hideous spectacle unexpectedly offered to my eyes which had shaken my nerves, as I felt that they were shaken now. Monkton's prediction that, if we succeeded in discovering his uncle's body, we should find it unburied, recurred to me the instant I saw the trestles and their ghastly burden. I felt assured on the instant that I had found the dead man—the old prophecy recurred to my memory—a strange yearning sorrow, a vague foreboding of ill, an inexplicable terror, as I thought of the poor lad who was awaiting my return in the distant town, struck through me with a chill of superstitious dread, robbed me of my judgment and resolution, and left me, when I had at last recovered myself, weak and dizzy, as if I had just suffered under some pang of overpowering physical pain.

I hastened round to the convent gate, and rang impatiently at the bell—waited a little while, and rang again—then heard footsteps.

In the middle of the gate, just opposite my face, there was a small sliding panel, not more than a few inches long; this was presently pushed aside from within. I saw, through a bit of iron grating, two dull, light grey eyes staring vacantly at me, and heard a feeble, husky voice saying:

‘What may you please to want?’

‘I am a traveller——’ I began.

‘We live in a miserable place. We have nothing to show travellers here.’

‘I don't come to see anything. I have an important question to ask, which I believe someone in this convent will be able to answer. If you are not willing to let me in, at least come out and speak to me here.’

‘Are you alone?’

‘Quite alone.’

‘Are there no women with you?’

‘None.’

The gate was slowly unbarred; and an old Capuchin, very infirm, very suspicious, and very dirty, stood before me. I was far too excited and impatient to waste any time in prefatory phrases; so telling the monk at once how I had looked through the hole in the outhouse, and what I had seen inside, I asked him in plain terms who the man had

been whose corpse I had beheld, and why the body was left unburied.

The old Capuchin listened to me with watery eyes that twinkled suspiciously. He had a battered tin snuff-box in his hand; and his finger and thumb slowly chased a few scattered grains of snuff round and round the inside of the box all the time I was speaking. When I had done, he shook his head, and said, 'that was certainly an ugly sight in their outhouse; one of the ugliest sights, he felt sure, that ever I had seen in all my life!'

'I don't want to talk of the sight,' I rejoined impatiently; 'I want to know who the man was, how he died, and why he is not decently buried. Can you tell me?'

The monk's finger and thumb having captured three or four grains of snuff at last, he slowly drew them into his nostrils, holding the box open under his nose the while, to prevent the possibility of wasting even one grain, sniffed once or twice, luxuriously—closed the box—then looked at me again, with his eyes watering and twinkling more suspiciously than before.

'Yes,' said the monk, 'that's an ugly sight in our outhouse—a very ugly sight, certainly!'

I never had more difficulty in keeping my temper in my life, than at that moment. I succeeded, however, in repressing a very disrespectful expression on the subject of monks in general, which was on the tip of my tongue, and made another attempt to conquer the old man's exasperating reserve. Fortunately for my chances of succeeding with him, I was a snuff-taker myself; and I had a box full of excellent English snuff in my pocket, which I now produced as a bribe. It was my last resource.

'I thought your box seemed empty just now,' said I; 'will you try a pinch out of mine?'

The offer was accepted with an almost youthful alacrity of gesture. The Capuchin took the largest pinch I ever saw held between any man's finger and thumb, inhaled it slowly, without spilling a single grain—half closed his eyes—and, wagging his head gently, patted me paternally on the back.

'Oh! my son!' said the monk, 'what delectable snuff! Oh, my son and amiable traveller, give the spiritual father who loves you, yet another tiny, tiny pinch!'

'Let me fill your box for you. I shall have plenty left for myself.'

The battered tin snuff-box was given to me before I had done speaking—the paternal hand patted my back more approvingly than ever—the feeble, husky voice grew glib and eloquent in my praise. I had evidently found out the weak side of the old Capuchin; and, on returning him his box, I took instant advantage of the discovery.

'Excuse my troubling you on the subject again,' I said, 'but I have particular reasons for wanting to hear all that you can tell me in explanation of that horrible sight in the outhouse.'

'Come in,' answered the monk.

He drew me inside the gate, closed it, and then leading the way across a grass-grown courtyard, looking out on a weedy kitchen garden, showed me into a long room with a low ceiling, a dirty dresser, a few rudely-carved stall seats, and one or two grim mildewed pictures for ornaments. This was the sacristy.

'There's nobody here, and it's nice and cool,' said the old Capuchin. It was so damp that I actually shivered. 'Would you like to see the church?' said the monk; 'a jewel of a church, if we could only keep it in repair; but we can't. Ah! malediction and misery, we are too poor to keep our church in repair!'

Here he shook his head, and began fumbling with a large bunch of keys.

'Never mind the church now!' said I. 'Can you, or can you not, tell me what I want to know?'

'Everything, from beginning to end—absolutely everything! Why I answered the gate-bell—I always answer the gate-bell here,' said the Capuchin.

'What, in heaven's name, has the gate-bell to do with the unburied corpse in your outhouse?'

'Listen, son of mine, and you shall know. Some time ago—some months—ah, me, I'm old; I've lost my memory; I don't know how many months—ah! miserable me, what a very old, old monk I am!' Here he comforted himself with another pinch of my snuff.

'Never mind the exact time,' said I. 'I don't care about that.'

'Good,' said the Capuchin. 'Now I can go on. Well, let us say, it is some months ago—we in this convent are all at breakfast—wretched, wretched breakfasts, son of mine, in this convent!—we are at breakfast, and we hear *bang! bang!* twice over. "Guns," says I. "What are they shooting for?" says brother Jeremy. "Game," says brother Vincent. "Aha! game," says brother Jeremy. "If I hear more, I shall send out and discover what it means," says the father superior. We hear no more, and we go on with our wretched breakfasts.'

'Where did the report of firearms come from?' I inquired.

'From down below, beyond the big trees at the back of the convent, where there's some clear ground—nice ground, if it wasn't for the pools and puddles. But, ah, misery! how damp we are in these parts! how very, very damp!'

'Well, what happened after the report of firearms?'

'You shall hear. We are still at breakfast, all silent—for what have we

to talk about here? What have we but our devotions, our kitchen garden, and our wretched, wretched bits of breakfasts and dinners? I say we are all silent when there comes suddenly such a ring at the bell as never was heard before—a very devil of a ring—a ring that caught us all with our bits—our wretched, wretched bits!—in our mouths, and stopped us before we could swallow them. “Go, brother of mine!” says the father superior to me—“go, it is your duty—go to the gate.” I am brave—a very lion of a Capuchin. I slip out on tip-toe—I wait—I listen—I pull back our little shutter in the gate—I wait, I listen again—I peep through the hole—nothing, absolutely nothing, that I can see. I am brave—I am not to be daunted. What do I do next? I open the gate. Ah! Sacred Mother of Heaven, what do I behold lying all long our threshold? A man—dead!—a big man; bigger than you, bigger than me, bigger than anybody in this convent—buttoned up tight in a fine coat, with black eyes, staring, staring up at the sky; and blood soaking through and through the front of his shirt. What do I do? I scream once—I scream twice—and run back to the father superior!

All the particulars of the fatal duel which I had gleaned from the French newspaper in Monkton’s room at Naples, recurred vividly to my memory. The suspicion that I had felt when I looked into the outhouse, became a certainty as I listed to the old monk’s last words.

‘So far I understand,’ said I. ‘The corpse I have just seen in the outhouse, is the corpse of the man whom you found dead outside your gate. Now tell me why you have not given the remains a decent burial?’

‘Wait—wait—wait,’ answered the Capuchin. ‘The father superior hears me scream, and comes out; we all run together to the gate; we lift up the big man, and look at him close. Dead! dead as this’ (smacking the dresser with his hand). ‘We look again, and see a bit of paper pinned to the collar of his coat. Aha! son of mine, you start at that. I thought I should make you start at last.’

I had started indeed. That paper was doubtless the leaf mentioned in the second’s unfinished narrative as having been torn out of his pocket-book, and inscribed with the statement of how the dead man had lost his life. If proof positive were wanted to identify the dead body, here was such proof found.

‘What do you think was written on the bit of paper?’ continued the Capuchin. ‘We read, and shudder. This dead man has been killed in a duel—he, the desperate, the miserable, has died in the commission of mortal sin; and the men who saw the killing of him, ask us Capuchins, holy men, servants of Heaven, children of our lord the pope—they ask *us* to give him burial! Oh! but we are outraged when we read that; we groan, we wring our hands, we turn away, we tear our beards, we——’

‘Wait one moment,’ said I, seeing that the old man was heating himself with his narrative, and was likely, unless I stopped him, to talk more and more fluently to less and less purpose—‘wait a moment. Have you preserved the paper that was pinned to the dead man’s coat; and can I look at it?’

The Capuchin seemed on the point of giving me an answer, when he suddenly checked himself. I saw his eyes wander away from my face, and at the same moment heard a door softly opened and closed again behind me.

Looking round immediately, I observed another monk in the sacristy—a tall, lean, black-bearded man, in whose presence my old friend with the snuff-box suddenly became quite decorous and devotional to look at. I suspected I was in the presence of the father superior; and I found that I was right the moment he addressed me.

‘I am the father superior of this convent,’ he said in quiet, clear tones, and looking me straight in the face while he spoke, with coldly attentive eyes. ‘I have heard the latter part of your conversation, and I wish to know why you are so particularly anxious to see the piece of paper that was pinned to the dead man’s coat?’

The coolness with which he avowed that he had been listening, and the quietly imperative manner in which he put his concluding questions, perplexed and startled me. I hardly knew at first what tone I ought to take in answering him. He observed my hesitation, and attributing it to the wrong cause, signed to the old Capuchin to retire. Humbly stroking his long grey beard, and furtively consoling himself with a private pinch of the ‘delectable snuff’, my venerable friend shuffled out of the room, making a profound obeisance at the door just before he disappeared.

‘Now,’ said the father superior, as coldly as ever; ‘I am waiting, sir, for your reply.’

‘You shall have it in the fewest possible words,’ said I, answering him in his own tone. ‘I find, to my disgust and horror, there is an unburied corpse in an outhouse attached to this convent. I believe that corpse to be the body of an English gentleman of rank and fortune, who was killed in a duel. I have come into this neighbourhood, with the nephew and only relation of the slain man, for the express purpose of recovering his remains; and I wish to see the paper found on the body, because I believe that paper will identify it to the satisfaction of the relative to whom I have referred. Do you find my reply sufficiently straightforward? And do you mean to give me permission to look at the paper?’

‘I am satisfied with your reply, and see no reason for refusing you a sight of the paper,’ said the father superior; ‘but I have something to

say first. In speaking of the impression produced on you by beholding the corpse, you used the words "disgust" and "horror". This licence of expression in relation to what you have seen in the precincts of a convent, proves to me that you are out of the pale of the Holy Catholic Church. You have no right, therefore, to expect any explanation; but I will give you one, nevertheless, as a favour. The slain man died, unabsolved, in the commission of mortal sin. We infer so much from the paper which we found on his body; and we know, by the evidence of our own eyes and ears, that he was killed on the territories of the church, and in the act of committing direct violation of those special laws against the crime of duelling, the strict enforcement of which the Holy Father himself has urged on the faithful throughout his dominions, by letters signed with his own hand. Inside this convent the ground is consecrated; and we Catholics are not accustomed to bury the outlaws of our religion, the enemies of our Holy Father, and the violators of our most sacred laws, in consecrated ground. Outside this convent, we have no rights and no power; and, if we had both, we should remember that we are monks, not gravediggers, and that the only burial with which *we* can have any concern, is burial with prayers of the church. That is all the explanation I think it necessary to give. Wait for me here, and you shall see the paper.' With those words the father superior left the room as quietly as he had entered it.

I had hardly time to think over this bitter and ungracious explanation, and to feel a little piqued by the language and manner of the person who had given it to me, before the father superior returned with the paper in his hand. He placed it before me on the dresser; and I read hurriedly traced in pencil, the following lines:

'This paper is attached to the body of the late Mr Stephen Monkton, an Englishman of distinction. He has been shot in a duel, conducted with perfect gallantry and honour on both sides. His body is placed at the door of this convent, to receive burial at the hands of its inmates, the survivors of the encounter being obliged to separate and secure their safety by immediate flight. I, the second of the slain man, and the writer of this explanation, certify on my word of honour as a gentleman, that the shot which killed my principal on the instant, was fired fairly, in the strictest accordance with the rules laid down beforehand for the conduct of the duel.

(Signed) 'F'

'F.' I recognized easily enough as the initial letter of Monsieur Foulon's name, the second of Mr Monkton, who had died of consumption at Paris.

The discovery and the identification were now complete. Nothing remained but to break the news to Alfred, and to get permission to

remove the remains in the outhouse. I began almost to doubt the evidence of my own senses, when I reflected that the apparently impracticable object with which we had left Naples was already, by the merest chance, virtually accomplished.

'The evidence of the paper is decisive,' I said, handing it back. 'There can be no doubt that the remains in the outhouse are the remains of which we have been in search. May I inquire if any obstacles will be thrown in our way, should the late Mr Monkton's nephew wish to remove his uncle's body to the family burial-place in England?'

'Where is this nephew?' asked the father superior.

'He is now waiting my return at the town of Fondi.'

'Is he in a position to prove his relationship?'

'Certainly; he has papers with him which will place it beyond a doubt.'

'Let him satisfy the civil authorities of his claim, and he need expect no obstacle to his wishes from anyone here.'

I was in no humour for talking a moment longer with my sour-tempered companion than I could help. The day was wearing on fast; and, whether night overtook me or not, I was resolved never to stop on my return till I got back to Fondi. Accordingly, after telling the father superior that he might expect to hear from me again immediately, I made my bow, and hastened out of the sacristy.

At the convent gate stood my old friend with the tin snuff-box, waiting to let me out.

'Bless you, my son,' said the venerable recluse, giving me a farewell pat on the shoulder; 'come back soon to your spiritual father who loves you; and amiably favour him with another tiny, tiny pinch of the delectable snuff.'

VI

I returned at the top of my speed to the village where I had left the mules, had the animals saddled immediately, and succeeded in getting back to Fondi a little before sunset.

While ascending the stairs of our hotel, I suffered under the most painful uncertainty as to how I should best communicate the news of my discovery to Alfred. If I could not succeed in preparing him properly for my tidings, the results—with such an organization as his—might be fatal. On opening the door of his room, I felt by no means sure of myself; and when I confronted him, his manner of receiving me took me so much by surprise that, for a moment or two, I lost my self-possession altogether. '

Every trace of the lethargy in which he was sunk when I had last

seen him, had disappeared. His eyes were bright, his cheeks deeply flushed. As I entered, he started up, and refused my offered hand.

'You have not treated me like a friend,' he said passionately; 'you had no right to continue the search unless I searched with you—you had no right to leave me here alone. I was wrong to trust you: you are no better than all the rest of them.'

I had by this time recovered a little from my first astonishment, and was able to reply before he could say anything more. It was quite useless, in his present state, to reason with him, or to defend myself. I determined to risk everything, and break my news to him at once.

'You will treat me more justly, Monkton, when you know that I have been doing you good service during my absence,' I said. 'Unless I am greatly mistaken, the object for which we have left Naples may be nearer attainment by both of us than——'

The flush left his cheeks almost in an instant. Some expression in my face, or some tone in my voice, of which I was not conscious, had revealed to his nervously-quicken'd perception more than I had intended that he should know at first. His eyes fixed themselves intently on mine; his hand grasped my arm; and he said to me in an eager whisper:

'Tell me the truth at once. Have you found him?'

It was too late to hesitate. I answered in the affirmative.

'Buried or unburied?'

His voice rose abruptly as he put the question, and his unoccupied hand fastened on my other arm.

'Unburied.'

I had hardly uttered the word before the blood flew back into his cheeks; his eyes flashed again as they looked into mine, and he burst into a fit of triumphant laughter, which shocked and startled me inexpressibly.

'What did I tell you? What do you say to the old prophecy now?' he cried, dropping his hold on my arms, and pacing backwards and forwards in the room. 'Own you were wrong. Own it, as all Naples shall own it, when once I have got him safe in his coffin!'

His laughter grew more and more violent. I tried to quiet him in vain. His servant and the landlord of the inn entered the room; but they only added fuel to the fire, and I made them go out again. As I shut the door on them, I observed lying on a table near at hand, the packet of letters from Miss Elmslie, which my unhappy friend preserved with such care, and read and re-read with such unflinching devotion. Looking towards me just when I passed by the table, the letters caught his eye. The new hope for the future, in connexion with the writer of them, which my news was already awakening in his

heart, seemed to overwhelm him in an instant at sight of the treasured memorials that reminded him of his betrothed wife. His laughter ceased, his face changed, he ran to the table, caught the letters up in his hand, looked from them to me for one moment with an altered expression which went to my heart, then sank down on his knees at the table, laid his face on the letters, and burst into tears. I let the new emotion have its way uninterruptedly, and quitted the room, without saying a word. When I returned, after a lapse of some little time, I found him sitting quietly in his chair, reading one of the letters from the packet which rested on his knee.

His look was kindness itself; his gesture almost womanly in its gentleness as he rose to meet me, and anxiously held out his hand.

He was quite calm enough now to hear in detail all that I had to tell him. I suppressed nothing but the particulars of the state in which I had found the corpse. I assumed no right of direction as to the share he was to take in our future proceedings, with the exception of insisting beforehand that he should leave the absolute superintendence of the removal of the body to me, and that he should be satisfied with a sight of M. Foulon's paper, after receiving my assurance that the remains placed in the coffin were really and truly the remains of which we had been in search.

'Your nerves are not so strong as mine,' I said, by way of apology for my apparent dictation; 'and for that reason I must beg leave to assume the leadership in all that we have now to do, until I see the leaden coffin soldered down and safe in your possession. After that, I shall resign all my functions to you.'

'I want words to thank you for your kindness,' he answered. 'No brother could have borne with me more affectionately, or helped me more patiently, than you.'

He stopped, and grew thoughtful, then occupied himself in tying up slowly and carefully the packet of Miss Elmslie's letters, and then looked suddenly towards the vacant wall behind me, with that strange expression the meaning of which I knew so well. Since we had left Naples, I had purposely avoided exciting him by talking on the useless and shocking subject of the apparition by which he believed himself to be perpetually followed. Just now, however, he seemed so calm and collected—so little likely to be violently agitated by any allusion to the dangerous topic—that I ventured to speak out boldly.

'Does the phantom still appear to you,' I asked, 'as it appeared at Naples?'

He looked at me, and smiled.

'Did I not tell you that it followed me everywhere?' His eyes wandered back again to the vacant space, and he went on speaking in

that direction, as if he had been continuing the conversation with some third person in the room. 'We shall part,' he said slowly and softly, 'when the empty place is filled in Wincot vault. Then I shall stand with Ada before the altar in the Abbey chapel; and when my eyes meet hers, they will see the tortured face no more.'

Saying this, he leaned his head on his hand, sighed, and began repeating softly to himself the lines of the old prophecy:

When in Wincot vault a place
Waits for one of Monkton's race;
When that one forlorn shall lie
Graveless under open sky,
Beggared of six feet of earth,
Though lord of acres from his birth—
That shall be a certain sign
Of the end of Monkton's line.
Dwindling ever faster, faster,
Dwindling to the last-left master;
From mortal ken, from light of day,
Monkton's race shall pass away.

Fancying that he pronounced the last lines a little incoherently, I tried to make him change the subject. He took no notice of what I said, and went on talking to himself.

'Monkton's race shall pass away!' he repeated; 'but not with *me*. The fatality hangs over *my* head no longer. I shall bury the unburied dead; I shall fill the vacant place in Wincot vault. And then—then the new life, the life with Ada!'—That name seemed to recall him to himself. He drew his travelling desk towards him, placed the packet of letters in it, and then took out a sheet of paper. 'I am going to write to Ada,' he said, turning to me, 'and tell her the good news. Her happiness, when she knows it, will be even greater than mine.'

Worn out by the events of the day, I left him writing, and went to bed. I was, however, either too anxious or too tired to sleep. In this waking condition, my mind naturally occupied itself with the discovery at the convent, and with the events to which that discovery would in all probability lead. As I thought on the future, a depression for which I could not account weighed on my spirits. There was not the slightest reason for the vaguely melancholy forebodings that oppressed me. The remains, to the finding of which my unhappy friend attached so much importance, had been traced; they would certainly be placed at his disposal in a few days; he might take them to England by the first merchant vessel that sailed from Naples; and, the gratification of his strange caprice thus accomplished, there was at least some reason to hope that his mind might recover its tone, and

that the new life he would lead at Wincot might result in making him a happy man. Such considerations as these were, in themselves, certainly not calculated to exert any melancholy influence over me; and yet, all through the night, the same inconceivable, unaccountable depression weighed heavily on my spirits—heavily through the hours of darkness—heavily, even when I walked out to breathe the first freshness of the early morning air.

With the day came the all-engrossing business of opening negotiations with the authorities.

Only those who have had to deal with Italian officials can imagine how our patience was tried by everyone with whom we came in contact. We were bandied about from one authority to the other, were stared at, cross-questioned, mystified—not in the least because the case presented any special difficulties or intricacies, but because it was absolutely necessary that every civil dignitary to whom we applied, should assert his own importance by leading us to our object in the most roundabout manner possible. After our first day's experience of official life in Italy, I left the absurd formalities, which we had no choice but to perform, to be accomplished by Alfred alone, and applied myself to considering the really serious question of how the remains in the convent outhouse were to be safely removed.

The best plan that suggested itself to me was to write to a friend at Rome, where I knew that it was a custom to embalm the bodies of high dignitaries of the church, and where, I consequently inferred, such chemical assistance as was needed in our emergency might be obtained. I simply stated in my letter that the removal of the body was imperative, then described the condition in which I had found it, and engaged that no expense on our part should be spared if the right person or persons could be found to help us. Here again more difficulties interposed themselves, and more useless formalities were to be gone through; but, in the end, patience, perseverance, and money triumphed, and two men came expressly from Rome to undertake the duties we required of them.

It is unnecessary that I should shock the reader by entering into any detail in this part of my narrative. When I have said that the progress of decay was so far suspended by chemical means as to allow of the remains being placed in the coffin, and to ensure their being transported to England with perfect safety and convenience, I have said enough. After ten days had been wasted in useless delays and difficulties, I had the satisfaction of seeing the convent outhouse empty at last; passed through a final ceremony of snuff-taking, or rather, of snuff-giving, with the old Capuchin; and ordered the travelling carriages to be ready at the inn door. Hardly a month had

elapsed since our departure, when we entered Naples successful in the achievement of a design, which had been ridiculed as wildly impracticable by every friend of ours who had heard of it.

The first object to be accomplished on our return was to obtain the means of carrying the coffin to England—by sea, as a matter of course. All inquiries after a merchant vessel on the point of sailing for any British port, led to the most unsatisfactory results. There was only one way of ensuring the immediate transportation of the remains to England, and that was to hire a vessel. Impatient to return, and resolved not to lose sight of the coffin till he had seen it placed in Wincot vault, Monkton decided immediately on hiring the first ship that could be obtained. The vessel in port which we were informed could soonest be got ready for sea, was a Sicilian brig; and this vessel my friend accordingly engaged. The best dockyard artisans that could be got were set to work, and the smartest captain and crew to be picked up on an emergency in Naples, were chosen to navigate the brig.

Monkton, after again expressing in the warmest terms his gratitude for the services I had rendered him, disclaimed any intention of asking me to accompany him on the voyage to England. Greatly to his surprise and delight, however, I offered of my own accord to take passage in the brig. The strange coincidences I had witnessed, the extraordinary discovery I had hit on, since our first meeting in Naples, had made his one great interest in life my one great interest for the time being, as well. I shared none of his delusions, poor fellow; but it is hardly an exaggeration to say that my eagerness to follow our remarkable adventure to its end, was as great as his anxiety to see the coffin laid in Wincot vault. Curiosity influenced me, I am afraid, almost as strongly as friendship, when I offered myself as the companion of his voyage home.

We set sail for England on a calm and lovely afternoon.

For the first time since I had known him, Monkton seemed to be in high spirits. He talked and jested on all sorts of subjects, and laughed at me for allowing my cheerfulness to be affected by the dread of seasickness. I had really no such fear; it was my excuse to my friend for a return of that unaccountable depression under which I had suffered at Fondi. Everything was in our favour; everybody on board the brig was in good spirits. The captain was delighted with the vessel; the crew, Italians and Maltese, were in high glee at the prospect of making a short voyage on high wages in a well-provisioned ship. I alone felt heavy at heart. There was no valid reason that I could assign to myself for the melancholy that oppressed me, and yet I struggled against it in vain.

Late on our first night at sea, I made a discovery which was by no

means calculated to restore my spirits to their usual equilibrium. Monkton was in the cabin, on the floor of which had been placed the packing-case containing the coffin; and I was on deck. The wind had fallen almost to a calm, and I was lazily watching the sails of the brig as they flapped from time to time against the masts, when the captain approached, and, drawing me out of hearing of the man at the helm, whispered in my ear—

‘There’s something wrong among the men forward. Did you observe how suddenly they all became silent just before sunset?’

I had observed it, and told him so.

‘There’s a Maltese boy on board,’ pursued the captain, ‘who is a smart lad enough, but a bad one to deal with. I have found out that he has been telling the men there is a dead body inside that packing case of your friend’s in the cabin.’

My heart sank as he spoke. Knowing the superstitious irrationality of sailors—of foreign sailors especially—I had taken care to spread a report on board the brig, before the coffin was shipped, that the packing-case contained a valuable marble statue which Mr Monkton prized highly, and was unwilling to trust out of his own sight. How could this Maltese boy have discovered that the pretended statue was a human corpse? As I pondered over the question, my suspicions fixed themselves on Monkton’s servant, who spoke Italian fluently, and whom I knew to be an incorrigible gossip. The man denied it when I charged him with betraying us, but I have never believed his denial to this day.

‘The little imp won’t say where he picked up this notion of his about the dead body,’ continued the captain. ‘It’s not my place to pry into secrets; but I advise you to call the crew aft, and contradict the boy, whether he speaks the truth or not. The men are a parcel of fools, who believe in ghosts, and all the rest of it. Some of them say they would never have signed our articles if they had known they were going to sail with a dead man; others only grumble; but I’m afraid we shall have some trouble with them all, in case of rough weather, unless the boy is contradicted by you or the other gentleman. The men say that if either you or your friend tell them on your words of honour that the Maltese is a liar, they will hand him up to be rope’s-ended accordingly; but that if you won’t, they have made up their minds to believe the boy.’

Here the captain paused, and awaited my answer. I could give him none. I felt hopeless under our desperate emergency. To get the boy punished by giving my word of honour to support a direct falsehood, was not to be thought of even for a moment. What other means of extrication from this miserable dilemma remained? None that I could

think of. I thanked the captain for his attention to our interests, told him I would take time to consider what course I should pursue, and begged that he would say nothing to my friend about the discovery he had made. He promised to be silent, sulkily enough, and walked away from me.

We had expected the breeze to spring up with the morning, but no breeze came. As it wore on towards noon, the atmosphere became insufferably sultry, and the sea looked as smooth as glass. I saw the captain's eye turn often and anxiously to windward. Far away in that direction, and alone in the blue heaven, I observed a little black cloud, and asked if it would bring us any wind.

'More than we want,' the captain replied, shortly; and then, to my astonishment, ordered the crew aloft to take in sail. The execution of this manoeuvre showed but too plainly the temper of the men; they did their work sulkily and slowly, grumbling and murmuring among themselves. The captain's manner, as he urged them on with oaths and threats, convinced me we were in danger. I looked again to windward. The one little cloud had enlarged to a great bank of murky vapour, and the sea at the horizon had changed in colour.

'The squall will be on us before we know where we are,' said the captain. 'Go below; you will be only in the way here.'

I descended to the cabin, and prepared Monkton for what was coming. He was still questioning me about what I had observed on deck, when the storm burst on us. We felt the little brig strain for an instant as if she would part in two, then she seemed to be swinging round with us, then to be quite still for a moment, trembling in every timber. Last, came a shock which hurled us from our seats, a deafening crash, and a flood of water pouring into the cabin. We clambered, half-drowned, to the deck. The brig had, in the nautical phrase, 'breached to', and she now lay on her beam ends.

Before I could make out anything distinctly in the horrible confusion, except the one tremendous certainty that we were entirely at the mercy of the sea, I heard a voice from the fore part of the ship which stilled the clamouring and shouting of the rest of the crew in an instant. The words were in Italian, but I understood their fatal meaning only too easily. We had sprung a leak, and the sea was pouring into the ship's hold like the race of a mill-stream. The captain did not lose his presence of mind in this fresh emergency. He called for his axe to cut away the foremast, and ordering some of the crew to help him, directed the others to rig out the pumps.

The words had hardly passed his lips, before the men broke into open mutiny. With a savage look at me, their ringleader declared that the passengers might do as they pleased, but that he and his messmates

were determined to take the boat, and leave the accursed ship, and *the dead man in her*, to go to the bottom together. As he spoke there was a shout among the sailors, and I observed some of them pointing derisively behind me. Looking round, I saw Monkton, who had hitherto kept close at my side, making his way back to the cabin. I followed him directly, but the water and confusion on deck, and the impossibility, from the position of the brig, of moving the feet without the slow assistance of the hands, so impeded my progress that it was impossible for me to overtake him. When I had got below, he was crouched upon the coffin, with the water on the cabin floor whirling and splashing about him, as the ship heaved and plunged. I saw a warning brightness in his eyes, a warning flush on his cheek as I approached and said to him:

‘There is nothing left for it, Alfred, but to bow to our misfortune, and do the best we can to save our lives.’

‘Save yours,’ he cried, waving his hand to me, ‘for *you* have a future before you. Mine is gone when this coffin goes to the bottom. If the ship sinks, I shall know that the fatality is accomplished, and shall sink with her.’

I saw that he was in no state to be reasoned with or persuaded, and raised myself again to the deck. The men were cutting away all obstacles, so as to launch the long boat, placed amidships, over the depressed bulwark of the brig, as she lay on her side; and the captain, after having made a last vain exertion to restore his authority, was looking on at them in silence. The violence of the squall seemed already to be spending itself, and I asked whether there was really no chance for us if we remained by the ship. The captain answered that there might have been the best chance if the men had obeyed his orders, but that now there was none. Knowing that I could place no dependence on the presence of mind of Monkton’s servant, I confided to the captain, in the fewest and plainest words, the condition of my unhappy friend, and asked if I might depend on his help. He nodded his head, and we descended together to the cabin. Even at this day, it costs me pain to write of the terrible necessity to which the strength and obstinacy of Monkton’s delusion reduced us, in the last resort. We were compelled to secure his hands, and drag him by main force to the deck. The men were on the point of launching the boat, and refused at first to receive us into it.

‘You cowards!’ cried the captain, ‘have we got the dead man with us this time? Isn’t he going to the bottom along with the brig? Who are you afraid of when we get into the boat?’

This sort of appeal produced the desired effect; the men became ashamed of themselves, and retracted their refusal.

Just as we pushed off from the sinking ship, Alfred made an effort to break from me, but I held him firm and he never repeated the attempt. He sat by me, with drooping head, still and silent, while the sailors rowed away from the vessel: still and silent, when with one accord they paused at a little distance off, and we all waited and watched to see the brig sink: still and silent, even when that sinking happened, when the labouring hull plunged slowly into a hollow of the sea—hesitated, as it seemed, for one moment—rose a little again—then sank to rise no more.

Sank with her dead freight: sank, and snatched for ever from our power the corpse which we had discovered almost by a miracle—those jealously-preserved remains on the safe keeping of which rested so strangely the hopes and the love-destinies of two living beings! As the last signs of the ship disappeared in the depths of the waters, I felt Monkton trembling all over as he sat close at my side, and heard him repeating to himself, sadly, and many times over, the name of 'Ada'.

I tried to turn his thoughts to another subject, but it was useless. He pointed over the sea to where the brig had once been, and where nothing was left to look at but the rolling waves.

'The empty place will now remain empty for ever in Wincot vault.'

As he said those words, he fixed his eyes for a moment sadly and earnestly on my face, then looked away, leant his cheek upon his hand, and spoke no more.

We were sighted long before nightfall by a trading-vessel, were taken on board, and landed at Cartagena in Spain. Alfred never held up his head, and never once spoke to me of his own accord, the whole time we were at sea in the merchantman. I observed, however, with alarm, that he talked often and incoherently to himself—constantly muttering the lines of the old prophecy—constantly referring to the fatal place that was empty in Wincot vault—constantly repeating in broken accents, which it affected me inexpressibly to hear, the name of the poor girl who was awaiting his return to England. Nor were these the only causes for the apprehension that I now felt on his account. Towards the end of our voyage he began to suffer from alternations of fever fits and shivering fits, which I ignorantly imagined to be attacks of ague. I was soon undeceived. We had hardly been a day on shore before he became so much worse that I secured the best medical assistance Cartagena could afford. For a day or two the doctors differed, as usual, about the nature of his complaint, but ere long alarming symptoms displayed themselves. The medical men declared that his life was in danger, and told me that his disease was brain fever.

Shocked and grieved as I was, I hardly knew how to act at first under

the fresh responsibility now laid upon me. Ultimately, I decided on writing to the old priest who had been Alfred's tutor, and who, as I knew, still resided at Wincot Abbey. I told this gentleman all that had happened, begged him to break my melancholy news as gently as possible to Miss Elmslie, and assured him of my resolution to remain with Monkton to the last.

After I had despatched my letter, and had sent to Gibraltar to secure the best English medical advice that could be obtained, I felt that I had done my best, and that nothing remained but to wait and hope.

Many a sad and anxious hour did I pass by my poor friend's bedside. Many a time did I doubt whether I had done right in giving any encouragement to his delusion. The reasons for doing so which had suggested themselves to me, after my first interview with him, seemed, however, on reflection, to be valid reasons still. The only way of hastening his return to England and to Miss Elmslie, who was pining for that return, was the way I had taken. It was not my fault that a disaster which no man could foresee, had overthrown all his projects and all mine. But now that the calamity had happened, and was irretrievable, how, in the event of his physical recovery, was his moral malady to be combated?

When I reflected on the hereditary taint in his mental organization on that first childish fright of Stephen Monkton from which he had never recovered, on the perilously secluded life that he had led at the Abbey, and on his firm persuasion of the reality of the apparition by which he believed himself to be constantly followed, I confess I despaired of shaking his superstitious faith in every word and line of the old family prophecy. If the series of striking coincidences which appeared to attest its truth had made a strong and lasting impression on *me* (and this was assuredly the case), how could I wonder that they had produced the effect of absolute conviction on *his* mind, constituted as it was? If I argued with him, and he answered me, how could I rejoin? If he said, 'The prophecy points at the last of the family: *I* am the last of the family. The prophecy mentions an empty place in Wincot vault: there is such an empty place there at this moment. On the faith of the prophecy I told you that Stephen Monkton's body was unburied, and you found that it was unburied'—if he said this, of what use would it be for me to reply, 'These are only strange coincidences, after all?'

The more I thought of the task that lay before me, if he recovered, the more I felt inclined to despond. The oftener the English physician who attended on him said to me, 'He may get the better of the fever, but he has a fixed idea, which never leaves him night or day, which has unsettled his reason, and which will end in killing him, unless you

or some of his friends can remove it,'—the oftener I heard this, the more acutely I felt my own powerlessness, the more I shrank from every idea that was connected with the hopeless future.

I had only expected to receive my answer from Wincot in the shape of a letter. It was consequently a great surprise, as well as a great relief, to be informed one day that two gentlemen wished to speak with me, and to find that of these two gentlemen the first was the old priest, and the second a male relative of Mrs Elmslie.

Just before their arrival the fever-symptoms had disappeared, and Alfred had been pronounced out of danger. Both the priest and his companion were eager to know when the sufferer would be strong enough to travel. They had come to Cartagena expressly to take him home with them, and felt far more hopeful than I did of the restorative effects of his native air. After all the questions connected with the first important point of the journey to England had been asked and answered, I ventured to make some inquiries after Miss Elmslie. Her relative informed me that she was suffering both in body and in mind from excess of anxiety on Alfred's account. They had been obliged to deceive her as to the dangerous nature of his illness, in order to deter her from accompanying the priest and her relation on their mission in Spain.

Slowly and imperfectly, as the weeks wore on, Alfred regained something of his former physical strength, but no alteration appeared in his illness as it affected his mind.

From the very first day of his advance towards recovery, it had been discovered that the brain fever had exercised the strangest influence over his faculties of memory. All recollection of recent events were gone from him. Everything connected with Naples, with me, with his journey to Italy, had dropped in some mysterious manner entirely out of his remembrance. So completely had all late circumstances passed from his memory, that, though he recognized the old priest and his own servant easily on the first days of his convalescence, he never recognized me, but regarded me with such a wistful, doubting expression, that I felt inexpressibly pained when I approached his bedside. All his questions were about Miss Elmslie and Wincot Abbey; and all his talk referred to the period when his father was yet alive.

The doctors augured good rather than ill from this loss of memory of recent incidents, saying that it would turn out to be temporary, and that it answered the first great healing purpose of keeping his mind at ease. I tried to believe them—tried to feel as sanguine, when the day came for his departure, as the old friends felt who were taking him home. But the effort was too much for me. A foreboding that I should

never see him again, oppressed my heart, and the tears came into my eyes as I saw the worn figure of my poor friend half-helped, half-lifted into the travelling carriage, and borne away gently on the road towards home.

He had never recognized me, and the doctors had begged that I would give him, for some time to come, as few opportunities as possible of doing so. But for this request I should have accompanied him to England. As it was, nothing better remained for me to do than to change the scene, and recruit as I best could my energies of body and mind, depressed of late by much watching and anxiety. The famous cities of Spain were not new to me, but I visited them again, and revived old impressions of the Alhambra and Madrid. Once or twice I thought of making a pilgrimage to the East, but late events had sobered and altered me. That yearning unsatisfied feeling which we call 'home-sickness', began to prey upon my heart, and I resolved to return to England.

I went back by way of Paris, having settled with the priest that he should write to me at my banker's there, as soon as he could after Alfred had returned to Wincot. If I had gone to the East, the letter would have been forwarded to me. I wrote to prevent this; and, on my arrival at Paris, stopped at the banker's before I went to my hotel.

The moment the letter was put into my hands, the black border on the envelope told me the worst. He was dead.

There was but one consolation—he had died calmly, almost happily, without once referring to those fatal chances which had wrought the fulfilment of the ancient prophecy. 'My beloved pupil,' the old priest wrote, 'seemed to rally a little the first few days after his return, but he gained no real strength, and soon suffered a slight relapse of fever. After this he sank gradually and gently day by day, and so departed from us on the last dread journey. Miss Elmslie (who knows that I am writing this) desires me to express her deep and lasting gratitude for all your kindness to Alfred. She told me when we brought him back, that she had waited for him as his promised wife, and that she would nurse him now as a wife should; and she never left him. His face was turned towards her, his hand was clasped in hers, when he died. It will console you to know that he never mentioned events at Naples, or the shipwreck that followed them, from the day of his return to the day of his death.'

Three days after reading the letter I was at Wincot, and heard all the details of Alfred's last moments from the priest. I felt a shock which it would not be very easy for me to analyse or explain, when I heard that he had been buried, at his own desire, in the fatal Abbey vault.

The priest took me down to see the place—a grim, cold,

subterranean building, with a low roof, supported on heavy Saxon arches. Narrow niches, with the ends only of coffins visible within them, ran down each side of the vault. The nails and silver ornaments flashed here and there as my companion moved past them with a lamp in his hand. At the lower end of the place he stopped, pointed to a niche, and said: 'He lies there, between his father and mother.' I looked a little further on, and saw what appeared at first like a long dark tunnel. 'That is only an empty niche,' said the priest, following me. 'If the body of Mr Stephen Monkton had been brought to Wincot, his coffin would have been placed there.'

A chill came over me, and a sense of dread which I am ashamed of having felt now, but which I could not combat then. The blessed light of day was pouring down gaily at the other end of the vault through the open door. I turned my back on the empty niche, and hurried into the sunlight and the fresh air.

As I walked across the grass glade leading down to the vault, I heard the rustle of a woman's dress behind me, and, turning round, saw a young lady advancing, clad in deep mourning. Her sweet, sad face, her manner as she held out her hand, told me who it was in an instant.

'I heard that you were here,' she said, 'and I wished'—her voice faltered a little. My heart ached as I saw how her lip trembled, but before I could say anything, she recovered herself, and went on—'I wished to take your hand, and thank you for your brotherly kindness to Alfred; and I wanted to tell you that I am sure, in all you did, you acted tenderly and considerately for the best. Perhaps you may be soon going away from home again, and we may not meet any more. I shall never, never forget that you were kind to him when he wanted a friend, and that you have the greatest claim of any one on earth to be gratefully remembered in my thoughts as long as I live.'

The inexpressible tenderness of her voice, trembling a little all the while she spoke, the pale beauty of her face, the artless candour in her sad, quiet eyes, so affected me that I could not trust myself to answer her at first, except by gesture. Before I recovered my voice, she had given me her hand once more and had left me.

I never saw her again. The chances and changes of life kept us apart. When I last heard of her, years and years ago, she was faithful to the memory of the dead, and was Ada Elmslie still, for Alfred Monkton's sake.

3

A Stolen Letter

Now, first of all, I should like to know what you mean by a story? You mean what other people do? And pray what is that? You know, but you can't exactly tell. I thought so! In the course of a pretty long legal experience, I have never yet met with a party out of my late profession, who was capable of giving a correct definition of anything.

To judge by your looks, I suspect you are amused at my talking of any such thing ever having belonged to me as a profession. Ha! ha! Here I am, with my toes out of my boots, without a shirt to my back or a rap in my pocket, except the fourpence I get out of this charity (against the present administration of which I protest—but that's not the point), and yet not two years ago I was an attorney in large practice in a bursting big country town. I had a house in the High Street. Such a giant of a house that you had to get up six steps to knock at the front door. I had a footman to drive tramps like me off all or any one of my six hearth-stoned steps, if they dared sit down on all or any one of my six hearth-stoned steps;—a footman who would give me into custody now if I tried to shake hands with him in the streets. I decline to answer your questions if you ask me any. How I got into trouble, and dropped down to where I am now, is my secret.

Now, I absolutely decline to tell you a story. But, though I won't tell a story, I am ready to make a statement. A statement is a matter of fact; therefore the exact opposite of a story, which is a matter of fiction. What I am now going to tell you really happened to me.

I served my time—never mind in whose office; and I started in business for myself, in one of our English country towns—I decline stating which. I hadn't a quarter of the capital I ought to have had to begin with; and my friends in the neighbourhood were poor and useless enough, with one exception. That exception was Mr Frank Gatliffe, son of Mr Gatliffe, member for the county, the richest man and the proudest for many a mile round about our parts.—Stop a bit!

you man in the corner there; you needn't perk up and look knowing. You won't trace any particulars by the name of Gatcliffe. I'm not bound to commit myself or anybody else by mentioning names. I have given you the first that came into my head.

Well! Mr Frank was a staunch friend of mine, and ready to recommend me whenever he got the chance. I had given him a little timely help—for a consideration, of course—in borrowing money at a fair rate of interest: in fact, I had saved him from the Jews. The money was borrowed while Mr Frank was at college. He came back from college, and stopped at home a little while: and then there got spread about all our neighbourhood, a report that he had fallen in love, as the saying is, with his young sister's governess, and that his mind was made up to marry her.—What! you're at it again, my man in the corner! You want to know her name, don't you? What do you think of Smith?

Speaking as a lawyer, I consider Report, in a general way, to be a fool and a liar. But in this case report turned out to be something very different. Mr Frank told me he was really in love, and said upon his honour (an absurd expression which young chaps of his age are always using) he was determined to marry Smith the governess—the sweet darling girl, as *he* called her; but I'm not sentimental, and *I* call her Smith the governess (with an eye, of course, to refreshing the memory of my friend in the corner). Mr Frank's father, being as proud as Lucifer, said 'No' as to marrying the governess, when Mr Frank wanted him to say 'Yes'. He was a man of business, was old Gatcliffe, and he took the proper business course. He sent the governess away with a first-rate character and a spanking present; and then he looked about him to get something for Mr Frank to do. While he was looking about, Mr Frank bolted to London after the governess, who had nobody alive belonging to her to go to but an aunt—her father's sister. The aunt refuses to let Mr Frank in without the squire's permission. Mr Frank writes to his father, and says he will marry the girl as soon as he is of age, or shoot himself. Up to town comes the squire, and his wife, and his daughter; and a lot of sentimentality, not in the slightest degree material to the present statement takes place among them; and the upshot of it is that old Gatcliffe is forced into withdrawing the word No, and substituting the word Yes.

I don't believe he would ever have done it, though, but for one lucky peculiarity in the case. The governess's father was a man of good family—pretty nigh as good as Gatcliffe's own. He had been in the army; had sold out; set up as a wine-merchant—failed—died: ditto his wife, as to the dying part of it. No relation, in fact, left for the squire to make inquiries about but the father's sister; who had behaved, as

old Gatcliffe said, like a thoroughbred gentlewoman in shutting the door against Mr Frank in the first instance. So, to cut the matter short, things were at last made up pleasant enough. The time was fixed for the wedding, and an announcement about it—Marriage in High Life and all that—put into the county paper. There was a regular biography, besides, of the governess's father, so as to stop people from talking; a great flourish about his pedigree, and a long account of his services in the army; but not a word, mind ye, of his having turned wine-merchant afterwards. Oh, no—not a word about that! I knew it, though, for Mr Frank told me. He hadn't a bit of pride about him. He introduced me to his future wife one day when I met them out walking, and asked me if I did not think he was a lucky fellow. I don't mind admitting that I did, and that I told him so. Ah! but she was one of my sort, was that governess. Stood, to the best of my recollection, five foot four. Good lissome figure, that looked as if it had never been boxed up in a pair of stays. Eyes that made me feel as if I was under a pretty stiff cross-examination the moment she looked at me. Fine red, fresh, kiss-and-come-again sort of lips. Cheeks and complexion—— No, my man in the corner, you wouldn't identify her by her cheeks and complexion, if I drew you a picture of them this very moment. She has had a family of children since the time I'm talking of; and her cheeks are a trifle fatter and her complexion is a shade or two redder now, than when I first met her out walking with Mr Frank.

The marriage was to take place on a Wednesday. I decline mentioning the year or the month. I had started as an attorney on my own account—say six weeks, more or less, and was sitting alone in my office on the Monday morning before the wedding-day, trying to see my way clear before me and not succeeding particularly well, when Mr Frank suddenly bursts in, as white as any ghost that ever was painted, and says he's got the most dreadful case for me to advise on, and not an hour to lose in acting on my advice.

'Is this in the way of business, Mr Frank?' says I, stopping him just as he was beginning to get sentimental. 'Yes or no, Mr Frank?' rapping my new office paper-knife on the table to pull him up short all the sooner.

'My dear fellow'—he was always familiar with me—'it's in the way of business, certainly; but friendship——'

I was obliged to pull him up short again and regularly examine him as if he had been in the witness-box, or he would have kept me talking to no purpose half the day.

'Now, Mr Frank' said I, 'I can't have any sentimentality mixed up with business matters. You please to stop talking, and let me ask questions. Answer in the fewest words you can use. Nod when nodding will do instead of words.'

I fixed him with my eye for about three seconds, as he sat groaning and wriggling in his chair. When I'd done fixing him, I gave another rap with my paper-knife on to the table to startle him up a bit. Then I went on.

'From what you have been stating up to the present time,' says I, 'I gather that you are in a scrape which is likely to interfere seriously with your marriage on Wednesday?' (He nodded, and I cut in again before he could say a word.) 'The scrape affects the young lady you are about to marry, and goes back to the period of a certain transaction in which her late father was engaged some years ago?' (He nods, and I cut in once more.) 'There is a party who turned up after seeing the announcement of your marriage in the paper, who is cognisant of what he oughtn't to know, and who is prepared to use his knowledge of the same, to the prejudice of the young lady and of your marriage, unless he receives a sum of money to quiet him? Very well. Now, first of all, Mr Frank, state what you have been told by the young lady herself about the transaction of her late father. How did you first come to have any knowledge of it?'

'She was talking to me about her father one day, so tenderly and prettily, that she quite excited my interest about him,' begins Mr Frank; 'and I asked her, among other things, what had occasioned his death. She said she believed it was distress of mind in the first instance; and added that this distress was connected with a shocking secret, which she and her mother had kept from everybody, but which she could not keep from me, because she was determined to begin her married life by having no secrets from her husband.' Here Mr Frank began to get sentimental again; and I pulled him up short once more with the paper-knife.

'She told me,' Mr Frank went on, 'that the great mistake of her father's life was his selling out of the army and taking to the wine trade. He had no talent for business; things went wrong with him from the first. His clerk, it was strongly suspected, cheated him——'

'Stop a bit,' says I, 'What was that suspected clerk's name?'

'Davager,' says he.

'Davager,' says I, making a note of it. 'Go on, Mr Frank.'

'His affairs got more and more entangled,' says Mr Frank; 'he was pressed for money in all directions; bankruptcy, and consequent dishonour (as he considered it) stared him in the face. His mind was so affected by his troubles that both his wife and daughter, towards the last, considered him to be hardly responsible for his own acts. In this state of desperation and misery, he——' Here Mr Frank began to hesitate.

We have two ways in the law, of drawing evidence off nice and clear

from an unwilling client or witness. We give him a fright or we treat him to a joke. I treated Mr Frank to a joke.

'Ah!' says I. 'I know what he did. He had a signature to write; and, by the most natural mistake in the world, he wrote another gentleman's name instead of his own—eh?'

'It was to a bill,' says Mr Frank, looking very crestfallen, instead of taking the joke. 'His principal creditor wouldn't wait till he could raise the money, or the greater part of it. But he was resolved, if he sold off everything, to get the amount and repay——'

'Of course!' says I. 'Drop that. The forgery was discovered. When?'

'Before even the first attempt was made to negotiate the bill. He had done the whole thing in the most absurdly and innocently wrong way. The person whose name he had used was a staunch friend of his, and a relation of his wife's: a good man as well as a rich one. He had influence with the chief creditor, and he used it nobly. He had a real affection for the unfortunate man's wife, and he proved it generously.'

'Come to the point,' says I. 'What did he do? In a business way, what did he do?'

'He put the false bill into the fire, drew a bill of his own to replace it, and then—only then—told my dear girl and her mother all that had happened. Can you imagine anything nobler?' asks Mr Frank.

'Speaking in my professional capacity, I can't imagine anything greener!' says I. 'Where was the father? Off, I suppose?'

'Ill in bed,' said Mr Frank, colouring. 'But, he mustered strength enough to write a contrite and grateful letter the same day, promising to prove himself worthy of the noble moderation and forgiveness extended to him, by selling off everything he possessed to repay his money debt. He did sell of everything, down to some old family pictures that were heirlooms; down to the little plate he had; down to the very tables and chairs that furnished his drawing-room. Every farthing of the debt was paid; and he was left to begin the world again, with the kindest promises of help from the generous man who had forgiven him. It was too late. His crime of one rash moment—atoned for though it had been—preyed upon his mind. He became possessed with the idea that he had lowered himself for ever in the estimation of his wife and daughter, and——'

'He died,' I cut in. 'Yes, yes, we know that. Let's go back for a minute to the contrite and grateful letter that he wrote. My experience in the law, Mr Frank, has convinced me that if everybody burnt everybody else's letters, half the Courts of Justice in this country might shut up shop. Do you happen to know whether the letter we are now speaking of contained anything like an avowal or confession of the forgery?'

'Of course it did,' says he. 'Could the writer express his contrition

properly without making some such confession?’

‘Quite easy, if he had been a lawyer,’ says I. ‘But never mind that; I’m going to make a guess—a desperate guess, mind. Should I be altogether in error,’ says I, ‘if I thought that this letter had been stolen; and that the fingers of Mr Davager, of suspicious commercial celebrity, might possibly be the fingers which took it?’ says I.

‘That is exactly what I tried to make you understand,’ cried Mr Frank.

‘How did he communicate that interesting fact to you?’

‘He has not ventured into my presence. The scoundrel actually had the audacity——’

‘Aha!’ says I. ‘The young lady herself! Sharp practitioner, Mr Davager.’

‘Early this morning, when she was walking alone in the shrubbery,’ Mr Frank goes on, ‘he had the assurance to approach her, and to say that he had been watching his opportunity of getting a private interview for days past. He then showed her—actually showed her—her unfortunate father’s letter; put into her hands another letter directed to me; bowed, and walked off; leaving her half dead with astonishment and terror!’

‘It was much better for you that you were not,’ says I. ‘Have you got that other letter?’

He handed it to me. It was so extremely humorous and short, that I remember every word of it at this distance of time. It began in this way:

‘To Francis Gatliffe, Esq., Jun.—Sir,—I have an extremely curious autograph letter to sell. The price is a Five hundred pound note. The young lady to whom you are to be married on Wednesday will inform you of the nature of the letter, and the genuineness of the autograph. If you refuse to deal, I shall send a copy to the local paper, and shall wait on your highly respected father with the original curiosity, on the afternoon of Tuesday next. Having come down here on family business, I have put up at the family hotel—being to be heard of at the Gatliffe Arms.

Your very obedient servant,

‘ALFRED DAVAGER.’

‘A clever fellow, that,’ says I, putting the letter into my private drawer.

‘Clever!’ cried Mr Frank, ‘he ought to be horsewhipped within an inch of his life. I would have done it myself, but she made me promise, before she told me a word of the matter, to come straight to you.’

‘That was one of the wisest promises you ever made,’ says I. ‘We can’t afford to bully this fellow, whatever else we may do with him. Don’t think I am saying anything libellous against your excellent father’s

character when I assert that if he saw the letter he would certainly insist on your marriage being put off, at the very least.'

'Feeling as my father does about my marriage, he would insist on its being dropped altogether, if he saw this letter,' says Mr Frank, with a groan. 'But even that is not the worst of it. The generous, noble girl herself says that if the letter appears in the paper, with all the unanswerable comments this scoundrel would be sure to add to it, she would rather die than hold me to my engagement—even if my father would let me keep it.' He was a weak young fellow, and ridiculously fond of her. I brought him back to business with another rap of the paper-knife.

'Hold up, Mr Frank,' says I. 'I have a question or two more. Did you think of asking the young lady whether, to the best of her knowledge, this infernal letter was the only written evidence of the forgery now in existence?'

'Yes, I did think directly of asking her that,' says he; 'and she told me she was quite certain that there was no written evidence of the forgery, except that one letter.'

'Will you give Mr Davager his price for it?' says I.

'Yes,' says Mr Frank, as quick as lightning.

'Mr Frank,' says I, 'you came here to get my help and advice in this extremely ticklish business, and you are ready, as I know, without asking, to remunerate me for all and any of my services at the usual professional rate. Now, I've made up my mind to act boldly—desperately, if you like—on the hit or miss—win-all-or-lose-all principle—in dealing with this matter. Here is my proposal. I'm going to try if I can't do Mr Davager out of his letter. If I don't succeed before tomorrow afternoon, you hand him the money, and I charge you nothing for professional services. If I do succeed, I hand you the letter instead of Mr Davager; and you give me the money, instead of giving it to him. It's a precious risk for me, but I'm ready to run it. You must pay your five hundred any way. What do you say to my plan? Is it, Yes—Mr Frank—or, No?'

'Hang your questions!' cries Mr Frank, jumping up; 'you know it's Yes, ten thousand times over. Only you earn the money and——'

'And you will be too glad to give it to me. Very good. Now go home. Comfort the young lady—don't let Mr Davager so much as set eyes on you—keep quiet—leave everything to me—and feel as certain as you please that all the letters in the world can't stop your being married on Wednesday.' With these words I hustled him off out of the office; for I wanted to be left alone to make my mind up about what I should do.

The first thing, of course, was to have a look at the enemy. I wrote

to Mr Davager, telling him that I was privately appointed to arrange the little business matter between himself and 'another party' (no names!) on friendly terms; and begging him to call on me at his earliest convenience. At the very beginning of the case, Mr Davager bothered me. His answer was that it would not be convenient for him to call till between six and seven in the evening. In this way, you see, he contrived to make me lose several precious hours, at a time when minutes almost were of importance. I had nothing for it, but to be patient, and to give certain instructions, before Mr Davager came, to my boy Tom.

There was never such a sharp boy of fourteen before, and there never will be again, as my boy, Tom. A spy to look after Mr Davager was, of course, the first requisite in a case of this kind; and Tom was the smallest, quickest, quietest, sharpest, stealthiest little snake of a chap that ever dogged a gentleman's steps and kept cleverly out of range of a gentleman's eyes. I settled it with the boy that he was not to show at all, when Mr Davager came; and that he was to wait to hear me ring the bell, when Mr Davager left. If I rang twice, he was to show the gentleman out. If I rang once, he was to keep out of the way and follow the gentleman wherever he went, till he got back to the inn. Those were the only preparations I could make to begin with; being obliged to wait, and let myself be guided by what turned up.

About a quarter to seven my gentleman came. In the profession of the law we get somehow quite remarkably mixed up with ugly people, blackguard people, and dirty people. But far away the ugliest and dirtiest blackguard I ever saw in my life was Mr Alfred Davager. He had greasy white hair and a mottled face. He was low in the forehead, fat in the stomach, hoarse in the voice, and weak in the legs. Both his eyes were bloodshot, and one was fixed in his head. He smelt of spirits, and carried a toothpick in his mouth. 'How are you? I've just done dinner,' says he—and he lights a cigar, sits down with his legs crossed, and winks at me.

I tried at first to take the measure of him in a wheedling, confidential way; but it was no good. I asked him in a facetious smiling manner, how he had got hold of the letter. He only told me in answer that he had been in the confidential employment of the writer of it, and that he had always been famous since infancy, for a sharp eye to his own interests. I paid him some compliments; but he was not to be flattered. I tried to make him lose his temper; but he kept it in spite of me. It ended in his driving me to my last resource—I made an attempt to frighten him.

'Before we say a word about the money,' I began, 'let me put a case Mr Davager. The pull you have on Mr Francis Gatcliffe is, that you can hinder his marriage on Wednesday. Now, suppose I have got a

magistrate's warrant to apprehend you in my pocket? Suppose I have a constable to execute it in the next room? Suppose I bring you up tomorrow—the day before the marriage—charge you only generally with an attempt to extort money, and apply for a day's remand to complete the case? Suppose, as a suspicious stranger, you can't get bail in this town? Suppose——'

'Stop a bit,' says Mr Davager; 'Suppose I should not be the greenest fool that ever stood in shoes? Suppose I should not carry the letter about me? Suppose I should have given a certain envelope to a certain friend of mine in a certain place in this town? Suppose the letter should be inside that envelope, directed to old Gatcliffe, side by side with a copy of the letter, directed to the editor of the local paper? Suppose my friend should be instructed to open the envelope, and take the letters to their right address, if I don't appear to claim them from him this evening? In short, my dear sir, suppose you were born yesterday, and suppose I wasn't?'—says Mr Davager, and winks at me again.

He didn't take me by surprise, for I never expected that he had the letter about him. I made a pretence of being very much taken aback, and of being quite ready to give in. We settled our business about delivering the letter and handing over the money, in no time. I was to draw out a document, which he was to sign. He knew the document was stuff and nonsense just as well as I did; and told me I was only proposing it to swell my client's bill. Sharp as he was, he was wrong there. The document was not to be drawn out to gain money from Mr Frank, but to gain time from Mr Davager. It served me as an excuse to put off the payment of the five hundred pounds till three o'clock on the Tuesday afternoon. The Tuesday morning Mr Davager said he should devote to his amusement, and asked me what sights were to be seen in the neighbourhood of the town. When I had told him, he pitched his toothpick into my grate—yawned—and went out.

I rang the bell once; waited till he had passed the window; and then looked after Tom. There was my jewel of a boy on the opposite side of the street, just setting his top going in the most playful manner possible. Mr Davager walked away up the street, towards the market-place. Tom whipped his top up the street towards the market-place too.

In a quarter of an hour he came back, with all his evidence collected in a beautifully clear and compact state. Mr Davager had walked to a public-house, just outside the town, in a lane leading to the high road. On a bench outside the public-house there sat a man smoking. He said 'All right?' and gave a letter to Mr Davager, who answered 'All right,' and walked back to the inn. In the hall he ordered hot rum and water, cigars, slippers, and a fire to be lit in his room. After that, he went upstairs, and Tom came away.

I now saw my road clear before me—not very far on, but still clear. I had housed the letter, in all probability for that night, at the Gatcliffe Arms. After tipping Tom, I gave him directions to play about the door of the inn, and refresh himself, when he was tired, at the tart-shop opposite—eating as much as he pleased, on the understanding that he crammed all the time with his eye on the window. If Mr Davager went out, or Mr Davager's friend called on him, Tom was to let me know. He was also to take a little note from me to the head chambermaid—an old friend of mine—asking her to step over to my office, on a private matter of business, as soon as her work was done for that night. After settling these little matters, having half an hour to spare, I turned to and did myself a bloater at the office-fire, and had a drop of gin and water hot, and felt comparatively happy.

When the head chambermaid came, it turned out, as good luck would have it, that Mr Davager had offended her. I no sooner mentioned him than she flew into a passion; and when I added, by way of clinching the matter, that I was retained to defend the interests of a very beautiful and deserving young lady (name not referred to, of course) against the most cruel underhand treachery on the part of Mr Davager, the head chambermaid was ready to go any lengths that she could safely to serve my cause. In few words, I discovered that Boots was to call Mr Davager at eight the next morning, and was to take his clothes downstairs to brush as usual. If Mr D. had not emptied his own pockets overnight, we arranged that Boots was to forget to empty them for him, and was to bring the clothes downstairs just as he found them. If Mr D.'s pockets were emptied, then, of course, it would be necessary to transfer the searching process to Mr D.'s room. Under any circumstances, I was certain of the head chambermaid; and under any circumstances also, the head chambermaid was certain of Boots.

I waited till Tom came home, looking very puffy and bilious about the face; but as to his intellects, if anything, rather sharper than ever. His report was uncommonly short and pleasant. The inn was shutting up; Mr Davager was going to bed in rather a drunken condition; Mr Davager's friend had never appeared. I sent Tom (properly instructed about keeping our man in view all the next morning) to his shake-down behind the office desk, where I heard him hiccupping half the night, as boys will, when over-excited and too full of tarts.

At half-past seven next morning, I slipped quietly into Boots's pantry. Down came the clothes. No pockets in trousers. Waistcoat pockets empty. Coat pockets with something in them. First, handkerchief; secondly, bunch of keys; thirdly, cigar-case; fourthly, pocket-book. Of course I wasn't such a fool as to expect to find the letter there; but I opened the pocket-book with a certain curiosity, notwithstanding.

Nothing in the two pockets of the book but some old advertisements cut out of newspapers, a lock of hair tied round with a dirty bit of ribbon, a circular letter about a loan society, and some copies of verses not likely to suit any company that was not of an extremely wicked description. On the leaves of the pocket-book, people's addresses scrawled in pencil, and bets jotted down in red ink. On one leaf, by itself, this queer inscription: 'MEM. 5 ALONG. 4 ACROSS.' I understood everything but those words and figures; so of course I copied them out into my own book. Then I waited in the pantry, till Boots had brushed the clothes and had taken them upstairs. His report, when he came down was, that Mr D. had asked if it was a fine morning. Being told that it was, he had ordered breakfast at nine, and a saddle-horse to be at the door at ten, to take him to Grimwith Abbey—one of the sights in our neighbourhood which I had told him of the evening before.

'I'll be here, coming in by the back way at half-past ten,' says I to the head chambermaid. 'To take the responsibility of making Mr Davager's bed off your hands for this morning only. I want to hire Sam for the morning. Put it down on the order-book that he's to be brought round to my office at ten.'

Sam was a pony, and I'd made up my mind that it would be beneficial to Tom's health, after the tarts, if he took a constitutional airing on a nice hard saddle in the direction of Grimwith Abbey.

'Anything else,' says the head chambermaid.

'Only one more favour,' says I. 'Would my boy Tom be very much in the way if he came, from now till ten, to help with the boots and shoes, and stood at his work close by this window which looks out on the staircase?'

'Not a bit,' says the head chambermaid.

'Thank you,' says I; and stepped back to my office directly.

When I had sent Tom off to help with the boots and shoes, I reviewed the whole case exactly as it stood at that time. There were three things Mr Davager might do with the letter. He might give it to his friend again before ten—in which case, Tom would most likely see the said friend on the stairs. He might take it to his friend, or to some other friend, after ten—in which case, Tom was ready to follow him on Sam the pony. And, lastly, he might leave it hidden somewhere in his room at the inn—in which case, I was all ready for him with a search-warrant of my own granting, under favour always of my friend the head chambermaid. So far I had my business arrangements all gathered up nice and compact in my own hands. Only two things bothered me: the terrible shortness of the time at my disposal, in case I failed in my first experiments for getting hold of the letter, and that

queer inscription which I had copied out of the pocket-book.

'MEM. 5 ALONG. 4 ACROSS.' It was the measurement, most likely, of something, and he was afraid of forgetting it; therefore, it was something important. Query—something about himself? Say '5' (inches) 'along'—he doesn't wear a wig. Say '5' (feet) 'along'—it can't be coat, waistcoat, trousers, or underclothing. Say '5' (yards) 'along'—it can't be anything about himself, unless he wears round his body the rope that he's sure to be hanged with one of these days. Then it is *not* something about himself. What do I know of that is important to him besides? I know of nothing but the Letter. Can the memorandum be connected with that? Say, yes. What do '5 along' and '4 across' mean then? The measurement of something he carries about with him?—or the measurement of something in his room? I could get pretty satisfactorily to myself as far as that; but I could get no further.

Tom came back to the office, and reported him mounted for his ride. His friend had never appeared. I sent the boy off, with his proper instructions, on Sam's back—wrote an encouraging letter to Mr Frank to keep him quiet—then slipped into the inn by the back way a little before half-past ten. The head chambermaid gave me a signal when the landing was clear. I got into his room without a soul but her seeing me, and locked the door immediately. The case was to a certain extent, simplified now. Either Mr Davager had ridden out with the letter about him, or he had left it in some safe hiding-place in his room. I suspected it to be in his room, for a reason that will a little astonish you—his trunk, his dressing-case, and all the drawers and cupboards were left open. I knew my customer, and I thought this extraordinary carelessness on his part rather suspicious.

Mr Davager had taken one of the best bedrooms at the Gatcliffe Arms. Floor carpeted all over, walls beautifully papered, four-poster, and general furniture first-rate. I searched, to begin with, on the usual plan, examining every thing in every possible way, and taking more than an hour about it. No discovery. Then I pulled out a carpenter's rule which I had brought with me. Was there anything in the room which—either in inches, feet, or yards—answered to '5 along' and '4 across'? Nothing. I put the rule back in my pocket—measurement was no good evidently. Was there anything in the room that would count up to 5 one way and 4 another, seeing that nothing would measure up to it? I had got obstinately persuaded by this time that the letter must be in the room—principally because of the trouble I had had in looking after it. And persuading myself of that, I took it into my head next, just as obstinately, that '5 along' and '4 across' must be the right clue to find the letter by—principally because I hadn't left myself, after all my searching and thinking, even so much as the vestige of another

guide to go by. '5 along'—where could I count five along and the room, in any part of it?

Not on the paper. The pattern there was pillars of trellis-work and flowers, enclosing a plain green ground—only four pillars along the wall and only two across. The furniture? There were not five chairs, or five separate pieces of any furniture in the room altogether. The fringes that hung from the cornice of the bed? Plenty of them, at any rate! Up I jumped on the counterpane, with my penknife in my hand. Every way that '5 along' and '4 across' could be reckoned on those unlucky fringes, I reckoned on them—probed with my penknife—scratched with my nails—crunched with my fingers. No use; not a sign of a letter; and the time was getting on—oh, Lord! how the time did get on in Mr Davager's room that morning.

I jumped down from the bed, so desperate at my ill-luck that I hardly cared whether anybody heard me or not. Quite a little cloud of dust rose at my feet as they thumped on the carpet. 'Hallo!' thought I; 'my friend the head chambermaid takes it easy here. Nice state for a carpet to be in, in one of the best bedrooms at the Gatcliffe Arms.' Carpet! I had been jumping on the bed, and staring up at the walls, but I had never so much as given a glance down at the carpet. Think of me pretending to be a lawyer, and not knowing how to look low enough!

The carpet! It had been a stout article in its time; had evidently begun in a drawing-room; then descended to a coffee-room; then gone upstairs altogether to a bedroom. The ground was brown, and the pattern was bunches of leaves and roses speckled over the ground at regular distances. I reckoned up the bunches. Ten along the room—eight across it. When I had stepped out five one way and four the other, and was down on my knees on the centre bunch, as true as I sit on this bench, I could hear my own heart beating so loud that it quite frightened me.

I looked nervously all over the bunch, and I felt all over it with the ends of my fingers; and nothing came of that. Then I scraped it over slowly and gently with my nails. My second fingernail stuck a little at one place. I parted the pile of the carpet over that place, and saw a thin slit, which had been hidden by the pile being smoothed over it—a slit about half an inch long, with a little end of brown thread, exactly the colour of the carpet-ground, sticking out about a quarter of an inch from the middle of it. Just as I laid hold of the thread gently, I heard a footstep outside the door.

It was only the head chambermaid. 'Haven't you done yet?' she whispers.

'Give me two minutes,' says I; 'and don't let anybody come near the

door—whatever you do, don't let anybody startle me again by coming near the door.'

I took a little pull at the thread, and heard something rustle. I took a longer pull, and out came a piece of paper, rolled up tight like those candle-lighters that the ladies make. I unrolled it—and, by George! gentlemen all, there was the letter!

The original letter!—I knew it by the colour of the ink. The letter that was worth five hundred pounds to me! It was all I could do to keep myself at first from throwing my hat into the air, and hooraying like mad. I had to take a chair and sit quiet in it for a minute or two, before I could cool myself down to my proper business level. I knew that I was safely down again when I found myself pondering how to let Mr Davager know that he had been done by the innocent country attorney, after all.

It was not long before a nice little irritating plan occurred to me. I tore a blank leaf out of my pocket-book, wrote on it with my pencil 'Change for a five hundred pound note,' folded up the paper, tied the thread to it, poked it back into the hiding-place, smoothed over the pile of the carpet, and—as everybody in this place guesses before I can tell them—bolted off to Mr Frank. He, in his turn, bolted off to show the letter to the young lady, who first certified to its genuineness, then dropped it into the fire, and then took the initiative for the first time since her marriage engagement, by flinging her arms round his neck, kissing him with all her might, and going into hysterics in his arms. So at least Mr Frank told me; but that's not evidence. It is evidence, however, that I saw them married with my own eyes on the Wednesday; and that while they went off in a carriage and four to spend the honeymoon, I went off on my own legs to open a credit at the Town and County Bank with a five hundred pound note in my pocket.

As to Mr Davager, I can tell you nothing about him, except what is derived from hearsay evidence, which is always unsatisfactory evidence, even in a lawyer's mouth.

My boy, Tom, although twice kicked off by Sam the pony, never lost hold of the bridle, and kept his man in sight from first to last. He had nothing particular to report, except that on the way out to the Abbey Mr Davager had stopped at the public-house, had spoken a word or two to his friend of the night before, and had handed him what looked like a bit of paper. This was no doubt a clue to the thread that held the letter, to be used in case of accidents. In every other respect Mr D. had ridden out and ridden in like an ordinary sightseer. Tom reported him to me as having dismounted at the hotel about two. At half-past, I locked my office door, nailed a card under the knocker

with 'not at home till tomorrow' written on it, and retired to a friend's house a mile or so out of the town for the rest of the day.

Mr Davager left the Gatcliffe Arms that night, with his best clothes on his back, and with all the valuable contents of his dressing-case in his pockets. I am not in a condition to state whether he ever went through the form of asking for his bill or not; but I can positively testify that he never paid it, and that the effects left in his bedroom did not pay it either. When I add to these fragments of evidence, that he and I have never met (luckily for me), since I jockeyed him out of his bank-note, I have about fulfilled my implied contract as maker of a statement, with the present company as hearers of a statement.

4

The Ostler

I find an old man, fast asleep, in one of the stalls of the stable. It is midday, and rather a strange time for an ostler to devote to sleep. Something curious, too, about the man's face. A withered woebegone face. The eyebrows painfully contracted; the mouth fast set, and drawn down at the corners; the hollow cheeks sadly, and, as I cannot help fancying, prematurely wrinkled; the scanty, grizzled hair, telling weakly its own tale of some past sorrow or suffering. How fast he draws his breath, too, for a man asleep! He is talking in his sleep.

'Wake up!' I hear him say, in a quick whisper through his fast-clenched teeth. 'Wake up there! Murder! O Lord help me! Lord help me, alone in this place!'

He stops, and sighs again—moves one lean arm slowly, till it rests over his throat—shudders a little, and turns on his straw—the arm leaves his throat—the hand stretches itself out, and clutches at the side towards which he has turned, as if he fancies himself to be grasping at the edge of something. Is he waking! No—there is the whisper again; he is still talking in his sleep.

'Light grey eyes,' he says now, 'and a droop in the left eyelid. Yes! yes!—flaxen hair with a gold-yellow streak in it—all right, mother—fair, white arms with a down on them—little lady's hand, with a reddish look under the fingernails—and the knife—always the cursed knife—first on one side, then on the other. Aha! you she-devil, where's the knife? Never mind, mother—too late now. I've promised to marry, and marry I must. Murder! wake up there! for God's sake, wake up!'

At the last words his voice rises, and he grows so restless on a sudden, that I draw back quietly to the door. I see him shudder on the straw—his withered face grows distorted—he throws up both his hands with a quick, hysterical gasp; they strike against the bottom of the manger under which he lies; the blow awakens him; I have just time to slip through the door, before his eyes are fairly open and his senses are his own again.

What I have seen and heard has so startled and shocked me, that I feel my heart beating fast, as I softly and quickly retrace my steps across the inn-yard. The discomposure that is going on within me, apparently shows itself in my face; for, as I get back to the covered way leading to the inn stairs, the landlord, who is just coming out of the house to ring some bell in the yard, stops astonished, and asks what is the matter with me. I tell him what I have just seen.

‘Aha!’ says the landlord, with an air of relief. ‘I understand now. Poor old chap! He was only dreaming his old dream over again. There’s the queerest story—of a dreadful kind, too, mind you—connected with him and his dream, that ever was told.’

I entreat the landlord to tell me the story. After a little hesitation, he complies with my request.

Some years ago, there lived in the suburbs of a large sea-port town, on the west coast of England, a man in humble circumstances, by name Isaac Scatchard. His means of subsistence were derived from any employment that he could get, as an ostler; and, occasionally, when times went well with him, from temporary engagements in service, as stable-helper in private houses. Though a faithful, steady, and honest man, he got on badly in his calling. His ill-luck was proverbial among his neighbours. He was always missing good opportunities, by no fault of his own; and always living longest in service with amiable people who were not punctual payers of wages. ‘Unlucky Isaac’ was his nickname in his own neighbourhood—and no one could say that he did not richly deserve it.

With far more than one man’s fair share of adversity to endure, Isaac had but one consolation to support him—and that was of the dreariest and most negative kind. He had no wife and children to increase his anxieties and add to the bitterness of his various failures in life. It might have been from mere insensibility, or it might have been from generous unwillingness to involve another in his own unlucky destiny—but the fact undoubtedly was, that he arrived at the middle term of life without marrying; and, what is much more remarkable, without once exposing himself, from eighteen to eight and thirty, to the genial imputation of ever having had a sweetheart. When he was out of service, he lived alone with his widowed mother. Mrs Scatchard was a woman above the average in her lowly station, as to capacities and manners. She had seen better days, as the phrase is; but she never referred to them in the presence of curious visitors; and, though perfectly polite to everyone who approached her, never cultivated any intimacies among her neighbours. She contrived to provide, hardly enough, for her simple wants, by doing rough work for the tailors; and always managed to keep a decent home for her son to return to

whenever his ill-luck drove him out helpless into the world.

One bleak autumn, when Isaac was getting on fast towards forty, and when he was, as usual, out of place, through no fault of his own, he set forth from his mother's cottage on a long walk inland to a gentleman's seat, where he had heard that a stable-helper was required. It wanted then but two days of his birthday; and Mrs Scatchard, with her usual fondness, made him promise, before he started, that he would be back in time to keep that anniversary with her, in as festive a way as their poor means would allow. It was easy for him to comply with this request, even supposing he slept a night each way on the road. He was to start from home on Monday morning; and, whether he got the new place or not, he was to be back for his birthday dinner on Wednesday at two o'clock.

Arriving at his destination too late on the Monday night to make application for the stable-helper's place, he slept at the village inn, and, in good time on the Tuesday morning, presented himself at the gentleman's house, to fill the vacant situation. Here, again, his ill-luck pursued him as inexorably as ever. The excellent written testimonials, as to character, which he was able to produce, availed him nothing; his long walk had been taken in vain—only the day before, the stable-helper's place had been given to another man.

Isaac accepted this new disappointment resignedly, and as a matter of course. Naturally slow in capacity, he had the bluntness of sensibility and phlegmatic patience of disposition which frequently distinguish men with sluggishly-working mental powers. He thanked the gentleman's steward, with his usual quiet civility, for granting him an interview, and took his departure with no appearance of unusual depression in his face or manner. Before starting on his homeward walk, he made some inquiries at the inn, and ascertained that he might save a few miles, on his return, by following a new road. Furnished with full instructions, several times repeated, as to the various turnings he was to take, he set forth for his homeward journey, and walked on all day with only one stoppage for bread and cheese. Just as it was getting towards dark, the rain came on and the wind began to rise; and he found himself, to make matters worse, in a part of the country with which he was entirely unacquainted, though he knew himself to be some fifteen miles from home. The first house he found to inquire at was a lonely roadside inn, standing on the outskirts of a thick wood. Solitary as the place looked, it was welcome to a lost man who was also hungry, thirsty, footsore, and wet. The landlord was a civil, respectable-looking man; and the price he asked for a bed was reasonable enough. Isaac, therefore, decided on stopping comfortably at the inn for that night.

His was constitutionally a temperate man. His supper simply consisted of two rashers of bacon, a slice of home-made bread, and a pint of ale. He did not go to bed immediately after this moderate meal, but sat up with the landlord talking about his bad prospects and his long run of ill-luck, and diverging from these topics to the subject of horse-flesh and racing. Nothing was said either by himself, his host, or the few labourers who strayed into the tap-room, which could, in the slightest degree, excite the very small and very dull imaginative faculty which Isaac Scatchard possessed.

At a little after eleven the house was closed. Isaac went round with the landlord and held the candle while the doors and lower-windows were being secured. He noticed with surprise the strength of the bolts, bars, and iron-sheathed shutters.

‘You see, we are rather lonely here,’ said the landlord. ‘We never have had any attempts made to break in yet, but it’s always as well to be on the safe side. When nobody is sleeping here, I am the only man in the house. My wife and daughter are timid, and the servant-girl takes after her missuses. Another glass of ale, before you turn in?—No!—Well, how such a sober man as you comes to be out of place is more than I can make out, for one.—Here’s where you’re to sleep. You’re our only lodger tonight, and I think you’ll say my missus has done her best to make you comfortable. You’re quite sure you won’t have another glass of ale?—Very well. Good-night.’

It was half-past eleven by the clock in the passage as they went upstairs to the bedroom, the window of which looked on to the wood at the back of the house. Isaac locked the door, set his candle on the chest of drawers, and wearily got ready for bed. The bleak autumn wind was still blowing, and the solemn, monotonous, surging moan of it in the wood was dreary and awful to hear through the night-silence. Isaac felt strangely wakeful, and resolved, as he lay down in bed, to keep the candle alight until he began to grow sleepy; for there was something unedurably depressing in the bare idea of lying awake in the darkness, listening to the dismal, ceaseless moaning of the wind in the wood.—

Sleep stole on him before he was aware of it. His eyes closed, and he fell off insensibly to rest, without having so much as thought of extinguishing the candle.

The first sensation of which he was conscious after sinking into slumber, was a strange shivering that ran through him suddenly from head to foot, and a dreadful sinking pain at the heart, such as he had never felt before. The shivering only disturbed his slumbers—the pain woke him instantly. In one moment he passed from a state of sleep to a state of wakefulness—his eyes wide open—his mental perceptions

cleared on a sudden as if by a miracle.

The candle had burnt down nearly to the last morsel of tallow; but the top of the unsnuffed wick had just fallen off, and the light in the little room was, for the moment, fair and full. Between the foot of his bed and the closed door there stood a woman with a knife in her hand, looking at him. He was stricken speechless with terror, but he did not lose the preternatural clearness of his faculties; and he never took his eyes off the woman. She said not one word as they stared each other in the face; but she began to move slowly towards the left-hand side of the bed.

His eyes followed her. She was a fair, fine woman, with yellowish flaxen hair, and light grey eyes, with a droop in the left eyelid. He noticed those things and fixed them on his mind, before she was round at the side of the bed. Speechless, with no expression in her face, with no noise following her footfall—she came closer and closer—stopped—and slowly raised the knife. He laid his right arm over his throat to save it; but, as he saw the knife coming down, threw his hand across the bed to the right side, and jerked his body over that way, just as the knife descended on the mattress within an inch of his shoulder.

His eyes fixed on her arm and hand, as she slowly drew the knife out of the bed. A white, well-shaped arm, with a pretty down lying lightly over the fair skin. A delicate, lady's hand, with the crowning beauty of a pink flush under and round the fingernails.

She drew the knife out, and passed back again slowly to the foot of the bed; stopped there for a moment looking at him; then came on—still speechless, still with no expression on the blank, beautiful face, still with no sound following the stealthy footfalls—came on to the right side of the bed where he now lay. As she approached, she raised the knife again, and he drew himself away to the left side. She struck, as before, right into the mattress, with a deliberate, perpendicularly-downward action of the arm. This time his eyes wandered from her to the knife. It was like the large clasp knives which he had often seen labouring men use to cut their bread and bacon with. Her delicate little fingers did not conceal more than two thirds of the handle; he noticed that it was made of buck-horn, clean and shining as the blade was, and looking like new.

For the second time she drew the knife out, concealed it in the wide sleeve of her gown, then stopped by the bedside, watching him. For an instant he saw her standing in that position—then the wick of the spent candle fell over into the socket. The flame diminished to a little blue point, and the room grew dark. A moment, or less, if possible, passed so—and then the wick flamed up, smokily, for the last time. His eyes were still looking eagerly over the right-hand side of the bed

when the final flash of light came, but they discerned nothing. The fair woman with the knife was gone.

The conviction that he was alone again, weakened the hold of the terror that had struck him dumb up to this time. The preternatural sharpness which the very intensity of his panic had mysteriously imparted to his faculties, left them suddenly. His brain grew confused—his heart beat wildly—his ears opened for the first time since the appearance of the woman, to a sense of the woeful, ceaseless moaning of the wind among the trees. With the dreadful conviction of the reality of what he had seen, still strong within him, he leapt out of bed, and screaming—‘Murder!—Wake up, there, wake up!’—dashed headlong through the darkness to the door.

It was fast locked, exactly as he had left it on going to bed.

His cries on starting up, had alarmed the house. He heard the terrified, confused exclamations of women; he saw the master of the house approaching along the passage, with his burning rush-candle in one hand and his gun in the other.

‘What is it?’ asked the landlord, breathlessly.

Isaac could only answer in a whisper: ‘A woman, with a knife in her hand,’ he gasped out. ‘In my room—a fair, yellow-haired woman; she jobbed at me with the knife, twice over.’

The landlord’s pale cheeks grew paler. He looked at Isaac eagerly by the flickering light of his candle; and his face began to get red again—his voice altered, too, as well as his complexion.

‘She seems to have missed you twice,’ he said.

‘I dodged the knife as it came down,’ Isaac went on, in the same scared whisper. ‘It struck the bed each time.’

The landlord took his candle into the bedroom immediately. In less than a minute he came out again into the passage in a violent passion.

‘The devil fly away with you and your woman with the knife! What do you mean by coming into a man’s place and frightening his family out of their wits about a dream?’

‘I’ll leave your house,’ said Isaac, faintly. ‘Better out on the road, in rain and dark, on my way home, than back again in that room after what I’ve seen in it. Lend me a light to get on my clothes by, and tell me what I’m to pay.’

‘Pay!’ cried the landlord, leading the way with his light sulkily into the bedroom. ‘You’ll find your score on the slate when you go downstairs. I wouldn’t have taken you in for all the money you’ve got about you, if I’d known your dreaming, screeching ways beforehand. Look at the bed. Where’s the cut of a knife in it? Look at the window—is the lock bursted? Look at the door (which I heard you fasten myself)—is it broke in? A murdering woman with a knife in my

house! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!’

Isaac answered not a word. He huddled on his clothes; and then they went downstairs together.

‘Nigh on twenty minutes past two!’ said the landlord, as they passed the clock. ‘A nice time in the morning to frighten honest people out of their wits!’

Isaac paid his bill, and the landlord let him out at the front door, asking, with a grin of contempt, as he undid the strong fastenings, whether ‘the murdering woman got in that way.’ The rain had ceased; but the night was dark, and the wind bleaker than ever. Little did the darkness, or the cold, or the uncertainty about his way home, matter to Isaac. If he had been turned out into a wilderness in a thunder-storm, it would have been a relief, after what he had suffered in the bedroom of the inn.

What was the fair woman with the knife? The creature of a dream, or that other creature from the unknown world called among men by the name of ghost? He could make nothing of the mystery—had made nothing of it, even when it was midday on Wednesday, and when he stood, at last, after many times missing his road, once more on the doorstep of home.

His mother came out eagerly to receive him. His face told her in a moment that something was wrong.

‘I’ve lost the place; but that’s my luck. I dreamed an ill dream last night, mother—or, may be, I saw a ghost. Take it either way, it scared me out of my senses, and I’m not my own man again yet.’

‘Isaac! your face frightens me. Come in to the fire. Come in, and tell mother all about it.’

He was as anxious to tell as she was to hear; for it had been his hope, all the way home, that his mother, with her quicker capacity and superior knowledge, might be able to throw some light on the mystery which he could not clear up for himself. His memory of the dream was still mechanically vivid, though his thoughts were entirely confused by it.

His mother’s face grew paler and paler as he went on. She never interrupted him by so much as a single word; but when he had done, she moved her chair close to his, put her arm round his neck, and said to him:

‘Isaac, you dreamed your ill dream on this Wednesday morning. What time was it when you saw the fair woman with the knife in her hand?’

Isaac reflected on what the landlord had said when they passed by the clock on his leaving the inn—allowed as nearly as he could for the time that must have elapsed between the unlocking of his bedroom

door and the paying of his bill just before going away, and answered: 'Somewhere about two o'clock in the morning.'

His mother suddenly quitted her hold of his neck, and struck her hands together with a gesture of despair.

'This Wednesday is your birthday Isaac; and two o'clock in the morning was the time when you were born!'

Isaac's capacities were not quick enough to catch the infection of his mother's superstitious dread. He was amazed and a little startled also, when she suddenly rose from her chair, opened her old writing-desk, took out pen and ink and paper, and then said to him:

'Your memory is but a poor one, Isaac, and now I'm an old woman, mine's not much better. I want all about this dream of yours to be as well known to both of us, years hence, as it is now. Tell me over again all you told me a minute ago, when you spoke of what the woman with the knife looked like.'

Isaac obeyed, and marvelled much as he saw his mother carefully set down on paper the very words that he was saying. 'Light grey eyes,' she wrote, as they came to the descriptive part, 'with a droop in the left eyelid. Flaxen hair, with a gold-yellow streak in it. White arms, with a down on them. Little lady's hand, with a reddish look about the fingernails. Clasp knife with a buck-horn handle, that seemed as good as new.' To these particulars, Mrs Scatchard added the year, month, day of the week, and time in the morning, when the woman of the dream appeared to her son. She then locked up the paper carefully in her writing-desk.

Neither on that day, nor on any day after, could her son induce her to return to the matter of the dream. She obstinately kept her thoughts about it to herself, and even refused to refer again to the paper in her writing-desk. Ere long, Isaac grew weary of attempting to make her break her resolute silence; and time, which sooner or later, wears out all things, gradually wore out the impression produced on him by the dream. He began by thinking of it carelessly, and he ended by not thinking of it at all. This result was the more easily brought about by the advent of some important changes for the better in his prospects, which commenced not long after his terrible night's experience at the inn. He reaped at last the reward of his long and patient suffering under adversity, by getting an excellent place, keeping it for seven years, and leaving it, on the death of his master, not only with an excellent character, but also with a comfortable annuity bequeathed to him as a reward for saving his mistress's life in a carriage accident. Thus it happened that Isaac Scatchard returned to his old mother, seven years after the time of the dream at the inn, with an annual sum of money at his disposal, sufficient to keep them both in ease and

independence for the rest of their lives.

The mother, whose health had been bad of late years, profited so much by the care bestowed on her and by freedom from money anxieties, that when Isaac's next birthday came round, she was able to sit up comfortably at table and dine with him.

On that day, as the evening drew on, Mrs Scatchard discovered that a bottle of tonic medicine—which she was accustomed to take, and in which she had fancied that a dose or more was still left—happened to be empty. Isaac immediately volunteered to go to the chemist's, and get it filled again. It was as rainy and bleak an autumn night as on the memorable past occasion when he lost his way and slept at the roadside inn.

On going into the chemist's shop, he was passed hurriedly by a poorly-dressed woman coming out of it. The glimpse he had of her face struck him, and he looked back after her as she descended the door-steps.

'You're noticing the woman?' said the chemist's apprentice behind the counter. 'It's my opinion there's something wrong with her. She's been asking for laudanum to put to a bad tooth. Master's out for half an hour; and I told her I wasn't allowed to sell poison to strangers in his absence. She laughed in a queer way, and said she would come back in half an hour. If she expects master to serve her, I think she'll be disappointed. It's a case of suicide, sir, if ever there was one yet.'

These words added immeasurably to the sudden interest in the woman which Isaac had felt at the first sight of her face. After he had got the medicine-bottle filled, he looked about anxiously for her, as soon as he was out in the street. She was walking slowly up and down on the opposite side of the road. With his heart, very much to his own surprise, beating fast, Isaac crossed over and spoke to her.

He asked if she was in any distress. She pointed to her torn shawl, her scanty dress, her crushed, dirty bonnet—then moved under a lamp so as to let the light fall on her stern, pale, but still most beautiful face.

'I look like a comfortable, happy woman—don't I?' she said with a bitter laugh.

She spoke with a purity of intonation which Isaac had never heard before from other than ladies' lips. Her slightest actions seemed to have the easy negligent grace of a thoroughbred woman. Her skin, for all its poverty-stricken paleness, was as delicate as if her life had been passed in the enjoyment of every social comfort that wealth can purchase. Even her small, finely-shaped hands, gloveless as they were, had not lost their whiteness.

Little by little, in answer to his question, the sad story of the woman came out. There is no need to relate it here; it is told over and over again

in Police Reports and paragraphs about Attempted Suicides.

'My name is Rebecca Murdoch,' said the woman, as she ended. 'I have ninepence left, and I thought of spending it at the chemist's over the way in securing a passage to the other world. Whatever it is, it can't be worse to me than this—so why should I stop here!'

Besides the natural compassion and sadness moved in his heart by what he heard, Isaac felt within him some mysterious influence at work all the time the woman was speaking, which utterly confused his ideas and almost deprived him of his powers of speech. All that he could say in answer to her last reckless words was, that he would prevent her from attempting her own life, if he followed her about all night to do it. His rough, trembling earnestness seemed to impress her.

'I won't occasion you that trouble,' she answered, when he repeated his threat. 'You have given me a fancy for living by speaking kindly to me. No need for the mockery of protestations and promises. You may believe me without them. Come to Fuller's Meadow tomorrow at twelve, and you will find me alive, to answer to myself. No!—no money. My ninepence will do to get me as good a night's lodging as I want.'

She nodded and left him. He made no attempt to follow—he felt no suspicion that she was deceiving him.

'It's strange, but I can't help believing her,' he said to himself—and walked away, bewildered, towards home.

On entering the house his mind was still so completely absorbed by its new subject of interest, that he took no notice of what his mother was doing when he came in with the bottle of medicine. She had opened her old writing-desk in his absence, and was now reading a paper attentively that lay inside it. On every birthday of Isaac's since she had written down the particulars of his dream from his own lips, she had been accustomed to read that same paper, and ponder over it in private.

The next day he went to Fuller's Meadow. He had done only right in believing her so implicitly—she was there, punctual to a minute, to answer for herself. The last-left faint defences in Isaac's heart against the fascination which a word or look from her began inscrutably to exercise over him, sank down and vanished before her for ever on that memorable morning.

When a man, previously insensible to the influence of women, forms an attachment in middle life, the instances are rare indeed, let the warning circumstances be what they may, in which he is found capable of freeing himself from the tyranny of the new ruling passion. The charm of being spoken to familiarly, fondly, and gratefully by a woman whose language and manners still retained enough of their

early refinement to hint at the high social station that she had lost, would have been a dangerous luxury to a man of Isaac's rank at the age of twenty. But it was far more than that—it was certain ruin to him—now that his heart was opening unworthily to a new influence, at that middle time of life when strong feelings of all kinds, once implanted, strike root most stubbornly in a man's moral nature. A few more stolen interviews after that first morning in Fuller's Meadow completed his infatuation. In less than a month from the time when he first met her, Isaac Scatchard had consented to give Rebecca Murdoch a new interest in existence, and a chance of recovering the character she had lost, by promising to make her his wife.

She had taken possession, not of his passions only, but of his faculties as well. All arrangements for the present and all plans for the future were of her devising. All the mind he had he put into her keeping. She directed him on every point; even instructing him how to break the news of his approaching marriage in the safest manner to his mother.

'If you tell her how you met me and who I am at first,' said the cunning woman, 'she will move heaven and earth to prevent our marriage. Say I am the sister of one of your fellow-servants—ask her to see me before you go into any more particulars—and leave it to me to do the rest. I want to make her love me next best to you, Isaac, before she knows anything of who I really am.'

The motive of the deceit was sufficient to sanctify it to Isaac. The stratagem proposed relieved him of his one great anxiety, and quieted his uneasy conscience on the subject of his mother. Still, there was something wanting to perfect his happiness, something that he could not realize, something mysteriously untraceable, and yet, something that perpetually made itself felt; not when he was absent from Rebecca Murdoch, but, strange to say, when he was actually in her presence! She was kindness itself with him; she never made him feel his inferior capacities, and inferior manners—she showed the sweetest anxiety to please him in the smallest trifles; but, in spite of all these attractions, he never could feel quite at his ease with her. At their first meeting, there had mingled with his admiration when he looked in her face, a faint involuntary feeling of doubt whether that face was entirely strange to him. No after familiarity had the slightest effect on this inexplicable, wearisome uncertainty.

Concealing the truth as he had been directed, he announced his marriage engagement precipitately and confusedly to his mother, on the day when he contracted it. Poor Mrs Scatchard showed her perfect confidence in her son by flinging her arms round his neck, and giving him joy of having found at last, in the sister of one of his fellow-

servants, a woman to comfort and care for him after his mother was gone. She was all eagerness to see the woman of her son's choice; and the next day was fixed for the introduction.

It was a bright sunny morning, and the little cottage parlour was full of light, as Mrs Scatchard, happy and expectant, dressed for the occasion in her Sunday gown, sat waiting for her son and her future daughter-in-law. Punctual to the appointed time, Isaac hurriedly and nervously led his promised wife into the room. His mother rose to receive her—advanced a few steps, smiling—looked Rebecca full in the eyes—and suddenly stopped. Her face, which had been flushed the moment before, turned white in an instant—her eyes lost their expression of softness and kindness, and assumed a blank look of terror—her outstretched hands fell to her sides, and she staggered back a few steps with a low cry to her son.

'Isaac!' she whispered, clutching him fast by the arm, when he asked alarmingly if she was taken ill. 'Isaac! Does that woman's face remind you of nothing?'

Before he could answer; before he could look round to where Rebecca stood, at the lower end of the room; his mother pointed impatiently to her writing-desk, and gave him the key.

'Open it,' she said, in a quick, breathless whisper.

'What does this mean? Why am I treated as if I had no business here? Does your mother want to insult me?' asked Rebecca, angrily.

'Open it, and give me the paper in the left-hand drawer. Quick! quick, for Heaven's sake!' said Mrs Scatchard, shrinking further back in terror. Isaac gave her the paper. She looked it over eagerly for a moment—then followed Rebecca, who was now turning away haughtily to leave the room, and caught her by the shoulder—abruptly raised the long, loose sleeve of her gown, and glanced at her hand and arm. Something like fear began to steal over the angry expression of Rebecca's face as she shook herself free from the old woman's grasp. 'Mad!' she said to herself; 'and Isaac never told me.' With these few words she left the room.

Isaac was hastening after her when his mother turned and stopped his further progress. It wrung his heart to see the misery and terror in her face as she looked at him.

'Light grey eyes,' she said, in low, mournful, awe-struck tones, pointing towards the open door. 'A droop in the left eyelid. Flaxen hair with a gold-yellow streak in it. White arms with a down on them. Little, lady's hand, with a reddish look under the fingernails. *The woman of the dream!*—Oh, Heaven! Isaac, the woman of the dream!'

That faint cleaving doubt which he had never been able to shake off in Rebecca Murdoch's presence, was fatally set at rest for ever. He *had*

seen her face, then, before—seven years before, on his birthday, in the bedroom of the lonely inn. ‘The woman of the dream!’

‘Be warned, Oh, my son! be warned! Isaac! Isaac! let her go, and do you stop with me!’

Something darkened the parlour window, as those words were said. A sudden chill ran through him; and he glanced sidelong at the shadow. Rebecca Murdoch had come back. She was peering in curiously at them over the low window blind.

‘I have promised to marry, mother,’ he said, ‘and marry I must.’

The tears came into his eyes as he spoke, and dimmed his sight; but he could just discern the fatal face outside moving away again from the window.

His mother’s head sank lower.

‘Are you faint?’ he whispered.

‘Broken-hearted, Isaac.’

He stooped down and kissed her. The shadow, as he did so, returned to the window; and the fatal face peered in curiously once more.

Three weeks after that day, Isaac and Rebecca were man and wife. All that was hopelessly dogged and stubborn in the man’s moral nature, seemed to have closed round his fatal passion, and to have fixed it unassailably in his heart.

After that first interview in the cottage parlour, no consideration would induce Mrs Scatchard to see her son’s wife again, or even to talk of her when Isaac tried hard to plead her cause after their marriage. This course of conduct was not in any degree occasioned by a discovery of the degradation in which Rebecca had lived. There was no question of that between mother and son. There was no question of anything but the fearfully exact resemblance between the living breathing woman and the spectre woman of Isaac’s dream. Rebecca, on her side, neither felt nor expressed the slightest sorrow at the estrangement between herself and her mother-in-law. Isaac, for the sake of peace, had never contradicted her first idea that age and long illness had affected Mrs Scatchard’s mind. He even allowed his wife to upbraid him for not having confessed this to her at the time of their marriage engagement, rather than risk anything by hinting at the truth. The sacrifice of his integrity before his one all-mastering delusion, seemed but a small thing, and cost his conscience but little, after the sacrifices he had already made.

The time of waking from his delusion—the cruel and the rueful time—was not far off. After some quiet months of married life, as the summer was ending, and the year was getting on towards the month of his birthday, Isaac found his wife altering towards him. She grew sullen and contemptuous—she formed acquaintances of the most

dangerous kind, in defiance of his objections, his entreaties, and his commands—and, worst of all, she learnt, ere long, after every fresh difference with her husband, to seek the deadly self-oblivion of drink. Little by little, after the first miserable discovery that his wife was keeping company with drunkards, the shocking certainty forced itself on Isaac that she had grown to be a drunkard herself.

He had been in a sadly desponding state for some time before the occurrence of these domestic calamities. His mother's health, as he could but too plainly discern every time he went to see her at the cottage, was failing fast; and he upbraided himself in secret as the cause of the bodily and mental suffering she endured. When, to his remorse on his mother's account, was added the shame and misery occasioned by the discovery of his wife's degradation, he sank under the double trial—his face began to alter fast, and he looked what he was, a spirit-broken man. His mother, still struggling bravely against the illness that was hurrying her to the grave, was the first to notice the sad alteration in him, and the first to hear of his last bitterest trouble with his wife. She could only weep bitterly, on the day when he made his humiliating confession; but on the next occasion when he went to see her, she had taken a resolution, in reference to his domestic afflictions, which astonished, and even alarmed him. He found her dressed to go out, and on asking the reason, received this answer:

'I am not long for this world, Isaac,' said she; 'and I shall not feel easy on my death-bed, unless I have done my best to the last, to make my son happy. I mean to put my own fears and my own feelings out of the question, and to go with you to your wife, and try what I can do to reclaim her. Give me your arm, Isaac; and let me do the last thing I can in this world to help my son before it is too late.'

He could not disobey her: and they walked together slowly towards his miserable home. It was only one o'clock in the afternoon when they reached the cottage where he lived. It was their dinner hour, and Rebecca was in the kitchen. He was thus able to take his mother quietly into the parlour, and then prepare his wife for the interview. She had fortunately drank but little at that early hour, and she was less sullen and capricious than usual. He returned to his mother, with his mind tolerably at ease. His wife soon followed him into the parlour, and the meeting between her and Mrs Scatchard passed off better than he had ventured to anticipate: though he observed, with secret apprehension, that his mother, resolutely as she controlled herself in other respects, could not look his wife in the face when she spoke to her. It was a relief to him, therefore, when Rebecca began to lay the cloth.

She laid the cloth—brought in the bread-tray, and cut a slice from the loaf for her husband—then returned to the kitchen. At that

moment, Isaac, still anxiously watching his mother, was startled by seeing the same ghastly change pass over her face, which had altered it so awfully on the morning when Rebecca and she first met. Before he could say a word she whispered with a look of horror:

‘Take me back!—home, home, again, Isaac! Come with me, and never come back again.’

He was afraid to ask for an explanation—he could only sign to her to be silent, and help her quickly to the door. As they passed the bread-tray on the table she stopped and pointed to it.

‘Did you see what your wife cut your bread with?’ she asked, in a low, still whisper.

‘No, mother—I was not noticing—what was it?’

‘Look!’

He did look. A new clasp-knife, with a buck-horn handle lay with the loaf in the bread-tray. He stretched out his hand, shudderingly, to possess himself of it; but, at the same time, there was a noise in the kitchen, and his mother caught at his arm.

‘The knife of the dream!—Isaac, I’m faint with fear—take me away! before she comes back!’

He was hardly able to support her—the visible tangible reality of the knife struck him with a panic, and utterly destroyed any faint doubts that he might have entertained up to this time, in relation to the mysterious dream-warning of nearly eight years before. By a last desperate effort, he summoned self-possession enough to help his mother quietly out of the house—so quietly, that the ‘dream-woman’ (he thought of her by that name, now!) did not hear them departing, from the kitchen.

‘Don’t go back, Isaac—don’t go back!’ implored Mrs Scatchard, as he turned to go away, after seeing her safely seated again in her own room.

‘I must get the knife,’ he answered under his breath. She tried to stop him again; but he hurried out without another word.

On his return, he found that his wife had discovered their secret departure from the house. She had been drinking, and was in a fury of passion. The dinner in the kitchen was flung under the grate; the cloth was off the parlour-table. Where was the knife? Unwisely, he asked for it. She was only too glad of the opportunity of irritating him, which the request afforded her. ‘He wanted the knife, did he? Could he give her a reason why?—No!—Then he should not have it—not if he went down on his knees to ask for it.’ Further recriminations elicited the fact that she had bought it a bargain—and that she considered it her own especial property. Isaac saw the uselessness of attempting to get the knife by fair means, and determined to search for

it, later in the day, in secret. The search was unsuccessful. Night came on, and he left the house to walk about the streets. He was afraid now to sleep in the same room with her.

Three weeks passed. Still sullenly enraged with him, she would not give up the knife; and still that fear of sleeping in the same room with her, possessed him. He walked about at night, or dozed in the parlour, or sat watching by his mother's bedside. Before the expiration of the first week in the new month his mother died. It wanted then but ten days' of her son's birthday. She had longed to live till that anniversary. Isaac was present at her death; and her last words in this world were addressed to him: 'Don't go back, my son, don't go back!'

He was obliged to go back, if it were only to watch his wife. Exasperated to the last degree by his distrust of her, she had revengefully sought to add a sting to his grief, during the last days of his mother's illness, by declaring that she would assert her right to attend the funeral. In spite of all that he could do, or say, she held with wicked pertinacity to her word; and, on the day appointed for the burial, forced herself—inflamed and shameless with drink—into her husband's presence, and declared that she would walk in the funeral procession to his mother's grave.

This last worst outrage, accompanied by all that was most insulting in word and look, maddened him for the moment. He struck her. The instant the blow was dealt, he repented it. She crouched down, silent in a corner of the room, and eyed him steadily; it was a look that cooled his hot blood, and made him tremble. But there was no time now to think of a means of making atonement. Nothing remained, but to risk the worst till the funeral was over. There was but one way of making sure of her. He locked her into her bedroom.

When he came back some hours after, he found her sitting, very much altered in look and bearing, by the bedside, with a bundle on her lap. She rose, and faced him quietly, and spoke with a strange stillness in her voice, a strange repose in her eyes, a strange composure in her manner.

'No man has ever struck me twice,' she said, 'and my husband shall have no second opportunity. Set the door open and let me go. From this day forth we see each other no more.'

Before he could answer she passed him, and left the room. He saw her walk away up the street.

Would she return? All that night he watched and waited; but no footstep came near the house. The next night, overpowered by fatigue, he lay down in bed, in his clothes, with the door locked, the key on the table, and the candle burning. His slumber was not disturbed. The third night, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, passed, and nothing

happened. He lay down on the seventh, still in his clothes, still with the door locked, the key on the table, and the candle burning; but easier in his mind.

Easier in his mind, and in perfect health of body, when he fell off to sleep. But his rest was disturbed. He woke twice, without any sensation of uneasiness. But the third time it was that never-to-be-forgotten shivering of the night at the lonely inn, that dreadful sinking pain at the heart, which once more aroused him in an instant.

His eyes opened towards the left hand side of the bed, and there stood—The woman of the dream, again?—No! His wife; the living reality, with the dream-spectre's face—in the dream-spectre's attitude; the fair arm up—the knife clasped in the delicate, white hand.

He sprang upon her, almost at the instant of seeing her, and yet not quickly enough to prevent her from hiding the knife. Without a word from him—without a cry from her—he pinioned her in a chair. With one hand he felt up her sleeve—and, there, where the dream-woman had hidden the knife, she had hidden it—the knife with the buck-horn handle, that looked like new.

In the despair of that fearful moment his brain was steady, his heart was calm. He looked at her fixedly, with the knife in his hand, and said these last words:

'You told me we should see each other no more, and you have come back. It is my turn, now, to go, and to go for ever. *I* say that we shall see each other no more; and *my* word shall not be broken.

He left her, and set forth into the night. There was a bleak wind abroad, and the smell of recent rain was in the air. The distant church clocks chimed the quarter as he walked rapidly beyond the last houses in the suburb. He asked the first policeman he met, what hour that was, of which the quarter had just struck.

The man referred sleepily to his watch, and answered: 'Two o'clock.' Two in the morning. What day of the month was this day that had just begun? He reckoned it up from the date of his mother's funeral. The fatal parallel was complete—it was his birthday!

Had he escaped the mortal peril which his dream foretold? or had he only received a second warning? As that ominous doubt forced itself on his mind, he stopped, reflected, and turned back again towards the city. He was still resolute to hold to his word, and never to let her see him more; but there was a thought now in his mind of having her watched and followed. The knife was in his possession—the world was before him; but a new distrust of her—a vague, unspeakable, superstitious dread—had overcome him.

'I must know where she goes, now she thinks I have left her,' he said to himself, as he stole back wearily to the precincts of his house.

It was still dark. He had left the candle burning in the bedchamber: but when he looked up at the window of the room now, there was no light in it. He crept cautiously to the house-door. On going away, he remembered to have closed it: on trying it now, he found it open.

He waited outside, never losing sight of the house, till daylight. Then he ventured indoors—listened, and heard nothing—looked into kitchen, scullery, parlour; and found nothing: went up, at last, into the bedroom—it was empty. A pick-lock lay on the floor, betraying how she had gained entrance in the night; and that was the only trace of her.

Whither had she gone? That no mortal tongue could tell him. The darkness had covered her flight; and when the day broke, no man could say where the light found her.

Before leaving the house and the town for ever, he gave instructions to a friend and neighbour to sell his furniture for anything that it would fetch, and apply the proceeds to employing the police to trace her. The directions were honestly followed, and the money was all spent; but the enquiries led to nothing. The pick-lock on the bedroom floor remained the last useless trace of her.

At this point of the narrative the landlord paused, and looked towards the stable-door.

‘So far,’ he said, ‘I tell you what was told to me. The little that remains to be added lies within my own experience. Between two and three months after the events I have just been relating, Isaac Scatchard came to me, withered and old-looking before his time, just as you saw him today. He had his testimonials to character with him, and he asked for employment here. I gave him a trial and liked him in spite of his queer habits. He is as sober, honest, and willing a man as there is in England. As for his restlessness at night, and his sleeping away his leisure time in the day, who can wonder at it after hearing his story? Besides, he never objects to being roused up, when he’s wanted, so there’s not much inconvenience to complain of, after all.’

‘I suppose he is afraid of waking out of that dreadful dream in the dark?’ said I.

‘No,’ returned the landlord. ‘The dream comes back to him so often, that he has got to bear with it by this time resignedly enough. It’s his wife keeps him waking at night, as he has often told me.’

‘What! Has she never been heard of yet?’

‘Never. Isaac himself has the one perpetual thought about her, that she is alive and looking for him. I believe he wouldn’t let himself drop off to sleep towards two in the morning for a king’s ransom. Two in the morning, he says, is the time when she will find him, one of these days. Two in the morning is the time all the year round, when he likes

to be most certain that he has got that clasp-knife safe about him. He does not mind being alone, as long as he is awake except on the night before his birthday, when he firmly believes himself to be in peril of his life. The birthday has only come round once since he has been here; and then he sat up, along with the night-porter. 'She's looking for me,' he always says, when I speak to him on the one theme of his life; 'she's looking for me.' He may be right. She *may* be looking for him. Who can tell?

'Who can tell!' said I.

5

The Siege of the Black Cottage

To begin at the beginning, I must take you back to the time after my mother's death, when my only brother had gone to sea, when my sister was out at service and when I lived alone with my father, in the midst of a moor in the West of England.

The moor was covered with great limestone rocks, and intersected here and there by streamlets. The nearest habitation to ours was situated about a mile and a half off, where a strip of the fertile land stretched out into the waste, like a tongue. Here the outbuildings of the great Moor Farm, then in the possession of my husband's father, began. The farmlands stretched down gently into a beautiful rich valley, lying nicely sheltered by the high platform of the moor. When the ground began to rise again, miles and miles away, it led up to a country house, called Holme Manor, belonging to a gentleman named Knifton. Mr Knifton had lately married a young lady whom my mother had nursed, and whose kindness and friendship for me, her foster-sister, I shall remember gratefully to the last day of my life. These, and other slight particulars, it is necessary to my story that I should tell you; and it is also necessary that you should be especially careful to bear them well in mind.

My father was by trade a stonemason. His cottage stood a mile and a half from the nearest habitation. In all other directions we were four or five times that distance from neighbours. Being very poor people, this lonely situation had one great attraction for us—we lived rent free on it. In addition to that advantage, the stones, by shaping which my father gained his livelihood, lay all about him at his very door; so that he thought his position, solitary as it was, quite an enviable one. I can hardly say that I agreed with him, though I never complained. I was very fond of my father, and managed to make the best of my loneliness with the thought of being useful to him. Mrs Knifton wished to take me into her service when she married, but I declined—unwillingly

enough—for my father's sake. If I had gone away, he would have had nobody to live with him; and my mother made me promise on her death-bed, that he should never be left to pine away alone in the midst of the bleak moor. Our cottage, small as it was, was stoutly and snugly built, with stone from the moor, as a matter of course. The walls were lined inside and fenced outside with wood, the gift of Mr Knifton's father to my father. This double covering of cracks and crevices, which would have been superfluous in a sheltered position, was absolutely necessary, in our exposed situation, to keep out the cold winds which, excepting just the summer months, swept over us continually, all the year round. The outside boards, covering our roughly-built stone walls, my father protected against the wet, with pitch and tar. This gave to our little abode a curiously dark, dingy look, especially when it was seen from a distance, and so it had come to be called in the neighbourhood, even before I was born, The Black Cottage.

I have now related the preliminary particulars which it is desirable that you should know, and may proceed at once to the pleasanter task of telling you my story.

One cloudy autumn day, when I was rather more than eighteen years old, a herdsman walked over from Moor Farm with a letter which had been left there for my father. It came from a builder, living at our country town, half-a-day's journey off, and it invited my father to come to him and give his judgment about an estimate for some stonework on a very large scale. My father's expenses for loss of time were to be paid, and he was to have his share of employment afterwards in preparing the stone. He was only too glad, therefore, to obey the directions which the letter contained, and to prepare at once for his long walk to the country town.

Considering the time at which he received the letter, and the necessity of resting before he attempted to return, it was impossible for him to avoid being away from home for one night at least. He proposed to me, in case I disliked being left alone in the Black Cottage, to lock the door, and to take me to Moor Farm to sleep with any of the milkmaids who would give me a share of her bed. I by no means liked the notion of sleeping with a girl whom I did not know, and I saw no reason to feel afraid of being left alone for only one night; so I declined. No thieves had ever come near us; our poverty was sufficient protection against them; and of other dangers there were none that even the most timid person could apprehend. Accordingly, I got my father's dinner, laughing at the notion of my taking refuge under the protection of a milkmaid at Moor Farm. He started for his walk as soon as he had done, saying he should try and be back by dinner-time the next day, and leaving me and my cat Polly to take care of the house.

I had cleared the table and brightened up the fire, and had sat down to my work, with the cat dozing at my feet, when I heard the trampling of horses; and, running to the door, saw Mr and Mrs Knifton, with their groom behind them, riding up to the Black Cottage. It was part of the young lady's kindness never to neglect an opportunity of coming to pay me a friendly visit; and her husband was generally willing to accompany her for his wife's sake. I made by best curtsy, therefore, with a great deal of pleasure, but with no particular surprise at seeing them. They dismounted and entered the cottage, laughing and talking in great spirits. I soon heard that they were riding to the same country town for which my father was bound; and that they intended to stay with some friends there for a few days, and to return home on horseback, as they went out.

I heard this, and I also discovered that they had been having an argument, in jest, about money matters, as they rode along to our cottage. Mrs Knifton had accused her husband of inveterate extravagance, and of never being able to go out with money in his pocket without spending it all, if he possibly could before he got home again. Mr Knifton had laughingly defended himself by declaring that all his pocket-money went in presents for his wife, and that, if he spent it lavishly, it was under her sole influence and superintendence.

'We are going to Cliverton now,' he said to Mrs Knifton, naming the country town, and warming himself at our poor fire just as pleasantly as if he had been standing at his own grand hearth. 'You will stop to admire every pretty thing in every one of the Cliverton shop-windows; I shall hand you the purse, and you will go in and buy. When we have reached home again, and you have had time to get tired of your purchases, you will clasp your hands in amazement, and declare that you are quite shocked at my habits of extravagance. I am only the banker who keeps the money—you, my love, are the spendthrift who throws it all away!'

'Am I sir?' said Mrs Knifton, with a look of mock indignation. 'We will see if I am to be misrepresented in this way with impunity. Bessie, my dear'(turning to me), 'you shall judge how far I deserve the character which my husband has just given to me. I am the spendthrift, am I? And you are only the banker? Very well. Banker, give me my money at once, if you please!'

Mr Knifton laughed, and took some gold and silver from his waistcoat pocket.

'No, no,' said Mrs Knifton. 'You may want what you have got there for necessary expenses. Is that all the money you have about you? What do I feel here?' and she tapped her husband on the chest, just over the breast-pocket of his coat.

Mr Knifton laughed again, and produced his pocket-book. His wife snatched it out of his hand, opened it, and drew out some bank-notes, put them back again immediately, and closing the pocket-book, stepped across the room to my poor mother's little walnut-wood bookcase—the only bit of valuable furniture we had in the house.

'What are you going to do there?' asked Mr Knifton, following his wife.

Mrs Knifton opened the glass door of the bookcase, put the pocket-book in a vacant place on one of the lower shelves, closed and locked the door again, and gave me the key.

'You called me a spendthrift just now,' she said. 'There is my answer. Not one farthing of that money shall you spend at Cliverton on *me*. Keep the key in your pocket, Bessie, and, whatever Mr Knifton may say, on no account let him have it until we call again on our way back. No, sir, I won't trust you with that money in your pocket in the town of Cliverton. I will make sure of your taking it all home again, by leaving it here in more trustworthy hands than yours, until we ride back. Bessie, my dear, what do you say to that, as a lesson in economy inflicted on a prudent husband by a spendthrift wife?'

She took Mr Knifton's arm while she spoke, and drew him away to the door. He protested, and made some resistance, but she easily carried her point, for he was far too fond of her to have a will of his own in any trifling matter between them. Whatever the men might say, Mr Knifton was a model husband in the estimation of all the women who knew him.

'You will see us as we come back, Bessie. Till then, you are our banker, and the pocket-book is yours,' cried Mrs Knifton gaily, at the door. Her husband lifted her into the saddle, mounted himself, and away they both galloped over the moor, as wild and happy as a couple of children.

Although my being trusted with money by Mrs Knifton was no novelty (in her maiden days she always employed me to pay her dressmaker's bills), I did not feel quite easy at having a pocket-book full of bank-notes left by her in my charge. I had no positive apprehension about the safety of the deposit placed in my hands, but it was one of the odd points in my character then (and I think it is still), to feel an unreasonably strong objection to charging myself with money responsibilities of any kind, even to suit the convenience of my dearest friends. As soon as I was left alone, the very sight of the pocket-book behind the glass door of the bookcase began to worry me; and, instead of returning to my work, I puzzled my brains about finding a place to lock it up in, where it would not be exposed to the view of any chance passer-by, who might stray into the Black Cottage.

This was not an easy matter to compass in a poor house like ours, where we had nothing valuable to put under lock and key. After running over various hiding-places in my mind, I thought of my tea-caddy, a present of Mrs Knifton's, which I always kept out of harm's way in my own bedroom. Most unluckily—as it afterwards turned out—instead of taking the pocket-book to the tea-caddy, I went into my room first, to take the tea-caddy to the pocket-book. I only acted in this roundabout way from sheer thoughtlessness, and severely enough I was punished for it, as you will acknowledge yourself when you have read a page or two more of my story.

I was just getting the unlucky tea-caddy out of my cupboard, when I heard footsteps in the passage, and running out immediately, saw two men walk into the kitchen—the room in which I had received Mr and Mrs Knifton. I enquired what they wanted, sharply enough, and one of them answered immediately that they wanted my father. He turned towards me, of course, as he spoke, and I recognized him as a stonemason, going among his comrades by the name of Shifty Dick. He bore a very bad character for everything but wrestling—a sport for which the working men of our parts were famous all through the county. Shifty Dick was champion, and he had got his name from some tricks in wrestling, for which he was celebrated. He was a tall, heavy man, with a lowering, scarred face, and huge hairy hands—the last visitor in the whole world that I should have been glad to see under any circumstances. His companion was a stranger, whom he addressed by the name of Jerry—a quick, dapper, wicked-looking man who took off his cap to me with mock politeness, and showed, in so doing, a very bald head, with some very ugly-looking knobs on it. I distrusted him worse than I did Shifty Dick, and managed to get between his leering eyes and the bookcase, as I told the two that my father was gone out, and that I did not expect him back till the next day.

The words were hardly out of my mouth before I repented of having spoken them. My anxiety to get rid of my unwelcome visitors had made me incautious enough to acknowledge that my father would be away from home for the whole night.

Shifty Dick and his companion looked at each other when I unwisely let out the truth, but made no remark, except to ask me if I would give them a drop of cider. I answered, sharply, that I had no cider in the house—having no fear of the consequences of refusing them drink, because I knew that plenty of men were at work within hail, in a neighbouring quarry. The two looked at each other again, when I denied having any cider to give them; and Jerry (as I am obliged to call him, knowing no other name by which to distinguish the

fellow) took off his cap to me once more, and, with a kind of blackguard gentility upon him, said they would have the pleasure of calling the next day, when my father was at home. I said good afternoon as ungraciously as possible: and, to my great relief, they both left the cottage immediately afterwards.

As soon as they were well away, I watched them from the door. They trudged off in the direction of Moor Farm; and, as it was beginning to get dusk, I soon lost sight of them.

Half an hour afterwards I looked out again.

The wind had lulled with the sunset, but the mist was rising, and a heavy rain was beginning to fall. Never did the lonely prospect of the moor look so dreary as it looked to my eyes that evening. Never did I regret any slight thing more sincerely than I then regretted the leaving of Mr Knifton's pocket-book in my charge. I cannot say that I suffered under any actual alarm, for I felt next to certain that neither Shifty Dick nor Jerry had got a chance of setting eyes on so small a thing as the pocket book, while they were in the kitchen: but there was a kind of vague distrust troubling me—a suspicion of the night—a dislike at being left by myself, which I never remember having experienced before. This feeling so increased, after I had closed the door and gone back to the kitchen, that, when I heard the voices of the quarrymen, as they passed our cottage on their way home to the village in the valley below Moor Farm, I stepped out into the passage with a momentary notion of telling them how I was situated, and asking them for advice and protection.

I had hardly formed this idea, however, before I dismissed it. None of the quarrymen were intimate friends of mine. I had a nodding acquaintance with them, and believed them to be honest men, as times went. But my own common sense told me that what little knowledge of their characters I had, was by no means sufficient to warrant me in admitting them into my confidence in the matter of the pocket-book. I had seen enough of poverty and poor men to know what a terrible temptation a large sum of money is to those whose whole lives are passed in scraping up sixpences by weary hard work. It is one thing to write fine sentiments in books about incorruptible honesty, and another thing to put those sentiments in practice, when one day's work is all that a man has to set up in the way of an obstacle between starvation and his own fire-side.

The only resource that remained was to carry the pocket-book with me to Moor Farm and ask permission to pass the night there. But I could not persuade myself that there was any real necessity for taking such a course as this; and, if the truth must be told, my pride revolted at the idea of presenting myself in the character of a coward before the

people at the farm. Timidity is thought rather a graceful attraction among ladies, but among poor women it is something to be laughed at. A woman with less spirit of her own than I had, and always shall have, would have considered twice in my situation before she made up her mind to encounter the jokes of ploughmen and the jeers of milkmaids. As for me, I had hardly considered about going to the farm before I despised myself for entertaining any such notion. 'No, no,' I thought, 'I am not the woman to walk a mile and a half through rain, and mist, and darkness, to tell a whole kitchenful of people that I am afraid. Come what may, here I stop till father gets back.'

Having arrived at that valiant resolution, the first thing I did was to lock and bolt the back and front doors, and see to the security of every shutter in the house.

That duty performed, I made a blazing fire, lighted my candle, and sat down to tea, as snug and comfortable as possible. I could hardly believe now, with the light in the room, and the sense of security inspired by the closed doors and shutters, that I had ever felt even the slightest apprehension earlier in the day. I sang as I washed up the tea-things: and even the cat seemed to catch the infection of my good spirits. I never knew the pretty creature more playful than she was that evening.

The tea-things put by, I took up my knitting, and worked away at it so long that I began at last to get drowsy. The fire was so bright and comforting that I could not muster resolution enough to leave it and go to bed. I sat staring lazily into the blaze, with my knitting on my lap—sat till the splashing of the rain outside, and the fitful, sullen sobbing of the wind, grew fainter and fainter on my ear. The last sounds I heard before I fairly dozed off to sleep were the cheerful crackling of the fire, and the steady purring of the cat, as she basked luxuriously in the warm light on the hearth. Those were the last sounds before I fell asleep.

The sound that woke me was a loud bang at the front door.

I started up, with my heart (as the saying is) in my mouth, with a frightful momentary shuddering at the roots of my hair—I started up, breathless and cold; waiting in the silence, I hardly knew for what; doubtful, at first, whether I had dreamed about the bang at the door, or whether the blow had really been struck on it.

In a minute or less there came a second bang, louder than the first. I ran into the passage.

'Who's there?'

'Let us in,' answered a voice, which I recognized immediately as the voice of Shifty Dick.

'Wait a bit, my dear, and let me explain,' said a second voice, in the

low, oily, jeering tones of Dick's companion—the wickedly clever little man whom he called Jerry. 'You are alone in the house, my pretty little dear. You may crack your sweet voice with screeching, and there's nobody near to hear you. Listen to reason, my love, and let us in. We don't want cider this time—we only want a very neat-looking pocket-book which you happen to have, and your late excellent mother's four silver teaspoons, which you keep so nice and clean on the chimney-piece. If you let us in, we won't hurt a hair of your head, my cherub, and we promise to go away the moment we have got what we want, unless you particularly wish us to stop to tea. If you keep us out, we shall be obliged to break into the house, and then——'

'And then,' burst in Shifty Dick, 'we'll *mash* you!'

'Yes,' said Jerry, 'we'll mash you, my beauty. But you won't drive us to doing that, will you? You will let us in?'

This long parley gave me time to recover from the effect which the first bang at the door had produced on my nerves. The threats of the two villains would have terrified some women out of their senses; but the only result produced on *me* was violent indignation. I had, thank God, a strong spirit of my own: and the cool, contemptuous insolence of the man Jerry effectually roused it.

'You cowardly villains!' I screamed at them through the door. 'You think you can frighten me because I am only a poor girl left alone in the house. You ragamuffin thieves, I defy you both! Our bolts are strong our shutters are thick. I am here to keep my father's house safe, and keep it I will against an army of you!'

You may imagine what a passion I was in when I vapoured and blustered in that way. I heard Jerry laugh, and Shifty Dick swear a whole mouthful of oaths. Then there was a dead silence for a minute or two; and then the two ruffians attacked the door.

I rushed into the kitchen and seized the poker, and then heaped wood on the fire, and lighted all the candles I could find: for I felt as though I could keep up my courage better if I had plenty of light. Strange and improbable as it may appear, the next thing that attracted my attention was my poor pussy, crouched up, panic-stricken, in a corner. I was so fond of the little creature that I took her up in my arms and carried her into my bedroom, and put her inside my bed. A comical thing to do in a situation of deadly peril, was it not? But it seemed quite natural and proper at the time.

All this while the blows were falling faster and faster on the door. They were dealt, as I conjectured, with heavy stones picked up from the ground outside. Jerry sang at his wicked work, and Shifty Dick swore. As I left the bedroom, after putting the cat under cover, I heard the lower panel of the door begin to crack.

I ran into the kitchen and huddled our four silver spoons into my pocket; then took the unlucky book with the bank-notes and put it into the bosom of my dress. I was determined to defend the property confided to my care with my life. Just as I had secured the pocket-book I heard the door splintering, and rushed into the passage again with my heavy kitchen poker lifted in both hands.

I was in time to see the bald head of Jerry, with the ugly-looking knobs on it, pushed into the passage through a great rent in one of the lower panels of the door.

‘Get out, you villain, or I’ll brain you on the spot!’ I screeched, threatening him with the poker.

Mr Jerry took his head out again much faster than he put it in.


The next thing that came through the rent was a long pitch-fork, which they darted at me from the outside, to move me from the door. I struck at it with all my might, and the blow must have jarred the hand of Shifty Dick up to his very shoulder, for I heard him give a roar of rage and pain. Before he could catch at the fork with his other hand, I had drawn it inside. By this time, even Jerry lost his temper, and swore more awfully than Dick himself.

Then there came another minute of respite. I suspected they had gone to get bigger stones, and I dreaded the giving way of the whole door.

Running into the bedroom as this fear beset me, I laid hold of my chest of drawers, dragged it into the passage, and threw it down against the door. On the top of that I heaped my father’s big tool chest, three chairs, and a scuttle-full of coals—and last, I dragged out the kitchen table and rammed it as hard as I could against the whole barricade. They heard me as they were coming up to the door with fresh stones. Jerry said, ‘Stop a bit’, and then the two consulted together in whispers. I listened eagerly, and just caught these words:

‘Let’s try it the other way.’

Nothing more was said, but I heard their footsteps retreating from the door.

Were they going to besiege the back-door now? 

I had hardly asked myself that question when I heard their voices at the other side of the house. The back-door was smaller than the front; but it had this advantage in the way of strength—it was made of two solid oak boards, joined long-wise, and strengthened inside by heavy cross-pieces. It had no bolts like the front door, but was fastened by a bar of iron, running across it in a slanting direction, and fitting at either end into the wall.

‘They must have the whole cottage down before they can break in at that door,’ I thought to myself. And they soon found out as much

for themselves. After five minutes of banging at the back door, they gave up any farther attack in that direction, and cast their heavy stones down with curses of fury awful to hear.

I went into the kitchen and dropped on the window seat to rest for a moment. Suspense and excitement together were beginning to tell upon me. The perspiration broke out thick on my forehead, and I began to feel the bruises I had inflicted on my hands in making the barricade against the front door. I had not lost a particle of my resolution, but I was beginning to lose strength. There was a bottle of rum in the cupboard, which my brother the sailor had left with us the last time he was ashore. I drank a drop of it. Never before or since have I put anything down by throat that did me half so much good as that precious mouthful of rum.

I was still sitting in the window seat drying my face, when I suddenly heard their voices close behind me.

They were feeling the outside of the window against which I was sitting. It was protected, like all the other windows in the cottage, by iron bars. I listened in dreadful suspense for the sound of filing, but nothing of the sort was audible. They had evidently reckoned on frightening me easily into letting them in, and had come unprovided with housebreaking tools of any kind. A fresh burst of oaths informed me that they had recognized the obstacle of the iron bars. I listened breathlessly for some warning of what they were going to do next, but their voices seemed to die away in the distance. They were retreating from the window. Were they also retreating from the house altogether? Had they given up the idea of effecting an entrance in despair?

A long silence followed—a silence which tried my courage even more severely than the tumult of their first attack on the cottage.

Dreadful suspicions now beset me of their being able to accomplish by treachery what they had failed to effect by force. Well as I knew the cottage, I began to doubt whether there might not be ways of cunningly and silently entering it against which I was not provided. The ticking of the clock annoyed me; the crackling of the fire startled me. I looked out twenty times in a minute into the dark corners of the passage, straining my eyes, holding my breath, anticipating the most unlikely events, the most impossible dangers. Had they really gone? or were they still prowling about the house? Oh, what a sum of money I would have given, only to have known what they were about in that interval of silence!

I was startled at last out of my suspense in the most awful manner.

A shout from one of them reached my ears on a sudden down the kitchen chimney. It was so unexpected and so horrible in the stillness,

that I screamed for the first time since the attack on the house. My worst forebodings had never suggested to me that the two villains might mount upon the roof.

‘Let us in, you she-devil!’ roared a voice down the chimney.

There was another pause. The smoke from the wood fire, thin and light as it was in the red state of the embers at that moment, had evidently obliged the man to take his face from the mouth of the chimney. I counted the seconds while he was, as I conjectured, getting his breath again. In less than half a minute there came another shout:

‘Let us in, or we’ll burn the place down over your head.’

Burn it? Burn what? There was nothing easily combustible but the thatch on the roof; and that had been well soaked by the heavy rain which had now fallen incessantly for more than six hours. Burn the place over my head? How?

While I was still casting about wildly in my mind to discover what possible danger there could be of fire, one of the heavy stones placed on the thatch to keep it from being torn up by high winds, came thundering down the chimney. It scattered the live embers on the hearth all over the room. A richly furnished place, with knickknacks and fine muslin about it, would have been set on fire immediately. Even our bare floor and rough furniture gave out a smell of burning at the first shower of embers which the first stone scattered.

For an instant I stood quite horror-struck before this new proof of the devilish ingenuity of the villains outside. But the dreadful danger I was now in recalled me to my senses immediately. There was a large canful of water in my bedroom, and I ran at once to fetch it. Before I could get back to the kitchen, a second stone had been thrown down the chimney, and the floor was smouldering in several places.

I had wit enough to let the smouldering go on for a moment or two more, and to pour the whole of my canful of water over the fire before the third stone came down the chimney. The live embers on the floor I easily disposed of after that. The man on the roof must have heard the hissing of the fire as I put it out, and have felt the change produced in the air at the mouth of the chimney; for after the third stone had descended, no more followed it. As for either of the ruffians themselves dropping down by the same road along which the stones had come, that was not to be dreaded. The chimney, as I well knew by our experience in cleaning it, was too narrow to give passage to anyone above the size of a small boy.

I looked upwards as that comforting reflection crossed my mind—I looked up, and saw, as plainly as I see the paper I am now writing on, the point of a knife coming through the inside of the roof, just over my head. Our cottage had no upper story, and our rooms had no

ceilings. Slowly and wickedly the knife wriggled its way through the dry inside thatch between the rafters. It stopped for a while, and there came a sound of tearing. That, in its turn, stopped too; there was a great fall of dry thatch on the floor; and I saw the heavy, hairy hand of Shifty Dick, armed with the knife, come through after the fallen fragments. He tapped at the rafters with the back of the knife, as if to test their strength. Thank God they were substantial and close together! Nothing lighter than a hatchet would have sufficed to remove any part of them.

The murderous hand was still tapping with the knife, when I heard a shout from the man Jerry, coming from the neighbourhood of my father's stone-shed in the back yard. The hand and knife disappeared instantly. I went to the back-door and put my ear to it and listened.

Both men were now in the shed. I made the most desperate efforts to call to mind what tools and other things were left in it, which might be used against me. But my agitation confused me. I could remember nothing except my father's big stone saw, which was far too heavy and unwieldy to be used on the roof of the cottage. I was still puzzling my brains and making my head swim to no purpose, when I heard the men dragging something out of the shed. At the same instance when the noise caught my ear, the remembrance flashed across me like lightning of some beams of wood which had lain in the shed for years past. I had hardly time to feel certain that they were removing one of these beams, before I heard Shifty Dick say to Jerry:

'Which door?'

'The front,' was the answer. 'We've cracked it already; we'll have it down in no time.'

Senses less sharpened by danger than mine would have understood but too easily, from these words, that they were about to use the beam as a battering-ram against the door. When that conviction overcame me, I lost courage at last. I felt that the door must come down. No such barricade as I had constructed could support it, for more than a few minutes, against such shocks as it was now to receive.

'I can do no more than keep the house against them,' I said to myself, with my knees knocking together, and the tears at last beginning to wet my cheeks. 'I must trust to the night and the thick darkness, and save my life by running for it, while there is yet time.'

I huddled on my cloak and hood, and had my hand on the bar of the back-door, when a piteous mew from the bedroom reminded me of the existence of poor pussy. I ran in, and huddled the creature up in my apron. Before I was out in the passage again, the first shock from the beam fell on the door.

The upper hinge gave way. The chairs and the coal-shuttle forming

the top of my barricade were hurled, rattling, on to the floor; but the lower hinge of the door, and the chest of drawers and tool-chest, still kept their places.

‘One more,’ I heard the villains cry—‘one more run with the beam, and down it comes!’

Just as they must have been starting for that ‘one more run,’ I opened the back-door and fled out into the night, with the bank-notes in my bosom, the silver spoons in my pocket, and the cat in my arms. I threaded my way easily enough through the familiar obstacles in the back yard, and was out in the pitch darkness of the moor, before I heard the second shock, and the crash which told me that the whole door had given way.

In a few minutes they must have discovered the fact of my flight with the pocket-book, for I heard shouts in the distance as if they were running out to pursue me. I kept on at the top of my speed, and the noise soon died away. It was so dark, that twenty thieves, instead of two, would have found it useless to follow me.

How long it was before I reached the farmhouse—the nearest place to which I could fly for refuge—I cannot tell you. I remember that I had just sense enough to keep the wind at my back (having observed in the beginning of the evening that it blew toward Moor Farm), and to go on resolutely through the darkness. In all other respects, I was by this time half crazed by what I had gone through. If it had so happened that the wind had changed after I had observed its direction early in the evening, I should have gone astray, and have probably perished of fatigue and exposure on the moor. Providentially, it still blew steadily, as it had blown for hours past, and I reached the farmhouse with my clothes wet through, and my brain in a high fever. When I made my alarm at the door, they had all gone to bed but the farmer’s eldest son, who was sitting up late over his pipe and newspaper. I just mustered strength enough to gasp out a few words, telling him what was the matter, and then fell down at his feet, for the first time in my life in a dead swoon.

That swoon was followed by a severe illness. When I got strong enough to look about me again, I found myself in one of the farmhouse beds—my father, Mrs Knifton, and the doctor, were all in the room—my cat was asleep at my feet, and the pocket-book that I had saved lay on the table by my side.

There was plenty of news for me to hear, as soon as I was fit to listen to it. Shifty Dick and the other rascal had been caught, and were in prison, waiting their trial at the next assizes. Mr and Mrs Knifton had been so shocked at the danger I had run—for which they blamed their own want of thoughtfulness in leaving the pocket-book in my care—

that they had insisted on my father's removing from our lonely home to a cottage on their land, which we were to inhabit rent free. The bank-notes that I had saved were given to me to buy furniture with, in place of the things that the thieves had broken. These pleasant tidings assisted so greatly in promoting my recovery, that I was soon able to relate to my friends at the farmhouse the particulars that I have written here. They were all surprised and interested; but no one, as I thought, listened to me with such breathless attention as the farmer's eldest son. Mrs Knifton noticed this, too, and began to make jokes about it, in her lighthearted way, as soon as we were alone. I thought little of her jesting at the time; but when I got well, and we went to live at our new home, 'the young farmer,' as he was called in our parts, constantly came to see us, and constantly managed to meet me out of doors. I had my share of vanity, like other young women, and I began to think of Mrs Knifton's jokes with some attention. To be brief, the young farmer managed one Sunday—I never could tell how—to lose his way with me in returning from church, and before we found out the right road home again, he had asked me to be his wife.

His relations did all they could to keep us asunder, and break off the match, thinking a poor stonemason's daughter no fit wife for a prosperous yeoman. But the farmer was too obstinate for them. He had one form of answer to all their objections. 'A man, if he is worth the name, marries according to his own notions, and to please himself,' he used to say. 'My notion is, that when I take a wife I am placing my character and my happiness—the most precious things I have to trust—in one woman's care. The woman I mean to marry had a small charge confided to her care, and showed herself worthy of it at the risk of her life. That is proof enough for me she is worthy of the greatest charge I can put into her hands. Rank and riches are fine things, but the certainty of getting a good wife is something better still. I'm of age, I know my own mind, and I mean to marry the stonemason's daughter.'

And he did marry me. Whether I proved myself worthy or not of his good opinion is a question which I must leave you to ask my husband. All that I had to relate about myself and my doings is now told. Whatever interest my perilous adventure may excite, ends, I am well aware, with my escape to the farmhouse. I have only ventured on writing these few additional sentences, because my marriage is the moral of my story. It has brought me the choicest blessings of happiness and prosperity; and I owe them all to my night adventure in *The Black Cottage*.

6

The Dead Hand

When this present nineteenth century was younger by a good many years than it is now, a certain friend of mine, named Arthur Holliday happened to arrive in the town of Doncaster, exactly in the middle of the race-week, or, in other words, in the middle of the month of September. He was one of those reckless, rattlepated, open-hearted, and open-mouthed young gentlemen, who possess the gift of familiarity in its highest perfection, and who scramble carelessly along the journey of life making friends, as the phrase is, wherever they go. His father was a rich manufacturer, and had bought landed property enough in one of the midland counties to make all the born squires in his neighbourhood thoroughly envious of him. Arthur was his only son, possessor in prospect of the great estate and the great business after his father's death; well supplied with money, and not too rigidly looked after, during his father's lifetime. Report, or scandal, whichever you please, said that the old gentleman had been rather wild in his youthful days, and that, unlike most parents, he was not disposed to be violently indignant when he found that his son took after him. This may be true or not. I myself only knew the elder Mr Holliday when he was getting on in years; and then he was as quiet and as respectable a gentleman as ever I met with.

Well, one September, as I told you, young Arthur comes to Doncaster, having decided all of a sudden, in his hare-brained way, that he would go to the races. He did not reach the town till towards the close of the evening, and he went at once to see about his dinner and bed at the principal hotel. Dinner they were ready enough to give him; but as for a bed, they laughed when he mentioned it. In the race-week at Doncaster, it is no uncommon thing for visitors, who have not bespoken accommodation, to sleep in the same room with a total stranger; this did not present an attractive prospect to him. He felt more than half-inclined to drop his five shillings into his pocket, and go out into the street once more.

'Is it yes, or no?' asked the landlord. 'Settle it as quick as you can, because there's lots of people wanting a bed at Doncaster tonight, besides you.'

Arthur looked towards the court, and heard the rain falling heavily in the street outside. He thought he would ask a question or two before he rashly decided on leaving the shelter of The Two Robins.

'What sort of a man is it who has got the other bed?' he inquired. 'Is he a gentleman? I mean, is he a quiet, well-behaved person?'

'The quietest man I ever came across,' said the landlord, rubbing his hands stealthily one over the other. 'As sober as a judge, and as regular as clockwork in his habits. It hasn't struck nine, not ten minutes ago, and he's in his bed already. I don't know whether that comes up to your notion of a quiet man: it goes a long way ahead of mine, I can tell you.'

'Is he asleep, do you think?' asked Arthur.

'I know he's asleep,' returned the landlord. 'And what's more, he's gone off so fast, that I'll warrant you don't wake him. This way, sir,' said the landlord, speaking over young Holliday's shoulder, as if he was addressing some new guest who was approaching the house.

'Here you are,' said Arthur, determined to be beforehand with the stranger whoever he might be. 'I'll take the bed.' And he handed the five shillings to the landlord, who nodded, dropped the money carelessly into his waistcoat-pocket, and lighted a candle.

'Come up and see the room,' said the host of The Two Robins, leading the way to the staircase quite briskly, considering how fat he was.

They mounted to the second-floor of the house. The landlord half opened a door fronting the landing, then stopped, and turned round to Arthur.

'It's a fair bargain, mind, on my side as well as on yours,' he said. 'You give me five shillings, I give you in return a clean, comfortable bed; and I warrant, beforehand, that you won't be interfered with, or annoyed in any way, by the man who sleeps in the same room with you.' Saying those words, he looked hard, for a moment, in young Holliday's face, and then led the way into the room.

It was larger and cleaner than Arthur had expected it would be. The two beds stood parallel with each other—a space of about six feet intervening between them. They were both of the same medium size, and both had the same plain white curtains, made to draw, if necessary, all round them. The occupied bed was the bed nearest the window. The curtains were all drawn round this, except the half curtain at the bottom, on the side of the bed farthest from the window. Arthur saw the feet of the sleeping man raising the scanty clothes into a sharp little

eminence, as if he was lying flat on his back. He took the candle, and advanced softly to draw the curtain—stopped half way, and listened for a moment—then turned to the landlord.

‘He is a very quiet sleeper,’ said Arthur.

‘Yes,’ said the landlord, ‘very quiet.’

Young Holliday advanced with the candle, and looked in at the man cautiously.

‘How pale he is!’ said Arthur.

‘Yes,’ returned the landlord, ‘pale enough, isn’t he?’

Arthur looked closer at the man. The bed-clothes were drawn up to his chin, and they lay perfectly still over the region of his chest. Surprised and vaguely startled, as he noticed this, Arthur stooped down closer over the stranger; looked at his ashy, parted lips; listened breathlessly for an instant; looked again at the strangely still face, and the motionless lips and chest; and turned round suddenly on the landlord, with his own cheeks as pale for the moment as the hollow cheeks of the man on the bed.

‘Come here,’ he whispered, under his breath. ‘Come here, for God’s sake! The man’s not asleep—he is dead!’

‘You have found that out sooner than I thought you would,’ said the landlord. ‘Yes, he’s dead, sure enough. He died at five o’clock today.’

‘How did he die? Who is he?’ asked Arthur, staggered, for the moment, by the audacious coolness of the answer.

‘As to who is he,’ rejoined the landlord, ‘I know no more about him than you do. There are his books and letters and things, all sealed up in that brown paper parcel, for the Coroner’s inquest to open tomorrow or the next day. He’s been here a week, paying his way fairly enough, and stopping indoors, for the most part, as if he was ailing. My girl brought him up his tea at five today; and as he was pouring of it out, he fell down in a faint, or a fit, or a compound of both, for anything I know. We could not bring him to—and I said he was dead. And the doctor couldn’t bring him to—and the doctor said he was dead. And there he is. And the Coroner’s inquest’s coming as soon as it can. And that’s as much as I know about it.’

Arthur held the candle close to the man’s lips. The flame still burnt straight up, as steadily as ever. There was a moment of silence; and the rain pattered drearily through it against the panes of the window.

‘If you haven’t got nothing more to say to me,’ continued the landlord, ‘I suppose I may go. You don’t expect your five shillings back do you? There’s the bed I promised you, clean and comfortable. There’s the man I warranted not to disturb you, quiet in this world for ever. If you’re frightened to stop alone with him, that’s not my look out. I’ve kept my part of the bargain, and I mean to keep the money.’

I'm not Yorkshire, myself, young gentleman; but I've lived long enough in these parts to have my wits sharpened; and I shouldn't wonder if you found out the way to brighten up yours, next time you come among us.' With these words, the landlord turned towards the door, and laughed to himself softly in high satisfaction at his own sharpness.

Startled and shocked as he was, Arthur had by this time sufficiently recovered himself to feel indignant at the trick that had been played on him, and at the insolent manner in which the landlord exulted in it.

'Don't laugh,' he said sharply, 'till you are quite sure you have got the laugh against me. You shan't have the five shillings for nothing, my man. I'll keep the bed.'

'Will you?' said the landlord. 'Then I wish you a good night's rest.' With that brief farewell, he went out, and shut the door after him.

A good night's rest! The words had hardly been spoken, the door had hardly been closed, before Arthur half-repent-ed the hasty words that had just escaped him. Though not naturally over-sensitive, and not wanting in courage of the moral as well as the physical sort, the presence of the dead man had an instantaneously chilling effect on his mind when he found himself alone in the room—alone, and bound by his own rash words to stay there till the next morning. An older man would have thought nothing of those words, and would have acted, without reference to them, as his calmer sense suggested. But Arthur was too young to treat the ridicule, even of his inferiors, with contempt—too young not to fear the momentary humiliation of falsifying his own foolish boast, more than he feared the trial of watching out the long night in the same chamber with the dead.

'It is but a few hours,' he thought to himself, 'and I can get away the first thing in the morning.'

He was looking towards the occupied bed as that idea passed through his mind, and the sharp angular eminence made in the clothes by the dead man's upturned feet again caught his eye. He advanced and drew the curtains, purposely abstaining, as he did so, from looking at the face of the corpse, lest he might unnerve himself at the outset by fastening some ghastly impression of it on his mind. He drew the curtain very gently, and sighed involuntarily as he closed it. 'Poor fellow,' he said, almost as sadly as if he had known the man. 'Ah, poor fellow!'

He went next to the window. The night was black, and he could see nothing from it. The rain still pattered heavily against the glass. He inferred, from hearing it, that the window was at the back of the house; remembering that the front was sheltered from the weather by the court and the buildings over it.

While he was still standing at the window—for even the dreary rain was a relief, because of the sound it made; a relief, also, because it moved, and had some faint suggestion, in consequence, of life and companionship in it—while he was standing at the window, and looking vacantly into the black darkness outside, he heard a distant church clock strike ten. Only ten! How was he to pass the time till the house was astir the next morning?

Under any other circumstances, he would have gone down to the public-house parlour, would have called for his grog, and would have laughed and talked with the company assembled as familiarly as if he had known them all his life. But the very thought of whiling away the time in this manner was now distasteful to him. The new situation in which he was placed seemed to have altered him to himself already. Thus far, his life had been the common, trifling, prosaic, surface-life of a prosperous young man, with no troubles to conquer, and no trials to face. He had lost no relation whom he loved, no friend whom he treasured. Till this night, what share he had of the immortal inheritance that is divided amongst us all, had lain dormant within him. Till this night, Death and he had not once met, even in thought.

He took a few turns up and down the room—then stopped. The noise made by his boots on the poorly carpeted floor, jarred on his ear. He hesitated a little, and ended by taking the boots off, and walking backwards and forwards noiselessly. All desire to sleep or to rest had left him. The bare thought of lying down on the unoccupied bed instantly drew the picture on his mind of a dreadful mimicry of the position of the dead man. Who was he? What was the story of his past life? Poor he must have been, or he would not have stopped at such a place as The Two Robins Inn—and weakened, probably, by long illness, or he could hardly have died in the manner which the landlord had described. Poor, ill, lonely—dead in a strange place; dead, with nobody but a stranger to pity him. A sad story: truly, on the mere face of it, a very sad story.

While these thoughts were passing through his mind, he had stopped insensibly at the window, close to which stood the foot of the bed with the closed curtains. At first he looked at it absently; then he became conscious that his eyes were fixed on it; and then, a perverse desire took possession of him to do the very thing which he had resolved not to do, up to this time—to look at the dead man.

He stretched out his hand towards the curtains; but checked himself in the very act of undrawing them, turned his back sharply on the bed, and walked towards the chimney-piece, to see what things were placed on it, and to try if he could keep the dead man out of his mind in that way.

There was a pewter inkstand on the chimney-piece, with some mildewed remains of ink in the bottle. There were two coarse china ornaments of the commonest kind; and there was a square of embossed card, dirty and fly-blown, with a collection of wretched riddles printed on it, in all sorts of zig-zag directions, and in variously coloured inks. He took the card, and went away, to read it, to the table on which the candle was placed; sitting down, with his back resolutely turned to the curtained bed.

He read the first riddle, the second, the third, all in one corner of the card—then turned it round impatiently to look at another. Before he could begin reading the riddles printed here the sound of the church clock stopped him. Eleven. He had got through an hour of the time, in the room with the dead man.

Once more he looked at the card. It was not easy to make out the letters printed on it, in consequence of the dimness of the light which the landlord had left him—a common tallow candle, furnished with a pair of heavy old-fashioned steel snuffers. Up to this time, his mind had been too much occupied to think of the light. He had left the wick of the candle unsnuffed, till it had risen higher than the flame, and had burnt into an odd pent-house shape at the top, from which morsels of the charred cotton fell off, from time to time, in little flakes. He took up the snuffers now, and trimmed the wick. The light brightened directly, and the room became less dismal.

Again he turned to the riddles; reading them doggedly and resolutely, now in one corner of the card, now in another. All his efforts, however, could not fix his attention on them. He pursued his occupation mechanically, deriving no sort of impression from what he was reading. It was as if a shadow from the curtained bed had got between his mind and the gaily printed letters—a shadow that nothing could dispel. At last, he gave up the struggle, and threw the card from him impatiently, and took to walking softly up and down the room again.

The dead man, the dead man, the *hidden* dead man on the bed! There was the one persistent idea still haunting him. Hidden! Was it only the body being there, or was it the body being there, concealed, that was preying on his mind? He stopped at the window, with that doubt in him; once more listening to the pattering rain, once more looking out into the black darkness.

Still the dead man! The darkness forced his mind back upon itself, and set his memory at work, reviving, with a painfully-vivid distinctness the momentary impression it had received from his first sight of the corpse. Before long the face seemed to be hovering out in the middle of the darkness, confronting him through the window,

with the paleness whiter, with the dreadful dull line of light between the imperfectly-closed eyelids broader than he had seen it—with the parted lips slowly dropping farther and farther away from each other—with the features growing larger and moving closer, till they seemed to fill the window and to silence the rain, and to shut out the night.

The sound of a voice, shouting below stairs, woke him suddenly from the dream of his own distempered fancy. He recognized it as the voice of the landlord. 'Shut up at twelve, Ben,' he heard it say. 'I'm off to bed.'

He wiped away the damp that had gathered on his forehead, reasoned with himself for a little while, and resolved to shake his mind free of the ghastly counterfeit which still clung to it, by forcing himself to confront, if it was only for a moment, the solemn reality. Without allowing himself an instant to hesitate, he parted the curtains at the foot of the bed, and looked through.

There was the sad, peaceful, white face, with the awful mystery of stiffness on it, laid back upon the pillow. No stir, no change there! He only looked at it for a moment before he closed the curtains again—but that moment steadied him, calmed him, restored him—mind and body—to himself.

He returned to his old occupation of walking up and down the room; persevering in it, this time, till the clock struck again. Twelve.

As the sound of the clock-bell died away, it was succeeded by the confused noise, downstairs, of the drinkers in the tap-room leaving the house. The next sound, after an interval of silence, was caused by the barring of the door, and the closing of the shutters, at the back of the inn. Then the silence followed again, and was disturbed no more.

He was alone now—absolutely, utterly, alone with the dead man, till the next morning.

The wick of the candle wanted trimming again. He took up the snuffers—but paused suddenly on the very point of using them, and looked attentively at the candle—then back, over his shoulder, at the curtained bed—then again at the candle. It had been lighted, for the first time, to show him the way upstairs, and three parts of it, at least, were already consumed. In another hour it would be burnt out. In another hour—unless he called at once to the man who had shut up the inn, for a fresh candle—he would be left in the dark.

Strongly as his mind had been affected since he had entered the room, his unreasonable dread of encountering ridicule, and of exposing his courage to suspicion, had not altogether lost its influence over him, even yet. He lingered irresolutely by the table, waiting till he could prevail on himself to open the door, and call, from the

landing, to the man who had shut up the inn. In his present hesitating frame of mind, it was a kind of relief to gain a few moments only by engaging in the trifling occupation of snuffing the candle. His hand trembled a little, and the snuffers were heavy and awkward to use. When he closed them on the wick, he closed them a hair's breadth too low. In an instant the candle was out, and the room was plunged in pitch darkness.

The one impression which the absence of light immediately produced on his mind, was distrust of the curtained bed—distrust which shaped itself into no distinct idea, but which was powerful enough, in its very vagueness, to bind him down to his chair, to make his heart beat fast, and to set him listening intently. No sound stirred in the room but the familiar sound of the rain against the window, louder and sharper now than he had heard it yet.

Still the vague distrust, the inexpressible dread possessed him, and kept him in his chair. He had put his carpet-bag on the table when he first entered the room; and he now took the key from his pocket, reached out his hand softly, opened the bag, and groped in it for his travelling writing-case, in which he knew that there was a small store of matches. When he had got one of the matches, he waited before he struck it on the coarse wooden table, and listened intently again, without knowing why. Still there was no sound in the room but the steady, ceaseless, rattling sound of the rain.

He lighted the candle again, without another moment of delay; and, on the instant of its burning up, the first object in the room that his eyes sought for was the curtained bed.

Just before the light had been put out, he had looked in that direction, and had seen no change, no disarrangement of any sort, in the bed folds of the closely-drawn curtains.

When he looked at the bed, now, he saw hanging over the side of it, a long white hand.

It lay perfectly motionless, midway on the side of the bed, where the curtain at the head and the curtain at the foot met. Nothing more was visible. The clinging curtains hid everything but the long white hand.

He stood looking at it unable to stir, unable to call out; feeling nothing, knowing nothing; every faculty he possessed gathered up and lost in the one seeing faculty. How long that first panic held him he never could tell afterwards. It might have been only for a moment; it might have been for many minutes together. How he got to the bed—whether he ran to it headlong, or whether he approached it slowly—how he wrought himself up to unclothe the curtains and look in, he never has remembered, and never will remember to his dying

day. It is enough that he did go to the bed, and that he did look inside the curtains.

The man had moved. One of his arms was outside the clothes; his face was turned a little on the pillow; his eyelids were wide open. Changed as to position, and as to one of the features, the face was otherwise, fearfully and wonderfully unaltered. The dead paleness and the dead quiet were on it still.

One glance showed Arthur this—one glance, before he flew breathlessly to the door, and alarmed the house.

The man whom the landlord called 'Ben,' was the first to appear on the stairs. In three words, Arthur told him what had happened, and sent him for the nearest doctor.

I, who tell you this story, was then staying with a medical friend of mine, in practice at Doncaster, taking care of his patients for him, during his absence in London; and I, for the time being, was the nearest doctor. They had sent for me from the inn, when the stranger was taken ill in the afternoon; but I was not at home, and medical assistance was sought for elsewhere. When the man from The Two Robins rang the night-bell, I was just thinking of going to bed. Naturally enough, I did not believe a word of his story about 'a dead man who had come to life again.' However, I put on my hat, armed myself with one or two bottles of restorative medicine, and ran to the inn, expecting to find nothing more remarkable, when I got there, than a patient in a fit.

My surprise at finding that the man had spoken the literal truth was almost, if not quite, equalled by my astonishment at finding myself face to face with Arthur Holliday as soon as I entered the bedroom. It was no time then for giving or seeking explanations. We just shook hands amazedly; and then I ordered everybody but Arthur out of the room, and hurried to the man on the bed.

The kitchen fire had not been long out. There was plenty of hot water in the boiler and plenty of flannel to be had. With these, with my medicines, and with such help as Arthur could render under my direction I dragged the man, literally, out of the jaws of death. In less than an hour from the time when I had been called in, he was alive and talking in the bed on which he had been laid out to wait for the Coroner's inquest.

You will naturally ask me, what had been the matter with him; and I might treat you in reply, to a long theory, plentifully sprinkled with, what the children call, hard words. I prefer telling you that, in this case, cause and effect could not be satisfactorily joined together by any theory whatever. There are mysteries in life, and the conditions of it, which human science has not fathomed yet; and I candidly confess to

you, that, in bringing that man back to existence, I was, morally speaking, groping haphazard in the dark. I know (from the testimony of the doctor who attended him in the afternoon) that the vital machinery, so far as its action is appreciable by our senses, had, in this case, unquestionably stopped; and I am equally certain (seeing that I recovered him) that the vital principle was not extinct. When I add, that he had suffered from a long and complicated illness, and that his whole nervous system was utterly deranged, I have told you all I really know of the physical conditions of my dead-alive patient at The Two Robins Inn.

When he 'came to', as the phrase goes, he was a startling object to look at, with his colourless face, his sunken cheeks, his wild black eyes, and his long black hair. The first question he asked me about himself, when he could speak, made me suspect that I had been called in to a man in my own profession. I mentioned to him my surmise; and he told me that I was right.

He said he had come last from Paris, where he had been attached to a hospital. That he had lately returned to England, on his way to Edinburgh, to continue his studies; that he had been taken ill on the journey and that he had stopped to rest and recover himself at Doncaster. He did not add a word about his name, or who he was: and, of course, I did not question him on the subject. All I inquired, when he ceased speaking, was what branch of the profession he intended to follow.

'Any branch,' he said bitterly, 'which will put bread into the mouth of a poor man.'

At this, Arthur, who had been hitherto watching him in silent curiosity, burst out impetuously in his usual good-humoured way:

'My dear fellow!' (everybody was 'my dear fellow' with Arthur) 'now you have come to life again, don't begin by being downhearted about your prospects. I'll answer for it, I can help you to some capital thing in the medical line—or, if I can't, I know my father can.'

The medical student looked at him steadily.

'Thank you,' he said coldly. Then added, 'May I ask who your father is?'

'He's well enough known all about this part of the country,' replied Arthur. 'He is a great manufacturer, and his name is Holliday.'

My hand was on the man's wrist during this brief conversation. The instant the name of Holliday was pronounced I felt the pulse under my fingers flutter, stop, go on suddenly with a bound, and beat afterwards, for a minute or two, at the fever rate.

'How did you come here?' asked the stranger, quickly, excitably, passionately almost.

Arthur related briefly what had happened from the time of his first taking the bed at the inn.

'I am indebted to Mr Holliday's son then for the help that has saved my life,' said the medical student, speaking to himself, with a singular sarcasm in his voice. 'Come here!'

He held out, as he spoke, his long, white, bony right hand.

'With all my heart,' said Arthur, taking the hand cordially. 'I may confess it now,' he continued, laughing, 'Upon my honour, you almost frightened me out of my wits.'

The stranger did not seem to listen. His wild black eyes were fixed with a look of eager interest on Arthur's face, and his long bony fingers kept tight hold of Arthur's hand. Young Holliday, on his side, returned the gaze, amazed and puzzled by the medical student's odd language and manners. The two faces were close together; I looked at them; and, to my amazement, I was suddenly impressed by the sense of a likeness between them—not in features, or complexion, but solely in expression. It must have been a strong likeness, or I should certainly not have found it out, for I am naturally slow at detecting resemblances between faces.

'You have saved my life,' said the strange man, still looking hard in Arthur's face, still holding tightly by his hand. 'If you had been my own brother, you could not have done more for me than that.'

He laid a singularly strong emphasis on those three words 'my own brother,' and a change passed over his face as he pronounced them—a change that no language of mine is competent to describe.

'I hope I have not done being of service to you yet,' said Arthur. 'I'll speak to my father as soon as I get home.'

'You seem to be fond and proud of your father,' said the medical student. 'I suppose, in return, he is fond and proud of you?'

'Of course, he is!' answered Arthur, laughing. 'Is there anything wonderful in that? Isn't *your* father fond——'

The stranger suddenly dropped young Holliday's hand, and turned his face away.

'I beg your pardon,' said Arthur. 'I hope I have not unintentionally pained you. I hope you have not lost your father?'

'I can't well lose what I have never had,' retorted the medical student, with a harsh mocking laugh.

'What you have never had!'

The strange man suddenly caught Arthur's hand again, suddenly looked once more hard in his face.

'Yes,' he said, with a repetition of the bitter laugh. 'You have brought a poor devil back into the world, who has no business there. Do I astonish you? Well! I have a fancy of my own for telling you what men

in my situation generally keep a secret. I have no name and no father. The merciful law of Society tells me I am Nobody's Son! Ask your father if he will be my father too, and help me on in life with the family name.'

Arthur looked at me, more puzzled than ever. I signed to him to say nothing, and then laid my fingers again on the man's wrist. No! In spite of the extraordinary speech that he had just made, he was not, as I had been disposed to suspect, beginning to get light-headed. His pulse, by this time, had fallen back to a quiet, slow beat, and his skin was moist and cool. Not a symptom of fever or agitation about him.

Finding that neither of us answered him, he turned to me, and began talking of the extraordinary nature of his case, and asking my advice about the future course of medical treatment to which he ought to subject himself. I said the matter required careful thinking over, and suggested that I should submit certain prescriptions to him the next morning. He told me to write them at once, as he would, most likely, be leaving Doncaster, in the morning, before I was up. It was quite useless to represent to him the folly and danger of such a proceeding as this. He heard me politely and patiently, but held to his resolution, without offering any reasons or any explanations, and repeated to me, that if I wished to give him a chance of seeing my prescription, I must write it at once. Hearing this, Arthur volunteered the loan of a travelling writing-case, which, he said, he had with him; and, bringing it to the bed, shook the notepaper out of the pocket of the case forthwith in his usual careless way. With the paper, there fell out on the counterpane of the bed a small packet of sticking-plaster, and a little water-colour drawing of a landscape.

The medical student took up the drawing and looked at it. His eye fell on some initials neatly written, in cypher, in one corner. He started, and trembled; his pale face grew whiter than ever; his wild black eyes turned on Arthur, and looked through and through him.

'A pretty drawing,' he said, in a remarkably quiet tone of voice.

'Ah! and done by such a pretty girl,' said Arthur. 'Oh, such a pretty girl! I wish it was not a landscape—I wish it was a portrait of her!'

'You admire her very much!'

Arthur, half in jest, half in earnest, kissed his hand for answer.

'Love at first sight!' he said, putting the drawing away again. 'But the course of it doesn't run smooth. It's the old story. She's monopolized as usual. Trammelled by a rash engagement to some poor man who is never likely to get money enough to marry her. It was lucky I heard of it in time, or I should certainly have risked a declaration when she gave me that drawing. Here, doctor! Here is pen, ink, and paper all ready for you.'

‘When she gave you that drawing? Gave it. Gave it.’ He repeated the words slowly to himself, and suddenly closed his eyes. A momentary distortion passed across his face, and I saw one of his hands clutch up the bed-clothes and squeeze them hard. I thought he was going to be ill again, and begged that there might be no more talking. He opened his eyes when I spoke, fixed them once more searchingly on Arthur, and said, slowly and distinctly, ‘You like her, and she likes you. The poor man may die out of your way. Who can tell that she may not give you herself as well as her drawing, after all?’

Before young Holliday could answer, he turned to me, and said in a whisper, ‘Now for the prescription.’ From that time, though he spoke to Arthur again, he never looked at him more.

When I had written the prescription, he examined it, approved of it, and then astonished us both by abruptly wishing us good night. I offered to sit up with him, and he shook his head. Arthur offered to sit up with him, and he said, shortly, with his face turned away, ‘No.’ I insisted on having somebody left to watch him. He gave way when he found I was determined, and said he would accept the services of the waiter at the inn.

‘Thank you, both,’ he said, as we rose to go. ‘I have one last favour to ask—not of you, doctor, for I leave you to exercise your professional discretion—but of Mr Holliday.’ His eyes, while he spoke, still rested steadily on me, and never once turned towards Arthur. ‘I beg that Mr Holliday will not mention to anyone—least of all to his father—the events that have occurred, and the words that have passed, in this room. I entreat him to bury me in his memory, as, but for him, I might have been buried in my grave. I cannot give my reasons for making this strange request. I can only implore him to grant it.’

His voice faltered for the first time, and he hid his face on the pillow. Arthur, completely bewildered, gave the required pledge. I took young Holliday away with me, immediately afterwards, to the house of my friend; determining to go back to the inn, and to see the medical student again before he had left in the morning.

I returned to the inn at eight o’clock, purposely abstaining from waking Arthur, who was sleeping off the past night’s excitement on one of my friend’s sofas. A suspicion had occurred to me, as soon as I was alone in my bedroom, which made me resolve that Holliday and the stranger whose life he had saved should not meet again, if I could prevent it. I have already alluded to certain reports, or scandals, which I knew of, relating to the early life of Arthur’s father. While I was thinking, in my bed, of what had passed at the inn—of the change in the student’s pulse when he heard of the name Holliday; of the

resemblance of expression that I had discovered between his face and Arthur's; of the emphasis he had laid on those three words, 'my own brother'; and of his incomprehensible acknowledgment of his own illegitimacy—while I was thinking of these things, the reports I have mentioned suddenly flew into my mind, and linked themselves fast to the chain of my previous reflections. Something within me whispered, 'It is best that those two young men should not meet again.' I felt it before I slept; I felt it when I woke; and I went, as I told you, alone to the inn the next morning.

I had missed my only opportunity of seeing my nameless patient again. He had been gone nearly an hour when I inquired for him.

I have now told you everything that I know for certain, in relation to the man whom I brought back to life in the double-bedded room of the inn at Doncaster. What I have next to add is matter for inference and surmise, and is not, strictly speaking, matter of fact.

I have to tell you, first, that the medical student turned out to be strangely and unaccountably right in assuming it as more than probable that Arthur Holliday would marry the young lady who had given him the water-colour drawing of the landscape. That marriage took place a little more than a year after the events occurred which I have just been relating. The young couple came to live in the neighbourhood in which I was then established in practice. I was present at the wedding, and was rather surprised to find that Arthur was singularly reserved with me, both before and after his marriage, on the subject of the young lady's prior engagement. He only referred to it once, when we were alone, merely telling me, on that occasion, that his wife had done all that honour and duty required of her in the matter, and that the engagement had been broken off with the full approval of her parents. I never heard more from him than this. For three years he and his wife lived together happily. At the expiration of that time, the symptoms of a serious illness first declared themselves in Mrs Arthur Holliday. It turned out to be a long, lingering, hopeless malady. I attended her throughout. We had been great friends when she was well and we became more attached to each other than ever when she was ill. I had many long and interesting conversations with her in the intervals when she suffered least. The result of one of those conversations I may briefly relate, leaving you to draw any inferences from it that you please.

The interview to which I refer, occurred shortly before her death. I called one evening, as usual, and found her alone, with a look in her eyes which told me that she had been crying. She only informed me at first, that she had been depressed in spirits; but, by little and little,

she became more communicative, and confessed to me that she had been looking over some old letters, which had been addressed to her, before she had seen Arthur, by a man to whom she had been engaged to be married. I asked her how the engagement came to be broken off. She replied that it had not been broken off, but that it had died out in a very mysterious way. The person to whom she was engaged—her first love, she called him—was very poor, and there was no immediate prospect of their being married. He followed my profession, and went abroad to study. They had corresponded regularly, until the time when, as she believed, he had returned to England. From that period she heard no more of him. He was of a fretful, sensitive temperament; and she feared that she might have inadvertently done or said something that offended him. However that might be, he had never written to her again; and, after waiting a year, she had married Arthur. I asked when the first estrangement had begun, and found that the time at which she ceased to hear anything of her first lover exactly corresponded with the time at which I had been called in to my mysterious patient at the The Two Robins Inn.

A fortnight after that conversation, she died. In course of time, Arthur married again. Of late years, he has lived principally in London, and I have seen little or nothing of him.

I have many years to pass over before I can approach to anything like a conclusion of this fragmentary narrative. And even when that later period is reached, the little that I have to say will not occupy your attention for more than a few minutes. Between six and seven years ago, the gentleman to whom I introduced you in this room, came to me, with good professional recommendations, to fill the position of my assistant. We met, not like strangers, but like friends—the only difference between us being, that I was very much surprised to see him, and that he did not appear to be at all surprised to see me. If he was my son, or my brother I believe he could not be fonder of me than he is; but he has never volunteered any confidences since he has been here, on the subject of his past life. I saw something that was familiar to me in his face when we first met; and yet it was also something that suggested the idea of change. I had a notion once that my patient at the inn might be a natural son of Mr Holliday's; I had another idea that he might also have been the man who was engaged to Arthur's first wife; and I have a third idea, still clinging to me, that Mr Lorn is the only man in England who could really enlighten me, if he chose, on both those doubtful points. His hair is not black, now, and his eyes are dimmer than the piercing eyes that I remember, but, for all that, he is very like the nameless medical student of my young days—very like him. And, sometimes, when I come home late at night, and find him

asleep, and wake him, he looks, in coming to, wonderfully like the stranger at Doncaster, as he raised himself in the bed on that memorable night!

7

The Ghost in the Cupboard Room

Mr Beaver, on being 'spoke' (as his friend and ally, Jack Governor, called it), turned out of an imaginary hammock with the greatest promptitude, and went straight on duty, 'As it's Nat Beaver's watch,' said he, 'there shall be no skulking.' Jack looked at me, with an expectant and admiring turn of his eye on Mr Beaver, full of complimentary implication. I noticed, by the way, that Jack, in a naval absence of mind with which he is greatly troubled at times, had his arm round my sister's waist. Perhaps this complaint originates in an old nautical requirement of having something to hold on to.

These were the terms of Mr Beaver's revelation to us:

What I have got to put forward, will not take very long; and I shall beg leave to begin by going back to last night—just about the time when we all parted from one another to go to bed.

The members of this good company did a very necessary and customary thing, last night—they each took a bedroom candlestick, and lit the candle before they went upstairs. I wonder whether any one of them noticed that I left my candlestick untouched, and my candle unlighted; and went to bed, in a haunted house of all the places in the world, in the dark? I don't think any one of them did.

That is, perhaps, rather curious to begin with. It is likewise curious, and just as true, that the bare sight of those candlesticks in the hands of this good company set me in a tremble, and made last night, a night's bad dream instead of a night's good sleep. The fact of the matter is—and I give you leave, ladies and gentlemen, to laugh at it as much as you please—that the ghost which haunted *me* last night, which has haunted me off and on for many years past, and which will go on haunting me till I am a ghost myself (and consequently spirit-proof in all respects), is nothing more or less than—a bedroom candlestick.

Yes, a bedroom candlestick and candle, or a flat candlestick and candle—put it which way you like—that is what haunts me. I wish it was something pleasanter and more out of the common way; a beautiful lady, or a mine of gold and silver, or a cellar of wine and a coach and horses, and such-like. But, being what it is, I must take it for what it is, and make the best of it—and I shall thank you all kindly if you will help me out by doing the same.

I am not a scholar myself; but I make bold to believe that the haunting of any man, with anything under the sun, begins with the frightening of him. At any rate, the haunting of me with a bedroom candlestick and candle began with the frightening of me with a bedroom candlestick and candle—the frightening of me half out of my life, ladies and gentlemen; and, for the time being, the frightening of me altogether out of my wits. That is not a very pleasant thing to confess to you all, before stating the particulars; but perhaps you will be the readier to believe that I am not a downright coward, because you find me bold enough to make a clean breast of it already, to my own great disadvantage, so far.

These are the particulars, as well as I can put them.

I was apprenticed to the sea when I was about as tall as my own walking-stick; and I made good enough use of my time to be fit for a mate's berth at the age of twenty-five years.

It was in the year eighteen hundred and eighteen, or nineteen, I am not quite certain which, that I reached the before-mentioned age of twenty-five. You will please to excuse my memory not being very good for dates, names, numbers, places, and such-like. No fear, though, about the particulars I have undertaken to tell you of; I have got them all ship-shape in my recollection; I can see them, at this moment, as clear as noonday in my own mind. But there is a mist over what went before, and, for the matter of that, a mist likewise over much that came after—and it's not very likely to lift, at my time of life, is it?

Well, in eighteen hundred and eighteen, or nineteen, when there was peace in our part of the world—and not before it was wanted, you will say—there was fighting, of a certain scampering, scrambling kind, going on in that old fighting ground, which we seafaring men know by the name of the Spanish Main. The possessions that belonged to the Spaniards in South America had broken into open mutiny and declared for themselves years before. There was plenty of bloodshed between the new government and the old; but the new had got the best of it, for the most part, under one General Bolivar—a famous man in his time, though he seems to have dropped out of people's memories now. Englishmen and Irishmen with a turn for

fighting and nothing particular to do at home, joined the general as volunteers; and some of our merchants here found it a good venture to send supplies across the ocean to the popular side. There was risk enough, of course, in doing this; but where one speculation of the kind succeeded, it made up for two, at the least, that failed. And that's the true principle of trade, wherever I have met with it, all the world over.

Among the Englishmen who were concerned in this Spanish-American business, I, your humble servant, happened, in a small way, to be one. I was then mate of a brig belonging to a certain firm in the City, which drove a sort of general trade, mostly in queer out-of-the-way places, as far from home as possible; and which freighted the brig, in the year I am speaking of, with a cargo of gunpowder for General Bolivar and his volunteers. Nobody knew anything about our instructions, when we sailed, except the captain; and he didn't half seem to like them. I can't rightly say how many barrels of powder we had on board, or how much each barrel held—I only know we had no other cargo. The name of the brig was *The Good Intent*—a queer name enough, you will tell me, for a vessel laden with gunpowder, and sent to help a revolution. And as far as this particular voyage was concerned, so it was. I meant that for a joke, ladies and gentlemen, and I'm sorry to find you don't laugh at it.

The Good Intent was the craziest old tub of a vessel I ever went to sea in, and the worst found in all respects. She was two hundred and thirty or two hundred and eighty tons burden, I forget which; and she had a crew of eight, all told—nothing like as many as we ought by rights to have had to work the brig. However, we were well and honestly paid our wages; and we had to set that against the chance of foundering at sea, and, on this occasion, likewise, the chance of being blown up into the bargain. In consideration of the nature of our cargo, we were harassed with new regulations which we didn't at all like, relative to smoking our pipes and lighting our lanterns; and, as usual in such cases, the captain who made the regulations preached what he didn't practise. Not a man of us was allowed to have a bit of lighted candle in his hand when he went below—except the skipper; and he used his light, when he turned in, or when he looked over his charts on the cabin table, just as usual. This light was a common kitchen candle or 'dip', of the sort that goes eight or ten to the pound; and it stood in an old battered flat candlestick, with all the japan worn and melted off, and all the tin showing through. It would have been more seamanlike and suitable in every respect if he had had a lamp or a lantern; but he stuck to his old candlestick; and that same old candlestick, ladies and gentlemen, has ever afterwards stuck to *me*. That's another joke, if you please; and I'm much obliged to Miss

Belinda in the corner for being good enough to laugh at it.

Well (I said 'well' before, but it's a word that helps a man on like), we sailed in the brig, and shaped our course, first, for the Virgin Islands, in the West Indies; and, after sighting them, we made for the Leeward Islands next; and then stood on due south, till the look-out at the mast-head hailed the deck, and said he saw land. That land was the coast of South America. We had had a wonderful voyage so far. We had lost none of our spars or sails, and not a man of us had been harassed to death at the pumps. It wasn't often the Good Intent made such a voyage as that, I can tell you.

I was sent aloft to make sure about the land, and I did make sure of it. When I reported the same to the skipper, he went below, and had a look at his letter of instructions and the chart. When he came on deck again, he altered our course a trifle to the eastward—I forget the point on the compass, but that don't matter. What I do remember is that it was dark before we closed in with the land. We kept the lead going, and hove the brig to in from four to five fathoms water, or it might be six—I can't say for certain. I kept a sharp eye to the drift of the vessel, none of us knowing how the currents ran on that coast. We all wondered why the skipper didn't anchor; but he said, No, he must first show a light at the foretop-mast-head, and wait for an answering light on shore. We did wait and nothing of the sort appeared. It was starlight and calm. What little wind there was came in puffs off the land. I suppose we waited, drifting a little to the westward, as I made it out, best part of an hour before anything happened—and then, instead of seeing the light on shore, we saw a boat coming towards us, rowed by two men only.

We hailed them, and they answered, 'Friends!' and hailed us by our name. They came on board. One of them was an Irishman, and the other was a coffee-coloured native pilot, who jabbered a little English. The Irishman handed a note to our skipper, who showed it to me. It informed us that the part of the coast we were off then, was not over safe for discharging our cargo, seeing that spies of the enemy (that is to say, of the old government) had been taken and shot in the neighbourhood the day before. We might trust the brig to the native pilot; and he had his instructions to take us to another part of the coast. The note was signed by the proper parties; so we let the Irishman go back alone in the boat, and allowed the pilot to exercise his lawful authority over the brig. He kept us stretching off from the land till noon the next day—his instructions, seemingly, ordered him to keep us well out of sight of the shore. We only altered our course, in the afternoon, so as to close in with the land again a little before midnight.

This same pilot was about as ill-looking a vagabond as ever I saw;

a skinny, cowardly quarrelsome mongrel, who swore at the men, in the vilest broken English, till they were every one of them ready to pitch him overboard. The skipper kept them quiet, and I kept them quiet, for the pilot being given us by our instructions, we were bound to make the best of him. Near nightfall, however, with the best will in the world to avoid it, I was unlucky enough to quarrel with him. He wanted to go below with his pipe, and I stopped him, of course, because it was contrary to orders. Upon that, he tried to hustle by me, and I put him away with my hand. I never meant to push him down; but, somehow, I did. He picked himself up as quick as lightening, and pulled out his knife. I snatched it out of his hand, slapped his murderous face for him, and threw his weapon overboard. He gave me one ugly look, and walked aft. I didn't think much of the look then; but I remembered it a little too well afterwards.

We were close in with the land again, just as the wind failed us, between eleven and twelve that night; and dropped our anchor by the pilot's directions. It was pitch dark, and a dead, airless calm. The skipper was on deck with two of our best men for watch. The rest were below, except the pilot, who coiled himself up, more like a snake than a man, on the forecastle. It was not my watch till four in the morning. But I didn't like the look of the night, or the pilot, or the state of things generally, and I shook myself down on deck to get my nap there, and be ready for anything at a moment's notice. The last I remember was the skipper whispering to me that he didn't like the look of things either, and that he would go below and consult his instructions again. That is the last I remember, before the slow, heavy regular roll of the old brig on the ground swell rocked me off to sleep.

I was woke, ladies and gentlemen, by a scuffle on the forecastle, and a gag in my mouth. There was a man on my breast and a man on my legs; and I was bound hand and foot in half a minute. The brig was in the hands of the Spaniards. They were swarming all over her. I heard six heavy splashes in the water, one after another—I saw the captain stabbed to the heart as he came running up the companion—and I heard a seventh splash in the water. Except myself, every soul of us on board had been murdered and thrown into the sea. Why I was left, I couldn't think, till I saw the pilot stoop over me with a lantern, and look, to make sure of who I was. There was a devilish grin on his face, and he nodded his head at me, as much to say, *you* were the man who hustled me down and slapped my face, and I mean to play the game of cat and mouse with *you* in return for it!

I could neither move nor speak; but I could see the Spaniards take off the main hatch and rig the purchases for getting up the cargo. A quarter of an hour afterwards, I heard the sweeps of a schooner, or

other small vessel, in the water. The strange craft was laid alongside of us; and the Spaniards set to work to discharge our cargo into her. They all worked hard except the pilot; and he came, from time to time, with his lantern, to have another look at me, and to grin and nod always in the same devilish way. I am old enough now not to be ashamed of confessing the truth; and I don't mind acknowledging that the pilot frightened me.

The fright, and the bonds, and the gag, and the not being able to stir hand nor foot, had pretty nigh worn me out, by the time the Spaniards gave over work. This was just as the dawn broke. They had shifted good part of our cargo on board their vessel, but nothing like all of it; and they were sharp enough to be off with what they had got, before daylight. I need hardly say that I had made up my mind, by this time, to the worst I could think of. The pilot, it was clear enough, was one of the spies of the enemy, who had wormed himself into the confidence of our consignees without being suspected. He, or more likely his employers, had got knowledge enough of us to suspect what our cargo was; we had been anchored for the night in the safest berth for them to surprise us in; and we had paid the penalty of having a small crew and consequently an insufficient watch. All this was clear enough—but what did the pilot mean to do with *me*?

On the word of a man, it makes my flesh creep, now, only to tell you what he did with me.

After all the rest of them were out of the brig, except the pilot and the two Spanish seamen, these last took me up, bound and gagged as I was, lowered me into the hold of the vessel, and laid me along on the floor; lashing me to it with ropes' ends, so that I could just turn from one side to the other, but could not roll myself fairly over, so as to change my place. They then left me. Both of them were the worse for liquor; but the devil of a pilot was sober—mind that!— as sober as I am at the present moment.

I lay in the dark for a little while, with my heart thumping as if it was going to jump out of me. I lay about five minutes so, when the pilot came down into the hold, alone. He had the captain's cursed flat candlestick and a carpenter's awl in one hand, and a long thin twist of cotton yarn, well oiled, in the other. He put the candlestick, with a new 'dip' lighted in it, down on the floor, about two feet from my face, and close against the side of the vessel. The light was feeble enough; but it was sufficient to show a dozen barrels of gunpowder or more, left all round me in the hold of the brig. I began to suspect what he was after, the moment I noticed the barrels. The horrors laid hold of me from head to foot; and the sweat poured off my face like water.

I saw him go, next, to one of the barrels of powder standing against the side of the vessel, in a line with the candle, and about three feet, or rather better, away from it. He bored a hole in the side of the barrel with his awl; and the horrid powder came trickling out, as black as hell, and dripped into the hollow of his hand, which he held to catch it. When he had got a good handful, he stopped up the hole by jamming one end of his oiled twist of cotton-yarn fast into it; and then he rubbed the powder into the whole length of the yarn, till he had blackened every hairsbreadth of it. The next thing he did—as true as I sit here, as true as the heaven above us all—the next thing he did was to carry the free end of his long, lean, black, frightful slow-match to the lighted candle alongside my face, and to tie it, in several folds, round the tallow dip, about a third of the distance down, measuring from the flame of the wick to the lip of the candlestick. He did that; he looked to see that my lashings were all safe; and then he put his face down close to mine; and whispered in my ear, ‘Blow up with the brig!’

He was on deck again the moment after; and he and the two others shoved the hatch on over me. At the farthest end from where I lay, they had not fitted it down quite true, and I saw a blink of daylight glimmering in when I looked in that direction. I heard the sweeps of the schooner fall into the water—splash! splash! fainter and fainter, as they swept the vessel out in the dead calm, to be ready for the wind in the offing. Fainter and fainter, splash! splash! for a quarter of an hour or more.

While those sounds were in my ears, my eyes were fixed on the candle. It had been freshly lit—if left to itself it would burn for between six and seven hours—the slow-match was twisted round it about a third of the way down—and therefore the flame would be about two hours reaching it. There I lay, gagged, bound, lashed to the floor; seeing my own life burning down with the candle by my side—there I lay, alone on the sea doomed to be blown to atoms, and to see that doom drawing on, nearer and nearer with every fresh second of time, through nigh on two hours to come; powerless to help myself and speechless to call for help to others. The wonder to me is that I didn’t cheat the flame, the slow-match, and the powder, and die of the horror of my situation before my first half-hour was out in the hold of the brig.

I can’t exactly say how long I kept the command of my senses after I had ceased to hear the splash of the schooner’s sweeps in the water. I can trace back everything I did and everything I thought, up to a certain point; but, once past that, I get all abroad, and lose myself in my memory now, much as I lost myself in my own feelings at the time.

The moment the hatch was covered over me, I began, as every other

man would have begun in my place, with a frantic effort to free my hands. In the mad panic I was in, I cut my flesh with the lashing as if they had been knife-blades; but I never stirred them. There was less chance still of freeing my legs, or of tearing myself from the fastenings that held me to the floor. I gave in, when I was all but suffocated for want of breath. The gag, you will please to remember, was a terrible enemy to me; I could only breathe freely through my nose—and that this is but a poor vent when a man is straining his strength as far as ever it will go.

I gave in, and lay quiet, and got my breath again; my eyes glaring and straining at the candle at the time. While I was staring at it, the notion struck me of trying to blow out the flame by pumping a long breath at it suddenly through my nostrils. It was too high above me, and too far away from me to be reached in that fashion. I tried, and tried, and tried—and then I gave in again and lay quiet again; always with my eyes glaring at the candle and the candle glaring at *me*. The splash of the schooner's sweeps was very faint by this time. I could only just hear them in the morning stillness. Splash! splash!—fainter and fainter—splash! splash!

Without exactly feeling my mind going, I began to feel it getting queer, as early as this. The snuff of the candle was growing taller and taller, and the length of tallow between the flame and the slow-match, which was the length of my life, was getting shorter and shorter. I calculated that I had rather less than an hour and a half to live. An hour and a half! Was there a chance, in that time of a boat pulling off to the brig from shore? Whether the land near which the vessel was anchored was in possession of our side, or in possession of the enemy's side, I made it out that they must, sooner or later, send to hail the brig, merely because she was a stranger in those parts. The question for *me* was, how soon? The sun had not risen yet, as I could tell by looking through the chink in the hatch. There was no coast village near us, as we all knew, before the brig was seized, by seeing no lights on shore. There was no wind, as I could tell by listening, to bring any strange vessel near. If I had had six hours to live, there might have been a chance for me, reckoning from sunrise to noon. But with an hour and a half, which had dwindled to an hour and a quarter by this time—or, in other words with the earliness of the morning, the uninhabited coast, and the dead calm all against me—there was not the ghost of a chance. As I felt that, I had another struggle—the last—with my bonds; and only cut myself the deeper for my pains.

I gave in once more, and lay quiet, and listened for the splash of the sweeps. Gone! Not a sound could I hear but the blowing of a fish, now and then, on the surface of the sea, and the creak of the brig's crazy

old spars, as she rolled gently from side to side with the little swell there was on the quiet water.

An hour and a quarter. The wick grew terribly, as the quarter slipped away; and the charred top of it began to thicken and spread out mushroom-shape. It would fall off soon. Would it fall off red-hot, and would the swing of the brig cant it over the side of the candle and let it down on the slow-match? If it would, I had about ten minutes to live instead of an hour. This discovery set my mind for a minute on a new tack altogether. I began to ponder with myself what sort of a death blowing-up might be. Painful? Well, it would be, surely, too sudden for that. Perhaps just one crash, inside me, or outside me, or both, and nothing more? Perhaps not even a crash; that and death and the scattering of this living body of mine into millions of fiery sparks, might all happen in the same instant? I couldn't make it out; I couldn't settle how it would be. The minutes of calmness in my mind left it, before I had half done thinking; and I got all abroad again.

When I came back to my thoughts, or when they came back to me (I can't say which), the wick was awfully tall, the flame was burning with a smoke above it, the charred top was broad and red, and heavily spreading out to its fall. My despair and horror at seeing it, took me in a new way, which was good and right, at any rate, for my poor soul. I tried to pray; in my own heart, you will understand, for the gag put all lip-praying out of my power. I tried, but the candle seemed to burn it up in me. I struggled hard to force my eyes from the slow, murdering flame, and to look up through the chink in the hatch at the blessed daylight. I tried once, tried twice; and gave it up. I tried next only to shut my eyes, and keep them shut—once—twice—and the second time I did it. 'God bless old mother, and sister Lizzie; God keep them both, and forgive *me*.' That was all I had time to say, in my own heart, before my eyes opened again, in spite of me, and the flame of the candle flew into them, flew all over me, and burnt up the rest of my thoughts in an instant.

I couldn't hear the fish blowing now; I couldn't hear the creak of the spars; I couldn't think; I couldn't feel the sweat of my own death agony on my face—I could only look at the heavy, charred top of the wick. It swelled, tottered, bent over to one side, dropped—red hot at the moment of its fall—black and harmless, even before the swing of the brig had canted it over into the bottom of the candlestick.

I caught myself laughing. Yes! laughing at the safe fall of the bit of wick. But for the gag I should have screamed with laughing. As it was, I shook with it inside me—shook till the blood was in my head, and I was all but suffocated for want of breath. I had just sense enough left to feel that my own horrid laughter, at that awful moment, was a sign

of my brain going at last. I had just sense enough left to make another struggle before my mind broke loose like a frightened horse, and ran away with me.

One comforting look at the blink of daylight through the hatch was what I tried for once more. The fight to force my eyes from the candle and to get that one look at the daylight, was the hardest I had had yet; and I lost the fight. The flame had hold of my eyes as fast as the lashings had hold of my hands. I couldn't look away from it. I couldn't even shut my eyes, when I tried that next, for the second time. There was the wick, growing tall once more. There was the space of unburnt candle between the light and the slow-match shortened to an inch or less. How much life did that inch leave me? Three-quarters of an hour? Half an hour? Fifty minutes? Twenty minutes? Steady! an inch of tallow candle would burn longer than twenty minutes. An inch of tallow! the notion of a man's body and soul being kept together by an inch of tallow! Wonderful! Why, the greatest king that sits on a throne can't keep a man's body and soul together; and here's an inch of tallow that can do what the king can't! There's something to tell mother, when I get home, which will surprise her more than all the rest of my voyages put together. I laughed inwardly, again, at the thought of that; and shook and swelled and suffocated myself, till the light of the candle leaped in through my eyes, and licked up the laughter, and burnt it out of me, and made me all empty, and cold, and quiet once more.

Mother and Lizzie. I don't know when they came back; but they did come back—not, as it seemed to me, into my mind this time; but right down bodily before me, in the hold of the brig.

Yes: sure enough, there was Lizzie, just as light-hearted as usual, laughing at me. Laughing! Well why not? Who is to blame Lizzie for thinking I'm lying on my back, drunk in the cellar, with the beer barrels all round me? Steady! she's crying now—spinning round and round in a fiery mist, wringing her hands, screeching out for help—fainter and fainter, like the splash of the schooner's sweeps. Gone!—burnt up in the fiery mist. Mist? fire? no: neither one nor the other. It's mother makes the light—mother knitting, with ten flaming points at the ends of her fingers and thumbs, and slow-matches hanging in bunches all round her face instead of her own grey hair. Mother in her old arm-chair, and the pilot's long skinny hands hanging over the back of the chair, dripping with gunpowder. No! no gunpowder, no chair, no mother—nothing but the pilot's face, shining red hot, like a sun, in the fiery mist; turning upside down in the fiery mist; running backwards and forwards along the slow-match, in the fiery mist; spinning millions of miles in a minute, in the fiery mist—spinning

itself smaller and smaller into one tiny point, and that point darting on a sudden straight into my head—and then, all fire and all mist—no hearing, no seeing, no thinking, no feeling—the brig, the sea, my own self, the whole world, all gone together!

After what I've just told you, I know nothing and remember nothing, till I woke up, as it seemed to me in a comfortable bed, with two rough and ready men like myself sitting on each side of my pillow, and a gentleman standing watching me at the foot of the bed. It was about seven in the morning. My sleep (or what seemed like my sleep to me) had lasted better than eight months—I was among my own countrymen in the island of Trinidad—the men at each side of my pillow were my keepers, turn and turn about—and the gentleman standing at the foot of the bed was the doctor. What I said and did in those eight months, I never have known and never shall. I woke out of it, as if it had been one long sleep—that's all I know.

It was another two months or more before the doctor thought it safe to answer the questions I asked him.

The brig had been anchored, just as I had supposed, off a part of the coast which was lonely enough to make the Spaniards pretty sure of no interruption, so long as they managed their murderous work quietly under cover of night. My life had not been saved from the shore, but from the sea. An American vessel, becalmed in the offing, had made out the brig as the sun rose; and the captain, having his time on his hands in consequence of the calm, and seeing a vessel anchored where no vessel had any reason to be, had manned one of his boats and sent his mate with it, to look a little closer into the matter, and bring back a report of what he saw. What he saw, when he and his men found the brig deserted and boarded her, was a gleam of candlelight through the chink in the hatchway. The flame was within about a thread's breadth of the slow-match, when he lowered himself into the hold; and if he had not had the sense and coolness to cut the match into two with his knife, before he touched the candle, he and his men might have been blown up along with the brig, as well as me. The match caught and turned into sputtering red fire, in the very act of putting the candle out; and if the communication with the powder barrel had not been cut off, the Lord only knows what might have happened.

What became of the Spanish schooner and the pilot I have never heard from that day to this. As for the brig, the Yankees took her, as they took me, to Trinidad, and claimed their salvage, and got it, I hope, for their own sakes. I was landed just in the same state as when they rescued me from the brig, that is to say, clean out of my senses. But, please to remember it was a long time ago; and, take my word for it, I was discharged cured, as I have told you. Bless your hearts, I'm all

right now, as you may see. I'm a little shaken by telling the story, ladies and gentlemen—a little shaken, that's all.

8

The Biter Bit

[Extracted from the correspondence
of the London Police]

*From Chief Inspector Theakstone, of the Detective Police,
to Sergeant Bulmer of the same force*

LONDON, 4th July, 18—.

SERGEANT BULMER,—This is to inform you that you are wanted to assist in looking up a case of importance, which will require all the attention of an experienced member of the force. The matter of the robbery on which you are now engaged, you will please to shift over to the young man who brings you this letter. You will tell him all the circumstances of the case, just as they stand; you will put him up to the progress you have made (if any) towards detecting the person or persons by whom the money has been stolen; and you will leave him to make the best he can of the matter now in your hands. He is to have the whole responsibility of the case, and the whole credit of his success, if he brings it to a proper issue.

So much for the orders that I am desired to communicate to you.

A word in your ear, next, about this new man who is to take your place. His name is Matthew Sharpin; and he is to have the chance given him of dashing into our office at a jump—supposing he turns out strong enough to take it. You will naturally ask me how he comes by this privilege. I can only tell you that he has some uncommonly strong interest to back him in certain high quarters which you and I had better not mention except under our breaths. He has been a lawyer's clerk; and he is wonderfully conceited in his opinion of himself, as well as mean and underhand to look at. According to his own account, he leaves his old trade, and joins ours of his own free will and preference. You will no more believe that than I do. My notion is, that he has managed to ferret out some private information in connection with the affairs of one of his master's clients, which makes him rather an awkward customer to keep in the office for the future, and which, at

the same time, gives him hold enough over his employer to make it dangerous to drive him into a corner by turning him away. I think the giving him this unheard-of chance among us, is, in plain words, pretty much like giving him hush-money to keep him quiet. However that may be, Mr Matthew Sharpin is to have the case now in your hands; and if he succeeds with it, he pokes his ugly nose into our office, as sure as fate. I put you up to this, Sergeant, so that you may not stand in your own light by giving the new man any cause to complain of you at headquarters, and remain yours,

FRANCIS THEAKSTONE.

From Mr Matthew Sharpin to Chief Inspector Theakstone

LONDON, July 5th, 18—.

DEAR SIR,—Having now been favoured with the necessary instructions from Sergeant Bulmer, I beg to remind you of certain directions which I have received, relating to the report of my future proceedings which I am to prepare for examination at headquarters.

The object of my writing, and of your examining what I have written, before you sent it in to the higher authorities, is, I am informed, to give me, as an untried hand, the benefit of your advice, in case I want it (which I venture to think I shall not) at any stage of my proceedings. As the extraordinary circumstances of the case on which I am now engaged, make it impossible for me to absent myself from the place where the robbery was committed, until I have made some progress towards discovering the thief, I am necessarily precluded from consulting you personally. Hence the necessity of my writing down the various details which might, perhaps, be better communicated by word of mouth. This, if I am not mistaken, is the position in which we are now placed. I state my own impressions on the subject, in writing, in order that we may clearly understand each other at the outset; and have the honour to remain, your obedient servant,

MATTHEW SHARPIN.

From Chief Inspector Theakstone, to Mr Matthew Sharpin

LONDON, 5th July, 18—.

SIR,—You have begun by wasting time, ink, and paper. We both of us perfectly well knew the position we stood in towards each other, when I sent you with my letter to Sergeant Bulmer. There was not the

least need to repeat in writing. Be so good as to employ your pen, in future, on the business actually in hand.

You have now three separate matters on which to write to me. First, you have to draw up a statement of your instructions received from Sergeant Bulmer, in order to show us that nothing has escaped your memory, and that you are thoroughly acquainted with all the circumstances of the case which has been entrusted to you. Secondly, you are to inform me what it is you propose to do. Thirdly, you are to report every inch of your progress (if you make any) from day to day, and, if need be, from hour to hour as well. This is *your* duty. As to what *my* duty may be, when I want you to remind me of it I will write and tell you so. In the meantime, I remain, yours,

FRANCIS THEAKSTONE.

From Mr Matthew Sharpin to Chief Inspector Theakstone

LONDON, 6th July, 18—.

SIR,—You are rather an elderly person, and, as such, naturally inclined to be a little jealous of men like me, who are in the prime of their lives and their faculties. Under these circumstances, it is my duty to be considerate towards you, and not to bear too hardly on your small failings. I decline, therefore, altogether, to take offence at the tone of your letter; I give you the full benefit of the natural generosity of my nature; I sponge the very existence of your surly communication out of my memory—in short, Chief Inspector Theakstone, I forgive you, and proceed to business.

My first duty is to draw up a full statement of the instructions I have received from Sergeant Bulmer. Here they are at your service, according to my version of them.

At number 13, Rutherford Street, Soho, there is a stationer's shop. It is kept by one Mr Yatman. He is a married man, but has no family. Besides Mr and Mrs Yatman, the other inmates in the house are a young single man named Jay, who lodges in the front room on the second floor—a shopman, who sleeps in one of the attics,—and a servant-of-all-work, whose bed is in the back-kitchen. Once a week a charwoman comes for a few hours in the morning only, to help this servant. These are all the persons who, on ordinary occasions, have means of access to the interior of the house, placed, as a matter of course, at their disposal.

Mr Yatman has been in business for many years, carrying on his

affairs prosperously enough to realize a handsome independence for a person in his position. Unfortunately for himself he endeavoured to increase the amount of his property by speculating. He ventured boldly in his investments, luck went against him, and rather less than two years ago he found himself a poor man again. All that was saved out of the wreck of his property was the sum of two hundred pounds.

Although Mr Yatman did his best to meet his altered circumstances, by giving up many of the luxuries and comforts to which he and his wife had been accustomed, he found it impossible to retrench so far as to allow of putting by any money from the income produced by the shop. The business has been declining of late years—the cheap advertising stationers having done it injury with the public. Consequently, up to the last week the only surplus property possessed by Mr Yatman consisted of the two hundred pounds which had been recovered from the wreck of his fortune. This sum was placed as a deposit in a joint-stock bank of the highest possible character.

Eight days ago, Mr Yatman and his lodger, Mr Jay, held a conversation on the subject of the commercial difficulties which are hampering trade in all directions at the present time. Mr Jay (who lives by supplying the newspapers with short paragraphs relating to incidents, offences, and brief records of remarkable occurrences in general—who is, in short, what they call a penny-a-liner) told his landlord that he had been in the City that day, and had heard unfavourable rumours on the subject of the joint-stock banks. The rumours to which he alluded had already reached the ears of Mr Yatman from other quarters; and the confirmation of them by his lodger had such an effect on his mind—predisposed as it was to alarm by the experience of his former losses—that he resolved to go at once to the bank and withdraw his deposit.

It was then getting on towards the end of the afternoon; and he arrived just in time to receive his money before the bank closed.

He received the deposit in bank-notes of the following amounts: one fifty-pound note, three twenty-pound notes, six ten-pound notes, and six five-pound notes. His object in drawing the money in this form was to have it ready to lay out immediately in trifling loans, on good security, among the small tradespeople of his district, some of whom are sorely pressed for the very means of existence at the present time. Investments of this kind seemed to Mr Yatman to be the most safe and the most profitable on which he could now venture.

He brought the money back in an envelope placed in his breast-pocket; and asked his shopman, on getting home, to look for a small flat tin cash-box, which had not been used for years, and which, as Mr Yatman remembered it, was exactly the right size to hold the bank-

notes. For some time the cash-box was searched for in vain. Mr Yatman called to his wife to know if she had any idea where it was. The question was overheard by the servant-of-all-work, who was taking up the tea-tray at the time, and by Mr Jay, who was coming downstairs on his way out to the theatre. Ultimately the cash-box was found by the shopman. Mr Yatman placed the bank-notes in it, secured them by a padlock, and put the box in his coat pocket. It stuck out of the coat pocket a very little, but enough to be seen. Mr Yatman remained at home upstairs, all the evening. No visitors called. At eleven o'clock he went to bed, and put the cash-box along with his clothes, on a chair by the bedside.

When he and his wife woke the next morning, the box was gone. Payment of the notes was immediately stopped at the Bank of England; but no news of the money has been heard of since that time.

So far, the circumstances of the case are perfectly clear. They point unmistakably to the conclusion that the robbery must have been committed by some person living in the house. Suspicion falls, therefore, upon the servant-of-all-work, upon the shopman, and upon Mr Jay. The two first knew that the cash-box was being inquired for by their master, but did not know what it was he wanted to put into it. They would assume, of course, that it was money. They both had opportunities (the servant, when she took away the tea—and the shopman, when he came, after shutting up, to give the keys of the till to his master) of seeing the cash-box in Mr Yatman's pocket, and of inferring naturally, from its position there, that he intended to take it into his bedroom with him at night.

Mr Jay on the other hand, had been told, during the afternoon's conversation on the subject of joint-stock banks, that his landlord had a deposit of two hundred pounds in one of them. He also knew that Mr Yatman left him with the intention of drawing that money out; and he heard the inquiry for the cash-box, afterwards, when he was coming downstairs. He must, therefore, have inferred that the money was in the house, and that the cash-box was the receptacle intended to contain it. That he could have had any idea, however, of the place in which Mr Yatman intended to keep it for the night, is impossible, seeing that he went out before the box was found, and did not return till his landlord was in bed. Consequently, if he committed the robbery, he must have gone into the bedroom purely on speculation.

Speaking of the bedroom reminds me of the necessity of noticing the situation of it in the house, and the means that exist of gaining easy access to it at any hour of the night.

The room in question is the back-room on the first floor. In consequence of Mrs Yatman's constitutional nervousness on the

subject of fire (which makes her apprehend being burnt alive in her room, in case of accident, by the hampering of the lock if the key is turned in it) her husband has never been accustomed to lock the bedroom door. Both he and his wife are, by their own admission, heavy sleepers. Consequently, the risk to be run by any evil-disposed persons wishing to plunder the bedroom, was of the most trifling kind. They could enter the room by merely turning the handle of the door; and if they moved with ordinary caution, there was no fear of their waking the sleepers inside. This fact is of importance. It strengthens our conviction that the money must have been taken by one of the inmates of the house, because it tends to show that the robbery, in this case, might have been committed by persons not possessed of the superior vigilance and cunning of the experienced thief.

Such are the circumstances, as they were related to Sergeant Bulmer, when he was first called in to discover the guilty parties, and, if possible, to recover the lost bank-notes. The strictest inquiry which he could institute, failed of producing the smallest fragment of evidence against any of the persons on whom suspicion naturally fell. Their language and behaviour, on being informed of the robbery, was perfectly consistent with the language and behaviour of innocent people. Sergeant Bulmer felt from the first that this was a case for private inquiry and secret observation. He began by recommending Mr and Mrs Yatman to affect a feeling of perfect confidence in the innocence of the persons living under their roof; and he then opened the campaign by employing himself in following the goings and comings, and in discovering the friends, the habits, and the secrets of the maid-of-all-work.

Three days and nights of exertions on his own part, and on that of others who were competent to assist his investigations, were enough to satisfy him that there was no sound cause for suspicion against the girl.

He next practised the same precaution in relation to the shopman. There was more difficulty and uncertainty in privately clearing up this person's character without his knowledge, but the obstacles were at last smoothed away with tolerable success; and though there is not the same amount of certainty, in this case, which there was in that of the girl, there is still fair reason for supposing that the shopman has had nothing to do with the robbery of the cash-box.

As a necessary consequence of these proceedings, the range of suspicion now becomes limited to the lodger, Mr Jay.

When I presented your letter of introduction to Sergeant Bulmer, he had already made some inquiries on the subject of this young man.

The result, so far, has not been at all favourable. Mr Jay's habits are irregular; he frequents public-houses, and seems to be familiarly acquainted with a great many dissolute characters; he is in debt to most of the trades-people whom he employs; he has not paid his rent to Mr Yatman for the last month; yesterday evening he came home excited by liquor, and last week he was seen talking to a prize-fighter. In short, though Mr Jay does call himself a journalist, in virtue of his penny-a-line contributions to the newspapers, he is a young man of low tastes, vulgar manners, and bad habits. Nothing has yet been discovered in relation to him, which redounds to his credit in the smallest degree.

I have now reported, down to the very last details, all the particulars communicated to me by Sergeant Bulmer. I believe you will not find an omission anywhere; and I think you will admit, though you are prejudiced against me, that a clearer statement of facts was never laid before you than the statement I have now made. My next duty is to tell you what I propose to do, now that the case is confided to my hands.

In the first place, it is clearly my business to take up the case at the point where Sergeant Bulmer has left it. On his authority, I am justified in assuming that I have no need to trouble myself about the maid-of-all-work and the shopman. Their characters are now to be considered as cleared up. What remains to be privately investigated is the question of the guilt or innocence of Mr Jay. Before we give up the notes for lost, we must make sure, if we can, that he knows nothing about them.

This is the plan that I have adopted, with the full approval of Mr and Mrs Yatman, for discovering whether Mr Jay is or is not the person who has stolen the cash-box:

I propose, today, to present myself at the house in the character of a young man who is looking for lodgings. The back-room on the second floor will be shown to me as the room to let; and I shall establish myself there tonight, as a person from the country who has come to London to look for a situation in a respectable shop or office.

By this means I shall be living next to the room occupied by Mr Jay. The partition between us is mere lath and plaster. I shall make a small hole in it, near the cornice, through which I can see what Mr Jay does in his room, and hear every word that is said when any friend happens to call on him. Whenever he is at home, I shall be at my post of observation. Whenever he goes out, I shall be after him. By employing these means of watching him, I believe I may look forward to the discovery of his secret—if he knows anything about the lost bank-notes—as to a dead certainty.

What you may think of my plan of observation I cannot undertake

to say. It appears to me to unite the invaluable merits of boldness and simplicity. Fortified by this conviction, I close the present communication with feelings of the most sanguine description in regard to the future, and remain your obedient servant,

MATTHEW SHARPIN.

From the Same to the Same

7th July.

SIR,—As you have not honoured me with any answer to my last communication, I assume that, in spite of your prejudices against me, it has produced the favourable impression on your mind which I ventured to anticipate. Gratified beyond measure by the token of approval which your eloquent silence conveys to me, I proceed to report the progress that has been made in the course of the last twenty-four hours.

I am now comfortably established next door to Mr Jay; and I am delighted to say that I have two holes in the partition, instead of one. My natural sense of humour has led me into the pardonable extravagance of giving them appropriate names. One I call my peep-hole, and the other my pipe-hole. The name of the first explains itself; the name of the second refers to a small tin pipe, or tube, inserted in the hole, and twisted so that the mouth of it comes close to my ear, while I am standing at my post of observation. Thus, while I am looking at Mr Jay through my peep-hole, I can hear every word that may be spoken in his room through my pipe-hole.

Perfect candour—a virtue which I have possessed from my childhood—compels me to acknowledge, before I go any further, that the ingenious notion of adding a pipe-hole to my proposed peep-hole originated with Mrs Yatman. This lady—a most intelligent and accomplished person, simple, and yet distinguished, in her manners—has entered into all my little plans with an enthusiasm and intelligence which I cannot too highly praise. Mr Yatman is so cast down by his loss, that he is quite incapable of affording me any assistance. Mrs Yatman, who is evidently most tenderly attached to him, feels her husband's sad condition of mind even more acutely than she feels the loss of the money; and is mainly stimulated to exertion by her desire to assist in raising him from the miserable state of prostration into which he has now fallen.

'The money, Mr Sharpin,' she said to me yesterday evening, with tears in her eyes, 'the money may be regained by rigid economy and strict attention to business. It is my husband's wretched state of mind

that makes me so anxious for the discovery of the thief. I may be wrong, but I felt hopeful of success as soon as you entered the house; and I believe, if the wretch who has robbed us is to be found, you are the man to discover him.' I accepted this gratifying compliment in the spirit in which it was offered—firmly believing that I shall be found, sooner or later, to have thoroughly deserved it.

Let me now return to business; that is to say, to my peep-hole and my pipe-hole.

I have enjoyed some hours of calm observation of Mr Jay. Though rarely at home, as I understand from Mrs Yatman, on ordinary occasions, he has been indoors the whole of this day. This is suspicious, to begin with. I have to report, further that he rose at a late hour this morning (always a bad sign in a young man), and that he lost a great deal of time, after he was up, in yawning and complaining to himself of headache. Like other debauched characters, he ate little or nothing for breakfast. His next proceeding was to smoke a pipe—a dirty clay pipe, which a gentleman would have been ashamed to put between his lips. When he had done smoking, he took out pen, ink, and paper, and sat down to write with a groan—whether of remorse for having taken the bank-notes, or of disgust at the task before him, I am unable to say. After writing a few lines (too far away from my peep-hole to give me a chance of reading over his shoulder), he leaned back in his chair, and amused himself by humming the tunes of certain popular songs. Whether these do, or do not, represent secret signals by which he communicates with his accomplices remains to be seen. After he had amused himself for some time by humming, he got up and began to walk about the room, occasionally stopping to add a sentence to the paper on his desk. Before long, he went to a locked cupboard and opened it. I strained my eyes eagerly, in expectation of making a discovery. I saw him take something carefully out of the cupboard—he turned round—and it was only a pint bottle of brandy! Having drunk some of the liquor, this extremely indolent reprobate lay down on his bed again, and in five minutes was fast asleep.

After hearing him snoring for at least two hours, I was recalled to my peep-hole by a knock at his door. He jumped up and opened it with suspicious activity.

A very small boy, with a very dirty face, walked in, said, 'Please, sir, they're waiting for you,' sat down on a chair, with his legs a long way from the ground, and instantly fell asleep! Mr Jay swore an oath, tied a wet towel round his head, and going back to his paper, began to cover it with writing as fast as his fingers could move the pen. Occasionally getting up to dip the towel in water and tie it on again, he continued at this employment for nearly three hours; then folded

up the leaves of writing, woke the boy, and gave them to him, with this remarkable expression: 'Now, then, young sleepy-head, quick—march! If you see the governor, tell him to have the money ready when I call for it.' The boy grinned, and disappeared. I was sorely tempted to follow 'sleepy-head', but, on reflection, considered it safest still to keep my eye on the proceedings of Mr Jay.

In half an hour's time, he put on his hat and walked out. Of course, I put on my hat and walked out also. As I went downstairs, I passed Mrs Yatman going up. The lady has been kind enough to undertake, by previous arrangement between us to search Mr Jay's room, while he is out of the way, and while I am necessarily engaged in the pleasing duties of following him wherever he goes. On the occasion to which I now refer, he walked straight to the nearest tavern, and ordered a couple of mutton chops for his dinner. I placed myself in the next box to him, and ordered a couple of mutton chops for my dinner. Before I had been in the room a minute, a young man of highly suspicious manners and appearance, sitting at a table opposite, took his glass of porter in his hand and joined Mr Jay. I pretended to be reading the newspaper, and listened, as in duty bound, with all my might.

'Jack has been here inquiring after you,' says the young man.

'Did he leave any message?' asks Mr Jay.

'Yes,' says the older. 'He told me, if I met with you, to say that he wished very particularly to see you tonight; and that he would give you a look in, at Rutherford Street, at seven o'clock.'

'All right,' says Mr Jay. 'I'll get back in time to see him.'

Upon this, the suspicious-looking young man finished his porter, and saying that he was rather in a hurry, took leave of his friend (perhaps I should not be wrong if I said his accomplice) and left the room.

At twenty-five minutes and a half past six—in these serious cases it is important to be particular about time—Mr Jay finished his chops and paid his bill. At twenty-six minutes and three-quarters I finished my chops and paid mine. In ten minutes more I was inside the house in Rutherford Street, and was received by Mrs Yatman in the passage. That charming woman's face exhibited an expression of melancholy and disappointment which it quite grieved me to see. 'I am afraid, Ma'am,' says I, 'that you have not hit on any little criminating discovery in the lodger's room?'

She shook her head and sighed. It was a soft, languid, fluttering sigh;—and, upon my life, it quite upset me. For the moment I forgot business, and burned with envy of Mr Yateman.

'Don't despair, Ma'am,' I said, with an insinuating mildness which seemed to touch her. 'I have heard a mysterious conversation—I know

of a guilty appointment—and I expect great things from my peep-hole and my pipe-hole tonight. Pray, don't be alarmed, but I think we are on the brink of a discovery.

Here my enthusiastic devotion to business got the better of my tender feelings. I looked—winked—nodded—left her.

When I got back to my observatory, I found Mr Jay digesting his mutton chops in an armchair, with his pipe in his mouth. On his table were two tumblers, a jug of water, and the pint bottle of brandy. It was then close upon seven o'clock. As the hour struck, the person described as 'Jack' walked in.

He looked agitated—I am happy to say he looked violently agitated. The cheerful glow of anticipated success diffused itself (to use a strong expression) all over me, from head to foot. With breathless interest I looked through my peep-hole, and saw the visitor—the 'Jack' of this delightful case—sit down, facing me, at the opposite side of the table to Mr Jay. Making allowance for the difference in expression which their countenances just now happened to exhibit, these two abandoned villains were so much alike in other respects as to lead at once to the conclusion that they were brothers. Jack was the cleaner man and the better dressed of the two. I admit that, at the outset. It is, perhaps, one of my failings to push justice and impartiality to their utmost limits. I am no Pharisee; and where vice has its redeeming point, I say, let vice have its due—yes, yes, by all manner of means, let vice have its due.

'What's the matter now, Jack?' says Mr Jay.

'Can't you see it in my face?' says Jack. 'My dear fellow, delays are dangerous. Let us have done with suspense, and risk it the day after tomorrow.'

'So soon as that?' cried Mr Jay, looking very much astonished. 'Well, I'm ready, if you are. But, I say, Jack, is Somebody Else ready too? Are you quite sure of that?'

He smiled as he spoke—a frightful smile—and laid a very strong emphasis on those two words, 'Somebody Else'. There is evidently a third ruffian, a nameless desperado, concerned in the business.

'Meet us tomorrow,' says Jack, 'and judge for yourself. Be in the Regent's Park at eleven in the morning, and look out for us at the turning that leads to the Avenue Road.'

'I'll be there,' says Mr Jay. 'Have a drop of brandy and water? What are you getting up for? You're not going already?'

'Yes, I am,' says Jack. 'The fact is, I'm so excited and agitated that I can't sit still anywhere for five minutes together. Ridiculous as it may appear to you, I'm in a perpetual state of nervous flutter. I can't, for the life of me, help fearing that we shall be found out. I fancy that every

man who looks twice at me in the street is a spy——’

At those words, I thought my legs would have given way under me. Nothing but strength of mind kept me at my peep-hole—nothing else, I give you my word of honour.

‘Stuff and nonsense!’ cried Mr Jay, with all the effrontery of a veteran in crime. ‘We have kept the secret up to this time, and we will manage cleverly to the end. Have a drop of brandy and water, and you will feel as certain about it as I do.’

Jack steadily refused the brandy and water, and steadily persisted in taking his leave.

‘I must try if I can’t walk it off,’ he said. ‘Remember tomorrow morning—eleven o’clock, Avenue Road side of the Regent’s Park.’

With those words he went out. His hardened relative laughed desperately, and resumed the dirty clay pipe.

I sat down on the side of my bed, actually quivering with excitement.

It is clear to me that no attempt has yet been made to change the stolen bank-notes; and I may add that Sergeant Bulmer was of that opinion also, when he left the case in my hands. What is the natural conclusion to draw from the conversation which I have just set down? Evidently, that the confederates meet tomorrow to take their respective shares in the stolen money, and to decide on the safest means of getting the notes changed the day after. Mr Jay is, beyond a doubt, the leading criminal in this business, and he will probably run the chief risk—that of changing the fifty-pound note. I shall, therefore, still make it my business to follow him—attending at the Regent’s Park tomorrow, and doing my best to hear what is said there. If another appointment is made the day after, I shall, of course, go to it. In the meantime, I shall want the immediate assistance of two competent persons (supposing the rascals separate after their meeting) to follow the two minor criminals. It is only fair to add, that, if the rogues all retire together, I shall probably keep my subordinates in reserve. Being naturally ambitious, I desire, if possible, to have the whole credit of discovering this robbery to myself.

8th July.

I have to acknowledge, with thanks, the speedy arrival of my two subordinates—men of very average abilities, I am afraid; but, fortunately, I shall always be on the spot to direct them.

My first business this morning was, necessarily, to prevent mistakes by accounting to Mr and Mrs Yatman for the presence of two strangers on the scene. Mr Yatman (between ourselves, a poor feeble

man) only shook his head and groaned. Mrs Yatman (that superior woman) favoured me with a charming look of intelligence.

‘Oh, Mr Sharpin!’ she said, ‘I am so sorry to see those two men! Your sending for their assistance looks as if you were beginning to be doubtful of success.’

I privately winked at her (she is very good in allowing me to do so without taking offence), and told her, in my facetious way, that she laboured under a slight mistake.

‘It is because I am sure of success, Ma’am, that I send for them. I am determined to recover the money, not for my own sake only, but for Mr Yatman’s sake—and for yours.’

I laid a considerable amount of stress on those last three words. She said, ‘Oh, Mr Sharpin!’ again—and blushed of a heavenly red—and looked down at her work. I could go to the world’s end with that woman, if Mr Yatman would only die.

I sent off the two subordinates to wait, until I wanted them, at the Avenue Road gate of the Regent’s Park. Half an hour afterwards I was following in the same direction myself, at the heels of Mr Jay.

The two confederates were punctual to the appointed time, I blush to record it, but it is nevertheless necessary to state, that the third rogue—the nameless desperado of my report, or if you prefer it, the mysterious ‘Somebody Else’ of the conversation between the two brothers—is a Woman! and, what is worse, a young woman! and what is more lamentable still, a nice-looking woman! I have long resisted a growing conviction, that, wherever there is mischief in this world, an individual of the fair sex is inevitably certain to be mixed up in it. After the experience of this morning, I can struggle against that sad conclusion no longer. I give up the sex—excepting Mrs Yatman, I give up the sex.

The man named ‘Jack’ offered the woman his arm. Mr Jay placed himself on the other side of her. The three then walked away slowly among the trees. I followed them at a respectful distance. My two subordinates, at a respectful distance also, followed me.

It was, I deeply regret to say, impossible to get near enough to them to overhear their conversation, without running too great a risk of being discovered. I could only infer from their gestures and actions that they were all three talking with extraordinary earnestness on some subject which deeply interested them. After having been engaged in this way a full quarter of an hour, they suddenly turned round to retrace their steps. My presence of mind did not forsake me in this emergency. I signed the two subordinated to walk on carelessly and pass them, while I myself slipped dexterously behind a tree. As they came by me, I heard ‘Jack’ address these words to Mr Jay:

'Let us say half-past ten tomorrow morning. And mind you come in a cab. We had better not risk taking one in this neighbourhood.'

Mr Jay made some brief reply, which I could not overhear. They walked back to the place at which they had met, shaking hands there with an audacious cordiality which it quite sickened me to see. They then separated. I followed Mr Jay. My subordinates paid the same delicate attention to the other two.

Instead of taking me back to Rutherford Street, Mr Jay led me to the Strand. He stopped at a dingy, disreputable-looking house, which, according to the inscription over the door, was a newspaper office, but which, in my judgment, had all the external appearance of a place devoted to the reception of stolen goods.

After remaining inside for a few minutes, he came out, whistling, with his finger and thumb in his waistcoat pocket. A less discreet man than myself would have arrested him on the spot. I remember the necessity of catching the two confederates, and the importance of not interfering with the appointment that had been made for the next morning. Such coolness as this, under trying circumstances, is rarely to be found, I should imagine, in a young beginner, whose reputation as a detective policeman is still to make.

From the house of suspicious appearance, Mr Jay betook himself to a cigar-divan, and read the magazines over a cheroot. I sat at a table near him, and read the magazines likewise over a cheroot. From the divan he strolled to the tavern and had his chops. I strolled to the tavern and had my chops. When he had done, he went back to his lodging. When I had done, I went back to mine. He was overcome with drowsiness early in the evening, and went to bed. As soon as I heard him snoring, I was overcome with drowsiness, and went to bed also.

Early in the morning my two subordinates came to make their report.

They had seen the man named 'Jack' leave the woman near the gate of an apparently respectable villa-residence, not far from the Regent's Park. Left to himself, he took a turning to the right, which led to a sort of suburban street, principally inhabited by shopkeepers. He stopped at the private door of one of the houses, and let himself in with his own key—looking about him as he opened the door, and staring suspiciously at my men as they lounged along on the opposite side of the way. These were all the particulars which the subordinates had to communicate. I kept them in my room to attend on me, if needful, and mounted to my peep-hole to have a look at Mr Jay.

He was occupied in dressing himself, and was taking extraordinary pains to destroy all traces of the natural slovenliness of his appearance. This was precisely what I expected. A vagabond like Mr Jay knows

the importance of giving himself a respectable look when he is going to run the risk of changing a stolen bank-note. At five minutes past ten o'clock, he had given the last brush to his shabby hat and the last scouring with breadcrumb to his dirty gloves. At ten minutes past ten he was in the street, on his way to the nearest cab-stand, and I and my subordinates were close on his heels.

He took a cab, and we took a cab. I had not overheard them appoint a place of meeting, when following them in the Park on the previous day; but I soon found that we were proceeding in the old direction of the Avenue Road gate.

The cab in which Mr Jay was riding turned into the Park slowly. We stopped outside, to avoid exciting suspicion. I got out to follow the cab on foot. Just as I did so, I saw it stop, and detected the two confederates approaching it from among the trees. They got in, and the cab was turned about directly. I ran back to my own cab, and told the driver to let them pass him, and them to follow as before.

The man obeyed my directions, but so clumsily as to excite their suspicions. We had been driving after them about three minutes (returning along the road by which we had advanced) when I looked out of the window to see how far they might be ahead of us. As I did this, I saw two hats popped out of the windows of their cab, and two faces looking back at me. I sank into my place in a cold sweat; the expression is coarse, but no other form of words can describe my condition at that trying moment.

'We are found out!' I said faintly to my subordinates. They stared at me in astonishment. My feelings changed instantly from the depth of despair to the height of indignation.

'It is the cabman's fault. Get out, one of you,' I said, with dignity—'get out and punch his head.'

Instead of following my directions (I should wish this act of disobedience to be reported at headquarters) they both looked out of the window. Before I could pull them back, they both sat down again. Before I could express my just indignation, they both grinned, and said to me, 'Please to look out, sir!'

I did look out. The thieves' cab had stopped.

Where?

At a church door!

What effect this discovery might have had upon the ordinary run of men, I don't know. Being of a strong religious turn myself, it filled me with horror. I have often read of the unprincipled cunning of criminal persons; but I never before heard of three thieves attempting to double on their pursuers by entering a church! The sacrilegious audacity of that proceeding is, I should think, unparalleled in the annals of crime.

I checked my grinning subordinates by a frown. It was easy to see what was passing in their superficial minds. If I had not been able to look below the surface, I might, on observing two nicely-dressed men and one nicely-dressed woman enter a church before eleven in the morning on a weekday, have come to the same hasty conclusion at which my inferiors had evidently arrived. As it was, appearances had no power to impose on *me*. I got out, and, followed by one of my men, entered the church. The other man I sent round to watch the vestry door. You may catch a weasel asleep—but not your humble servant, Matthew Sharpin!

We stole up the gallery stairs, diverged to the organ loft and peered through the curtains in front. There they were all three, sitting in a pew below—yes, incredible as it may appear, sitting in a pew below.

Before I could determine what to do, a clergyman made his appearance in full canonicals, from the vestry door, followed by a clerk. My brain whirled, and my eyesight grew dim. Dark remembrances of robberies committed in vestries floated through my mind. I trembled for the excellent man in full canonicals—I even trembled for the clerk.

The clergyman placed himself inside the altar rails. The three desperadoes approached him. He opened his book, and began to read. What?—you will ask.

I answer, without the slightest hesitation, the first lines of the Marriage Service.

My subordinate had the audacity to look at me, and then to stuff his pocket-handkerchief into his mouth. I scorned to pay any attention to him. After I had discovered that the man 'Jack' was the bridegroom, and that the man Jay acted the part of father, and gave away the bride, I left the church, followed by my man, and joined the other subordinate outside the vestry door. Some people in my position would now have felt rather crestfallen, and would have begun to think that they had made a very foolish mistake. Not the faintest misgiving of any kind troubled me. I did not feel in the slightest degree depreciated in my own estimation. And even now, after a lapse of three hours, my mind remains, I am happy to say, in the same calm and hopeful condition.

As soon as I and my subordinates were assembled together outside the church, I intimated my intention of still following the other cab, in spite of what had occurred. My reason for deciding on this course will appear presently. The two subordinates were astonished at my resolution. One of them had the impertinence to say to me:

'If you please, sir, who is it that we are after? A man who has stolen money, or a man who has stolen a wife?'

The other low person encouraged him by laughing. Both have deserved an official reprimand; and both, I sincerely trust, will be sure to get it.

When the marriage ceremony was over, the three got into their cab; and once more our vehicle (neatly hidden round the corner of the church, so that they could not suspect it to be near them) started to follow theirs.

We traced them to the terminus of the South-Western Railway. The newly-married couple took tickets for Richmond—paying their fare with a half-sovereign, and so depriving me of the pleasure of arresting them, which I should certainly have done, if they had offered a bank-note. They parted from Mr Jay, saying, 'Remember the address—14, Babylon Terrace. You dine with us tomorrow week.' Mr Jay accepted the invitation, and added, jocosely, that he was going home at once to get off his clean clothes, and to be comfortable and dirty again for the rest of the day. I have to report that I saw him home safely, and that he is comfortable and dirty again (to use his own disgraceful language) at the present moment.

Here the affair rests, having by this time reached what I may call its first stage.

I know very well what persons of hasty judgment will be inclined to say of my proceedings thus far. They will assert that I have been deceiving myself all through, in the most absurd way; they will declare that the suspicious conversations which I have reported, referred solely to the difficulties and dangers of successfully carrying out a runaway match; and they will appeal to the scene in the church, as offering undeniable proof of the correctness of their assertions. So let it be. I dispute nothing up to this point. But I ask a question, out of the depths of my own sagacity as a man of the world, which the bitterest of my enemies will not, I think, find it particularly easy to answer.

Granted the fact of the marriage, what proof does it afford me of the innocence of the three persons concerned in that clandestine transaction? It gives me none. On the contrary, it strengthens my suspicions against Mr Jay and his confederates, because it suggests a distinct motive for their stealing money. A gentleman who is going to spend his honeymoon at Richmond wants money; and a gentleman who is in debt to all his tradespeople wants money. Is this an unjustifiable imputation of bad motives? In the name of outraged morality, I deny it. These men have combined together, and have stolen a woman. Why should they not combine together and steal a cash-box? I take my stand on the logic of rigid virtue; and I defy all the sophistry of vice to move me an inch out of my position.

Speaking of virtue, I may add that I have put this view of the case to Mr and Mrs Yatman. That accomplished and charming woman found it difficult, at first, to follow the close chain of my reasoning. I am free to confess that she shook her head, and shed tears, and joined her husband in premature lamentation over the loss of the two hundred pounds. But a little careful explanation on my part, and a little attentive listening on hers, ultimately changed her opinion. She now agrees with me, that there is nothing in this unexpected circumstance of the clandestine marriage which absolutely tends to divert suspicion from Mr Jay, or Mr 'Jack,' or the runaway lady. 'Audacious hussy' was the term my fair friend used in speaking of her, but let that pass. It is more to the purpose to record that Mrs Yatman has not lost confidence in me and that Mr Yatman promises to follow her example, and do his best to look hopefully for future results.

I have now, in the new turn that circumstances have taken, to await advice from your office. I pause for fresh orders with all the composure of a man who had got two strings to his bow. When I traced the three confederates from the church door to the railway terminus, I had two motives for doing so. First, I followed them as a matter of official business, believing them still to have been guilty of the robbery. Secondly, I followed them as a matter of private speculation, with a view of discovering the place of refuge to which the runaway couple intended to retreat, and of making my information a marketable commodity to offer to the young lady's family and friends. Thus, whatever happens, I may congratulate myself beforehand on not having wasted my time. If the office approves of my conduct, I have my plan ready for further proceedings. If the office blames me, I shall take myself off, with my marketable information, to the genteel villa-residence in the neighbourhood of the Regent's Park. Anyway, the affair puts money into my pocket, and does credit to my penetration as an uncommonly sharp man.

I have only one word more to add, and it is this: If any individual ventures to assert that Mr Jay and his confederates are innocent of all share in the stealing of the cash-box, I, in return, defy that individual—though he may even be Chief Inspector Theakstone himself—to tell me who has committed the robbery at Rutherford Street, Soho.

I have the honour to be,

Your very obedient servant,

MATTHEW SHARPIN.

From Chief Inspector Theakstone to Sergeant Bulmer

BIRMINGHAM, July 9th.

SERGEANT BULMER,—That empty-headed puppy, Mr Matthew Sharpin, has made a mess of the case at Rutherford Street, exactly as I expected he would. Business keeps me in this town; so I write to you to set the matter straight. I enclose, with this, the pages of feeble scribble-scrabble which the creature, Sharpin, calls a report. Look them over; and when you have made your way through all the gabble, I think you will agree with me that the conceited booby has looked for the thief in every direction but the right one. You can lay your hand on the guilty person in five minutes, now. Settle the case at once; forward your report to me at this place; and tell Mr Sharpin that he is suspended till further notice.

Yours,

FRANCIS THEAKSTONE.

From Sergeant Bulmer to Chief Inspector Theakstone

LONDON, July 10th.

INSPECTOR THEAKSTONE,—Your letter and enclosure came safe to hand. Wise men, they say, may always learn something, even from a fool. By the time I had got through Sharpin's maundering report of his own folly, I saw my way clear enough to the end of the Rutherford Street case, just as you thought I should. In half an hour's time I was at the house. The first person I saw there was Mr Sharpin himself.

'Have you come to help me?' says he.

'Not exactly,' says I. 'I've come to tell you that you are suspended till further notice.'

'Very good,' says he, not taken down, by so much as a single peg, in his own estimation. 'I thought you would be jealous of me. It's very natural; and I don't blame you. Walk in, pray, and make yourself at home. I'm off to do a little detective business on my own account, in the neighbourhood of the Regent's Park. Ta-ta, sergeant, ta-ta!'

With those words he took himself out of the way—which was exactly what I wanted him to do.

As soon as the maid-servant had shut the door, I told her to inform her master that I wanted to say a word to him in private. She showed me into the parlour behind the shop; and there was Mr Yatman, all alone, reading the newspaper.

'About this matter of the robbery, sir,' says I.

He cut me short, peevishly enough—being naturally a poor, weak,

womanish sort of man. 'You have come to tell me that your wonderfully clever man, who has bored holes in my second-floor partition, has made a mistake, and is off the scent of the scoundrel who has stolen my money.'

'Yes, sir,' says I. 'That *is* one of the things I came to tell you. But I have got something else to say, besides that.'

'Can you tell me who the thief is?' says he, more pettish than ever.

'Yes, sir,' says I, 'I think I can.'

He put down the newspaper, and began to look rather anxious and frightened.

'Not my shopman?' says he. 'I hope, for the man's own sake, it's not my shopman.'

'Guess again, sir,' says I.

'That idle slut, the maid?' says he.

'She is idle, sir,' says I, 'and she is also a slut; my first inquiries about her proved as much as that. But she's not the thief.'

'Then in the name of heaven, who is?' says he.

'Will you please to prepare yourself for a very disagreeable surprise, sir?' says I. 'And in case you lose your temper, will you excuse my remarking that I am the stronger man of the two, and that, if you allow yourself to lay hands on me, I may unintentionally hurt you, in pure self-defence?'

He turned as pale as ashes, and pushed his chair two or three feet away from me.

'You have asked me to tell you, sir, who has taken your money,' I went on. 'If you insist on my giving you an answer——'

'I do insist,' he said, faintly. 'Who has taken it?'

'Your wife has taken it,' I said very quietly, and very positively at the same time.

He jumped out of the chair as if I had put a knife into him, and struck his fist on the table, so heavily that the wood cracked again.

'Steady, sir,' says I. 'Flying into a passion won't help you to the truth.'

'It's a lie!' says he, with another smack of his fist on the table—'a base, vile, infamous lie! How dare you——'

He stopped, and fell back into the chair again, looked about him in a bewildered way, and ended by bursting out crying.

'When your better sense come back to you, sir,' says I, 'I am sure you will be gentleman enough to make an apology for the language you have just used. In the meantime, please to listen, if you can, to a word of explanation. Mr Sharpin has sent in a report to our inspector, of the most irregular and ridiculous kind; setting down, not only all his own foolish doings and sayings, but the doings and sayings of Mrs Yatman

as well. In most cases, such a document would have been fit for the waste-paper basket; but, in this particular case, it so happens that Mr Sharpin's budget of nonsense leads to a certain conclusion, which the simpleton of a writer has been quite innocent of suspecting from the beginning to the end. Of that conclusion I am so sure, that I will forfeit my place, if it does not turn out that Mrs Yatman has been practising upon the folly and conceit of this young man, and that she has tried to shield herself from discovery by purposely encouraging him to suspect the wrong persons. I tell you that confidently; and I will even go further. I will undertake to give a decided opinion as to why Mrs Yatman took the money, and what she has done with it, or with a part of it. Nobody can look at that lady, sir, without being struck by the great taste and beauty of her dress——'

As I said those last words, the poor man seemed to find his powers of speech again. He cut me short directly, as haughtily as if he had been a duke instead of a stationer.

'Try some other means of justifying your vile calumny against my wife,' says he. 'Her milliner's bill for the past year, is on my file of receipted accounts at this moment.'

'Excuse me, sir,' says I, 'but that proves nothing. Milliners, I must tell you, have a certain rascally custom which comes within the daily experience of our office. A married lady who wishes it, can keep two accounts at her dressmaker's; one is the account which her husband sees and pays; the other is the private account, which contains all the extravagant items, and which the wife pays secretly, by instalments, whenever she can. According to our usual experience, these instalments are mostly squeezed out of the housekeeping money. In your case, I suspect no instalments have been paid; proceedings have been threatened; Mrs Yatman, knowing your altered circumstances, has felt herself driven into a corner; and she has paid her private account out of your cash-box.'

'I won't believe it,' says he. 'Every word you speak is an abominable insult to me and to my wife.'

'Are you man enough sir,' says I, taking him up short, in order to save time and words, 'to get that receipted bill you spoke of just now off the file, and come with me at once to the milliner's shop where Mrs Yatman deals?'

He turned red in the face at that, got the bill directly, and put on his hat. I took out of my pocket-book the list containing the numbers of the lost notes, and we left the house together immediately.

Arrived at the milliners (one of the expensive West-end houses, as I expected), I asked for a private interview, on important business, with the mistress of the concern. It was not the first time that she and

I had met over the same delicate investigation. The moment she set eyes on me, she sent for her husband. I mentioned who Mr Yatman was, and what we wanted.

‘This is strictly private?’ inquires her husband. I nodded my head.

‘And confidential?’ says the wife. I nodded again.

‘Do you see any objection, dear, to obliging the sergeant with a sight of the books?’ says the husband.

‘None in the world, love, if you approve of it,’ says the wife.

All this while poor Mr Yatman sat looking the picture of astonishment and distress, quite out of place at our polite conference. The books were brought—and one minute’s look at the pages in which Mrs Yatman’s name figured was enough, and more than enough, to prove the truth of every word I had spoken.

There, in one book, was the husband’s account, which Mr Yatman had settled. And there, in the other, was the private account, crossed off also; the date of settlement being the very day after the loss of the cash-box. This said private account amounted to the sum of a hundred and seventy-five pounds, odd shillings; and it extended over a period of three years. Not a single instalment had been paid on it. Under the last line was an entry to this effect: ‘Written to for the third time, June 23rd.’ I pointed to it, and asked the milliner if that meant ‘last June’. Yes, it did mean last June; and she now deeply regretted to say that it had been accompanied by a threat of legal proceedings.

‘I thought you gave good customers more than three years credit?’ says I.

The milliner looks at Mr Yatman, and whispers to me— ‘Not when a lady’s husband gets into difficulties.’

She pointed to the account as she spoke. The entries after the time when Mr Yatman’s circumstances became involved were just as extravagant, for a person in his wife’s situation, as the entries for the year before that period. If the lady had economized in other things, she had certainly not economized in the matter of dress.

There was nothing left now but to examine the cash-book, for form’s sake. The money had been paid in notes, the amounts and numbers of which exactly tallied with the figures set down in my list.

After that, I thought it best to get Mr Yatman out of the house immediately. He was in such a pitiable condition, that I called a cab and accompanied him home in it. At first he cried and raved like a child: but I soon quieted him—and I must add, to his credit, that he made me a most handsome apology for his language, as the cab drew up at his house door. In return, I tried to give him some advice about how to set matters right, for the future, with his wife. He paid very little attention to me, and went upstairs muttering to himself about a

separation. Whether Mrs Yatman will come cleverly out of the scrape or not, seems doubtful. I should say, myself, that she will go into screeching hysterics, and so frighten the poor man into forgiving her. But this is no business of ours. So far as we are concerned, the case is now at an end; and the present report may come to a conclusion along with it.

I remain, accordingly, yours to command,

THOMAS BULMER.

PS.—I have to add, that, on leaving Rutherford Street, I met Mr Matthew Sharpin coming to pack up his things.

‘Only think!’ says he, rubbing his hands in great spirits, ‘I’ve been to the genteel villa-residence; and the moment I mentioned by business, they kicked me out directly. There were two witnesses of the assault; and it’s worth a hundred pounds to me, if it’s worth a farthing.’

‘I wish you joy of your luck,’ says I.

‘Thank you,’ says he. ‘When may I pay you the same compliment on finding the thief?’

‘Whenever you like,’ says I, ‘for the thief is found.’

‘Just what I expected,’ says he. ‘I’ve done all the work; and now you cut in, and claim all the credit—Mr Jay of course?’

‘No,’ says I.

‘Who is it then?’ says he.

‘Ask Mrs Yatman,’ says I. ‘She’s waiting to tell you.’

‘All right! I’d much rather hear it from that charming woman than from you,’ says he, and goes into the house in a mighty hurry.

What do you think of that, Inspector Theakstone? Would you like to stand in Mr Sharpin’s shoes? I shouldn’t, I can promise you!

From Chief Inspector Theakstone to Mr Matthew Sharpin

July 12th.

SIR,—Sergeant Bulmer has already told you to consider yourself suspended until further notice. I have now authority to add, that your services as a member of the Detective Police are positively declined. You will please to take this letter as notifying officially your dismissal from the force.

I may inform you, privately, that your rejection is not intended to cast any reflection on your character. It merely implies that you are not quite sharp enough for our purpose. If we *are* to have a new recruit among us, we should infinitely prefer Mrs Yatman.

Your obedient servant,

FRANCIS THEAKSTONE.

NOTE ON THE PRECEDING CORRESPONDENCE, ADDED BY
MR THEAKSTONE

The Inspector is not in a position to append any explanations of importance to the last of the letters. It has been discovered that Mr Matthew Sharpin left the house in Rutherford Street five minutes after his interview outside of it with Sergeant Bulmer—his manner expressing the liveliest emotions of terror and astonishment, and his left cheek displaying a bright patch of red, which might have been the result of a slap on the face from a female hand. He was also heard, by the shopman at Rutherford Street, to use a very shocking expression in reference to Mrs Yatman; and was seen to clench his fist vindictively, as he ran round the corner of the street. Nothing more has been heard of him; and it is conjectured that he has left London with the intention of offering his valuable services to the provincial police.

On the interesting domestic subject of Mr and Mrs Yatman still less is known. It has, however, been positively ascertained that the medical attendant of the family was sent for in a great hurry, on the day when Mr Yatman returned from the milliner's shop. The neighbouring chemist received, soon afterwards, a prescription of a soothing nature to make up for Mrs Yatman. The day after, Mr Yatman purchased some smelling-salts at the shop, and afterwards appeared at the circulating library to ask for a novel, descriptive of high life, that would amuse an invalid lady. It has been inferred from these circumstances, that he has not thought it desirable to carry out his threat of separating himself from his wife—at least in the present (presumed) condition of that lady's sensitive nervous system.

9

My Black Mirror

Has everybody heard of Doctor Dee, the magician, and of the black speculum or mirror of cannel coal, in which he could see at will everything in the wide world, and many things beyond it? If so, I may introduce myself to the readers in the easiest manner possible. Although I cannot claim to be a descendant of Doctor Dee, I profess the occult art to the extent of keeping a black mirror, made exactly after the model of that possessed by the old astrologer. My speculum, like his, is constructed of an oval piece of cannel coal, highly polished, and set on a wooden back with a handle to hold it by. Nothing can be simpler than its appearance; nothing more marvellous than its capacities—provided always that the person using it be a true adept. Any man who disbelieves nothing is a true adept. Let him get a piece of cannel coal, polish it highly, clean it before use with a white cambric handkerchief, retire to a private sitting-room, invoke the name of Doctor Dee, shut both eyes for a moment, and open them again suddenly on the black mirror. If he does not see anything he likes, after that—past, present, or future—then let him depend on it there is some speck or flaw of incredulity in his nature; and the sad termination of his career may be considered certain. Sooner or later, he will end in being nothing but a rational man.

I, who have not one morsel of rationality about me; I, who am as true an adept as if I had lived in the good old times ('the Ages of Faith,' as another adept has very properly called them) find unceasing interest and occupation in my black mirror. For everything I want to know, and for everything I want to do, I consult it. This very day, for instance (being in the position of most of the other inhabitants of London, at the present season), I am thinking of soon going out of town. My time for being away is so limited, and my wanderings have extended, at home and abroad, in so many directions, that I can hardly hope to visit

any really beautiful scenes, or gather any really interesting experiences that are absolutely new to me. I must go to some place that I have visited before; and I must, in common regard to my own holiday interests, take care that it is a place where I have already thoroughly enjoyed myself, without a single drawback to my pleasure that is worth mentioning.

Under these circumstances, if I were a mere rational man, what should I do? Weary my memory to help me to decide on a destination, by giving me my past travelling recollections in one long panorama—although I can tell by experience that of all my faculties memory is the least serviceable at the very time when I most want to employ it. As a true adept, I know better than to give myself any useless trouble of this sort. I retire to my private sitting-room, take up my black mirror, mention what I want—and, behold! on the surface of the cannel coal the image of my former travels passes before me, in a succession of dream-scenes. I revive my past experiences, and I make my present choice out of them, by the evidence of my own eyes; and I may add, by that of my own ears also—for the figures in my magic landscapes move and speak!

Shall I go on the continent again? Yes. To what part of it? Suppose I revisit Austrian Italy, for the sake of renewing my familiarity with certain views, buildings, and pictures which once delighted me? But let me first ascertain whether I had any serious drawbacks to complain of on making acquaintance with that part of the world. Black mirror! show me my first evening in Austrian Italy.

A cloud rises on the magic surface—rests on it a little while—slowly disappears. My eyes are fixed on the cannel coal. I see nothing, hear nothing of the world about me. The first of the magic scenes grows visible. I behold it, as in a dream. Away with the ignorant Present. I am in Italy again.

The darkness is just coming on. I see myself looking out of the side window of a carriage. The hollow roll of the wheels has changed to a sharp rattle, and we have entered a town. We cross a vast square, illuminated by two lamps and a glimmer of reflected light from a coffee-shop window. We get on into a long street, with heavy stone arcades for foot-passengers to walk under. Everything looks dark and confused; grim visions of cloaked men flit by, all smoking; shrill female voices rise above the clatter of our wheels, then subside again in a moment. We stop. The bells on the horses' necks ring their last tiny peal for the night. A greasy hand opens the carriage door, and helps me down the steps. I am under an archway, with blank darkness before me, with a smiling man holding a flaming tallow candle by my side, with street spectators silently looking on behind me. They wear

high-crowned hats and brown cloaks, mysteriously muffling them up to the chin. Brigands, evidently. Pass, Scene! I am a peaceable man, and I don't like the suspicion of a stiletto, even in a dream.

Show me my sitting-room. Where did I dine, and how, on my first evening in Austrian Italy?

I am in the presence of two cheerful waiters, with two flaring candles. One is lighting lamps; the other is setting brushwood and logs in a blaze in a perfect cavern of a hearth. Where am I, now that there is plenty of light to see by? Apparently in a banqueting-hall, fifty feet long by forty wide. This is my private sitting-room, and I am to eat my little bit of dinner in it all alone. Let me look about observantly, while the meal is preparing. Above me is an arched painted ceiling, all alive with Cupids rolling about on clouds, and scattering perpetual roses on the heads of travellers beneath. Around me are classical landscapes of the school which treats the spectator to umbrella-shaped trees, calm green oceans, and foregrounds rampant with dancing goddesses. Beneath me is something elastic to tread upon, smelling very like old straw, which indeed it is, covered with a thin drugget. This is humanely intended to protect me against the cold of the stone or brick floor, and is a concession to English prejudices on the subject of comfort. May I be grateful for it, and take no unfriendly notice of the fleas, though they are crawling up my legs from the straw and the drugget already!

What do I see next? Dinner on table. Drab-coloured soup, which will take a great deal of thickening with grated Parmesan cheese, and five dishes all round it. Trout fried in oil, rolled beef steeped in succulent brown gravy, roast chicken with watercresses, square pastry cakes with mincemeat inside them, fried potatoes—all excellent. This is really good Italian cookery: it is more fanciful than the English and more solid than the French. It is not greasy, and none of the fried dishes taste in the slightest degree of lamp oil. The wine is good, too—effervescent, smacking of the Muscatel grape, and only eighteen-pence a bottle. The second course more than sustains the character of the first. Small browned birds that look like larks, their plump breasts clothed succulently with a counterpane of fat bacon, their tender backs reposing on beds of savoury toast,—stewed pigeon,—a sponge-cake pudding,—baked pears. Where could one find a better dinner or a pleasanter waiter to serve at table? He is neither servile nor familiar, and is always ready to occupy any superfluous attention I have to spare with all the small talk that is in him. He has, in fact, but one fault, and that consists in his very vexatious and unaccountable manner of varying the language in which he communicates with me.

I speak French and Italian, and he can speak French also as well as

his own tongue. I naturally, however, choose Italian on first addressing him, because it is his native language. He understands what I say to him perfectly, but he answers me in French. I bethink myself, upon this, that he may be wishing, like the rest of us, to show off any little morsel of learning that he has picked up, or that he may fancy I understand French better than I do Italian, and may be politely anxious to make our colloquy as easy as possible to me. Accordingly I humour him, and change to French when I next speak. No sooner are the words out of my mouth than, with inexplicable perversity, he answers me in Italian. All through the dinner I try hard to make him talk the same language that I do, yet, excepting now and then a few insignificant phrases, I never succeed. What is the meaning of his playing this game of philological see-saw with me? Do the people here actually carry the national politeness so far as to flatter the stranger by according him an undisturbed monopoly of the language in which he chooses to talk to them? I cannot explain it, and dessert surprises me in the midst of my perplexities. Four dishes again! Parmesan cheese, macarons, pears, and green figs. With these and another bottle of the effervescent wine, how brightly the evening will pass away by the blazing wood fire! Surely, I cannot do better than go to Austrian Italy again, after having met with such a first welcome to the country as this. Shall I put down the cannel coal, and determine without any more ado on paying a second visit to the land that is cheered by my comfortable inn? No, not too hastily. Let me try the effect of one or two more scenes from my past travelling experience in this particular division of the Italian peninsula before I decide.

Black Mirror! how did I end my evening at the comfortable inn?

The cloud passes again, heavily and thickly this time, over the surface of the mirror—clears away slowly—shows me myself dozing luxuriously by the red embers with an empty bottle at my side. A suddenly-opening door wakes me up; the landlord of the inn approaches, places a long, official-looking book on the table, and hands me pen and ink. I inquire peevishly what I am wanted to write at that time of night, when I am just digesting my dinner. The landlord answers respectfully that I am required to give the police a full true and particular account of myself. I approach the table, thinking this demand rather absurd, for my passport is already in the hands of the authorities. However, as I am in a despotic country, I keep my thoughts to myself, open a blank page in the official-looking book, see that it is divided into columns, with printed headings, and find that I no more understand what they mean than I understand an assessed tax-paper at home, to which by-the-bye, the blank page bears a striking general resemblance. The headings are technical official

words, which I now meet with as part of Italian speech for the first time. I am obliged to appeal to the polite landlord, and, by his assistance, I get gradually to understand what it is the Austrian police want of me.

The police require to know, before they will let me go on peaceably tomorrow, first, What is my name in full? (Answered easily enough.) Second, What is my nation? (British, and delighted to cast it in the teeth of continental tyrants.) Third, Where was I born? (In London—parish of Marylebone—and I wish my native vestry knew how the Austrian authorities were using me.) Fourth, Where do I live? (In London, again—and I have half a mind to write to the *Times* about this nuisance before I go to bed.) Fifth, How old am I? (My age is what it has been for the last seven years, and what it will remain until further notice—twenty-five exactly.) What next? By all that is inquisitive, here are the police wanting to know (sixth) whether I am married or single! Landlord, what is the Italian for bachelor? 'Write Nubile, signor.' Nubile? That means Marriageable. Permit me to remark, my good sir, that this is a woman's definition of a bachelor—not a man's. No matter, let it pass. What next? (O distrustful despots! what next?) Seventh, What is my condition? (First-rate condition, to be sure—full of rolled beef, toasted larks, and effervescent wine. Condition! What do they mean by that? Profession, is it? I have not got one. What shall I write? 'Write Proprietor, signor.' Very well; but I don't know that I am proprietor of anything except the clothes I stand up in: even my trunk was borrowed of a friend.) Eighth, Where do I come from? Ninth, Where am I going to? Tenth, When did I get my passport? Eleventh, Where did I get my passport? Twelfth, Who gave me my passport? Was there ever such a monstrous string of questions to address to a harmless, idle man, who only wants to potter about Italy quietly in a postchaise! Do they catch Mazzini, landlord, with all these precautions! No: they only catch *me*. There! there! take your Travellers' Book back to the police. Surely, such unfounded distrust of my character as the production of that volume at my dinner-table implies, forms a serious drawback to the pleasure of travelling in Austrian Italy. Shall I give up at once all idea of going there, in my own innocent character, again? No; let me be deliberate in arriving at a decision—let me patiently try the experiment of looking at one more scene from the past.

Black Mirror! how did I travel in Austrian Italy after I had paid my bill in the morning, and had left my comfortable inn?

The new dream-scene shows me evening again. I have joined another English traveller in taking a vehicle that they call a *calèche*. It is a frowsy kind of sedan-chair on wheels, with greasy leather curtains

and cushions. In the days of its prosperity and youth it might have been a state-coach, and might have carried Sir Robert Walpole to court, or the Abbé Dubois to a supper with the Regent Orleans. It is driven by a tall, cadaverous, ruffianly postilion, with his clothes all in rags, and without a spark of mercy for his miserable horses. It smells badly, looks badly, goes badly; and jerks, and cracks, and totters as if it would break down altogether—when it is suddenly stopped on a rough stone pavement in front of a lonely post-house, just as the sun is sinking and the night is setting in.

The postmaster comes out to superintend the harnessing of fresh horses. He is tipsy, familiar, and confidential; he first apostrophizes the calèche with contemptuous curses, then takes me mysteriously aside, and declares that the whole highroad onward to our morning's destination swarms with thieves. It seems, then, that the Austrian police reserve all their vigilance for innocent travellers, and leave local rogues entirely unmolested. I make this reflection, and ask the postmaster what he recommends us to do for the protection of our portmanteaus, which are tied on to the roof of the calèche. He answers that unless we take special precautions, the thieves will get up behind, on our crazy foot-board, and will cut the trunks off the top of our frowsy travelling-carriage, under cover of the night, while we are quietly seated inside, seeing and suspecting nothing. We instantly express our readiness to take any precautions that any one may be kind enough to suggest. The postmaster winks, lays his finger archly on the side of his nose, and gives an unintelligible order in the patois of the district. Before I have time to ask what he is going to do, every idler about the post-house who can climb, scales the summit of the calèche, and every idler who cannot stand roaring and gesticulating below with a lighted candle in his hand.

While the hubbub is at its loudest, a rival travelling-carriage suddenly drives into the midst of us, in the shape of a huge barrel-organ on wheels, and bursts out awfully in the darkness with the grand march in Semiramide, played with the utmost fury of the drum, cymbal, and trumpet-stops. The noise is so bewildering that my travelling companion and I take refuge inside our carriage, and shut our eyes, and stop our ears, and abandon ourselves to despair. After a time, our elbows are jogged, and a string apiece is given to us through each window. We are informed in shouts, accompanied fiercely by the grand march, that the strings are fastened to our portmanteaus above; that we are to keep the loose ends round our forefingers all night; and that the moment we feel a tug, we may be quite certain the thieves are at work, and may feel justified in stopping the carriage and fighting for our baggage without any more ado.

Under these agreeable auspices, we start again, with our strings round our forefingers. We feel like men about to ring the bell—or like men engaged in deep-sea fishing—or like men on the point of pulling the string of a shower-bath. Fifty times at least, during the next stage, each of us is certain that he feels a tug, and pops his head agitatedly out of the window, and sees absolutely nothing, and falls back again exhausted with excitement in a corner of the calèche. All through the night this wear and tear of our nerves goes on; and all through the night (thanks, probably, to the ceaseless popping of our heads out of the windows) not the ghost of a thief comes near us. We begin, at last, almost to feel that it would be a relief to be robbed—almost to doubt the policy of resisting any mercifully-larcenous hands stretched forth to rescue us from the incubus of our own baggage. The morning dawn finds us languid and haggard, with the accused portmanteau strings dangling unregarded in the bottom of the calèche. And this is taking our pleasure! This is an incident of travel in Austrian Italy! Faithful Black Mirror, accept my thanks. The warning of the two last dream-scenes that you have shown me shall not be disregarded. Whatever other direction I may take when I go out of town for the present season, one road at least I know that I shall avoid—the road that leads to Austrian Italy.

Shall I keep on the northern side of the Alps, and travel a little, let us say, in German-Switzerland? Black Mirror! how did I get on when I was last in that country? Did I like my introductory experience at my first inn?

The vision changes, and takes me again to the outside of a house of public entertainment; a great white, clean, smooth-fronted, opulent-looking hotel—a very different building from my dingy, cavernous Italian inn. At the street-door stands the landlord. He is a little, lean, rosy man, dressed all in black, and looking like a master undertaker. I observe that he neither steps forwards nor smiles when I get out of the carriage and ask for a bedroom. He gives me the shortest possible answer, growls guttural instructions to a waiter, then looks out into the street again and, before I have so much as turned my back on him, forgets my existence immediately. The vision changes again, and takes me inside the hotel. I am following a waiter upstairs—the man looks unaffectedly sorry to see me. In the bedroom corridor we find a chambermaid asleep with her head on a table. She is woke up; opens a door with a groan, and scowls at me reproachfully when I say that the room will do. I descend to dinner. Two waiters attend on me, under protest, and look as if they were on the point of giving warning every time I require them to change my plate. At the second course the landlord comes in, and stands and stares at me intently and silently

with his hands in his pockets. This may be his way of seeing that my dinner is well served; but it looks much more like his way of seeing that I do not abstract any spoons from his table. I become irritated by the boorish staring and frowning of everybody about me, and express myself strongly on the subject of my reception at the hotel to an English traveller dining near me.

The English traveller is one of those exasperating men who are always ready to put up with injuries, and he coolly accounts for the behaviour of which I complain, by telling me that it is the result of the blunt honesty of the natives, who cannot pretend to take an interest in me which they do not really feel. What do I care about the feelings of the stolid landlord and the sulky waiters? I require the comforting outward show from them—the inward substance is not of the smallest consequence to me. When I travel in civilized countries, I want such a reception at my inn as shall genially amuse and gently tickle all the region round about my organ of self-esteem. Blunt honesty which is too offensively truthful to pretend to be glad to see me, shows no corresponding integrity—as my own experience informs me at this very hotel—about the capacities of its wine-bottles, but gives me a pint and charges me for a quart in the bill, like the rest of the world. Blunt honesty, although it is too brutally sincere to look civilly distressed and sympathetic when I say that I am tired after my journey, does not hesitate to warm up, and present before me as newly dressed, a Methuselah of a duck that has been cooked several times over, several days ago, and paid for, though not eaten, by my travelling predecessors. Blunt honesty fleeces me according to every established predatory law of the landlord's code, yet shrinks from the amiable duplicity of fawning affectionately before me all the way upstairs when I first present myself to be swindled. Away with such detestable sincerity as this! Away with the honesty which brutalizes a landlord's manners without reforming his bottles or his bills! Away with my German-Swiss hotel, and the extortionate cynic who keeps it! Let others pay tribute if they will to that boor in innkeeper's clothing, the colour of my money he shall never see again.

Suppose I avoid German-Switzerland, and try Switzerland proper? Mirror! how did I travel when I last found myself on the Swiss side of the Alps?

The new vision removes me even from the most distant view of an hotel of any kind, and places me in a wild mountain country where the end of a rough road is lost in the dry bed of a torrent. I am seated in a queer little box on wheels, called a Char, drawn by a mule and a mare, and driven by a jovial coachman in a blue blouse. I have hardly time to look down alarmedly at the dry bed of the torrent, before the

Char plunges into it. Rapidly and recklessly we thump along over rocks and stones, acclivities and declivities that would shake down the stoutest English travelling-carriage, knock up the best-bred English horses, nonplus the most knowing English coachman. Jovial Blue Blouse, singing like a nightingale, drives ahead regardless of every obstacle—the mule and mare tear along as if the journey was the great enjoyment of the day to them—the Char cracks, rends, sways, bumps, and totters, but scorns, as becomes a hardy little mountain vehicle, to overturn or come to pieces. When we are not among the rocks we are rolling and heaving in sloughs of black mud and sand, like a Dutch herring-boat in a ground-swell. It is all one to Blue Blouse and the mule and mare. They are just as ready to drag through sloughs as to jolt over rocks; and when we do come occasionally to a bit of unencumbered ground, they always indemnify themselves for past hardship and fatigue by galloping like mad. As for my own sensations in the character of passenger in the Char, they are not, physically speaking, of the pleasantest possible kind. I can only keep myself inside my vehicle by dint of holding tight with both hands by anything I can find to grasp at; and I am so shaken throughout my whole anatomy that my very jaws clatter again, and my feet play a perpetual tattoo on the bottom of the Char. Did I hit on no method of travelling more composed and deliberate than this, I wonder, when I was last in Switzerland? Must I make up my mind to be half-shaken to pieces if I am bold enough to venture on going there again?

The surface of the Black Mirror is once more clouded over. It clears, and the vision is now of a path along the side of a precipice. A mule is following the path, and I am the adventurous traveller who is astride on the beast's back. The first observation that occurs to me in my new position is, that mules thoroughly deserve their reputation for obstinacy, and that, in regard to the particular animal on which I am riding, the less I interfere with him and the more I conduct myself as if I was a pack-saddle on his back, the better we are sure to get on together.

Carrying pack-saddles is his main business in life; and though he saw me get on his back, he persists in treating me as if I was a bale of goods, by walking on the extreme edge of the precipice, so as not to run any risk of rubbing his load against the safe, or mountain, side of the path. In this and in other things I find that he is the victim of routine, and the slave of habit. He has a way of stopping short, placing himself in a slanting position, and falling into a profound meditation at some of the most awkward turns in the wild mountain roads. I imagine at first that he may be halting in this abrupt and inconvenient manner to take breath; but then he never exerts himself so as to tax his

lungs in the smallest degree, and he stops on the most unreasonably irregular principles, sometimes twice in ten minutes—sometimes not more than twice in two hours—evidently just as his new ideas happen to absorb his attention or not. It is part of his exasperating character at these times, always to become immersed in reflection where the muleteer's staff has not room to reach him with the smallest effect; and where, loading him with blows being out of the question, loading him with abusive language is the only other available process for getting him on. I find that he generally turns out to be susceptible to the influence of injurious epithets after he has heard himself insulted five or six times. Once his obdurate nature gives way, even at the third appeal. He has just stopped with me on his back, to amuse himself, at a dangerous part of the road, with a little hard thinking in a steeply slanting position; and it becomes therefore urgently necessary to abuse him into proceeding forthwith. First, the muleteer calls him a Serpent—he never stirs an inch. Secondly, the muleteer calls him a Frog—he goes on imperturbably with his meditation. Thirdly, the muleteer roars out indignantly, Ah sacré nom d'un Butor! (which, interpreted by the help of my Anglo-French dictionary, means apparently, Ah, sacred name of a Muddle-head!); and at this extraordinary adjuration the beast instantly jerks up his nose, shakes his ears, and goes on his way indignantly.

Mule-riding, under these circumstances, is certainly an adventurous and amusing method of travelling, and well worth trying for once in a way; but I am not at all sure that I should enjoy a second experience of it, and I have my doubts on this account—to say nothing of my dread of a second jolting journey in a Char—about the propriety of undertaking another journey to Switzerland during the present sultry season. It will be wisest, perhaps, to try the effect of a new scene from the past, representing some former visit to some other locality, before I venture on arriving at a decision. I have rejected Austrian Italy and German Switzerland, and I am doubtful about Switzerland proper. Suppose I do my duty as a patriot, and give the attractions of my own country a fair chance of appealing to any past influences of the agreeable kind, which they may have exercised over me? Black Mirror! when I was last a tourist at home, how did I travel about from place to place?

The cloud on the magic surface rises slowly and grandly, like the lifting of a fog at sea, and discloses a tiny drawing-room, with a skylight window, and a rose-coloured curtain drawn over it to keep out the sun. A bright bookshelf runs all round this little fairy chamber, just below the ceiling, where the cornice would be in loftier rooms. Sofas extend along the wall on either side, and mahogany cupboards

full of good things ensconce themselves snugly in the four corners. The table is brightened with nosegays; the mantle-shelf has a smart railing all round it; and the looking-glass above is just large enough to reflect becomingly the face and shoulders of any lady who will give herself the trouble of looking into it. The present inhabitants of the room are three gentlemen with novels and newspapers in their hands, taking their ease in blouses, dressing-gowns, and slippers. They are reposeing on the sofas with fruit and wine within easy reach—and one of the party looks to me very much like the enviable possessor of the Black Mirror. They exhibit a spectacle of luxury which would make an ancient Spartan shudder with disgust; and, in an adjoining apartment, their band is attending on them, in the shape of a musical box which is just now playing the last scene in *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

Hark! what sounds are those mingling with the notes of Donizetti's lovely music—now rising over it sublimely, now dying away under it, gently and more gently still? Our sweet opera air shall come to its close, our music shall play for its short destined time and then be silent again; but those more glorious sounds shall go on with us day and night, shall still swell and sink inexhaustibly, long after we and all who know and love and remember us have passed from this earth for ever. It is the wash of the waves that now travels along with us grandly wherever we go. We are at sea in a schooner yacht, and we are taking our pleasure along the southern shores of the English coast.

Yes, this to every man who can be certain of his own stomach, this is the true luxury of travelling, the true secret for thoroughly enjoying all the attractions of moving about from place to place. Wherever we now go, we carry our elegant and comfortable home along with us. We can stop where we like, see what we like, and always come back to our favourite corner on the sofa, always carry on our favourite occupations and amusements, and still be travelling, still be getting forward to new scenes all the time. Here is no hurrying to accommodate yourself to other people's hours for starting, no scrambling for places, no wearisome watchfulness over baggage. Here are no anxieties about strange beds—for have we not each of us our own sweet little cabin to nestle in at night?—no agitating dependence at the dinner hour upon the vagaries of strange cooks—for have we not our own sumptuous larder always to return to, our own accomplished and faithful culinary artist always waiting to minister to our special tastes? We can walk and sleep, stand up or lie down just as we please, in our floating travelling-carriage. We can make our own road, and trespass nowhere. The bores we dread, the letters we don't want to answer, cannot follow and annoy us. We are the freest travellers under Heaven; and we find something to interest and attract

us through every hour of the day. The ships we meet, the trimming of our sails, the varying of the weather, the everlasting innumerable changes of the ocean, afford constant occupation for eye and ear. Sick, indeed, must that libellous traveller have been who first called the sea monotonous—sick to death, and perhaps, born brother also to that other traveller of evil renown, the first man who journeyed from Dan to Beersheba, and found all barren.

Rest then awhile unemployed, my faithful Black Mirror! The last scene you have shown me is sufficient to answer the purpose for which I took you up. Towards what point of the compass I may turn after leaving London is more than I can tell; but this I know, that my next post-horses shall be the winds, my next stages coast-towns, my next road over the open waves. I will be a sea-traveller once more, and will put off resuming my land journeyings until the arrival of that most obliging of all convenient periods of time—a future opportunity.

10

John Jago's Ghost or The Dead Alive

I

'Heart all right,' said the doctor. 'Lungs all right. No organic disease that I can discover. Philip Lefrank, don't alarm yourself. You are not going to die yet. The disease you are suffering from is—overwork. The remedy in your case is—rest.'

So the doctor spoke, in my chambers in the Temple (London); having been sent for to see me about half an hour after I had alarmed my clerk by fainting at my desk. I have no wish to intrude myself needlessly on the reader's attention; but it may be necessary to add, in the way of explanation, that I am a 'junior' barrister in good practice. I come from the Channel Island of Jersey. The French spelling of my name (Lefranc) was Anglicized generations since, in the days when the letter 'k' was still used in England at the end of words which now terminate in 'c'. We hold our heads high, nevertheless, as a Jersey family. It is to this day a trial to my father to hear his son described as a member of the English bar.

'Rest!' I repeated, when my medical adviser had done. 'My good friend, are you aware that it is term time? The courts are sitting. Look at the briefs waiting for me on that table! Rest means ruin in my case.'

'And work,' added the doctor, quietly, 'means death.'

I started. He was not trying to frighten me: he was plainly in earnest.

'It is merely a question of time,' he went on. 'You have a fine constitution; you are a young man; but you cannot deliberately overwork your brain, and derange your nervous system much longer. Go away at once. If you are a good sailor, take a sea-voyage. The ocean-air is the best of all air to build you up again. No: I don't want to write a prescription. I decline to physic you. I have no more to say.'

With those words my medical friend left the room. I was obstinate: I went into court the same day.

The senior counsel in the case on which I was engaged applied to

me for some information which it was my duty to give him. To my horror and amazement, I was perfectly unable to collect my ideas: facts and dates all mingled together confusedly in my mind. I was led out of court thoroughly terrified about myself. The next day my briefs went back to the attorneys; and I followed my doctor's advice by taking my passage for America in the first steamer that sailed for New York.

I had chosen the voyage to America in preference to any other trip by sea, with a special object in view. A relative of my mother's had emigrated to the United States many years since, and had thriven there as a farmer. He had given me a general invitation to visit him if I ever crossed the Atlantic. The long period of inaction, under the name of *rest*, to which the doctor's decision had condemned me, could hardly be more pleasantly occupied, as I thought, than by paying a visit to my relation, and seeing what I could of America in that way. After a brief sojourn at New York, I started by railway for the residence of my host—Mr Isaac Meadowcroft, of Morwick Farm.

There are some of the grandest natural prospects on the face of creation in America. There is also to be found in certain States of the Union, by way of wholesome contrast, scenery as flat, as monotonous, and as uninteresting to the traveller, as any that the earth can show. The part of the country in which Mr Meadowcroft's farm was situated fell within this latter category. I looked round me when I stepped out of the railway carriage on the platform at Morwick Station; and I said to myself, 'If to be cured means, in my case, to be dull, I have accurately picked out the very place for the purpose.'

I look back at those words by the light of later events; and I pronounce them, as you will soon pronounce them, to be the words of an essentially rash man, whose hasty judgment never stopped to consider what surprises time and chance together might have in store for him.

Mr Meadowcroft's eldest son, Ambrose, was waiting at the station to drive me to the farm.

There was no forewarning, in the appearance of Ambrose Meadowcroft, of the strange and terrible events that were to follow my arrival at Morwick. A healthy, handsome young fellow, one of thousands of other healthy, handsome young fellows, said, 'How d'ye do, Mr Lefrank? Glad to see you, sir. Jump into the buggy: the man will look after your portmanteau.' With equally conventional politeness I answered, 'Thank you. How are you all at home?' So we started on the way to the farm.

Our conversation on the drive began with the subjects of agriculture and breeding. I displayed my total ignorance of crops and

cattle before we had travelled ten yards on our journey. Ambrose Meadowcroft cast about for another topic, and failed to find it. Upon this I cast about on my side, and asked, at a venture, if I had chosen a convenient time for my visit. The young farmer's stolid brown face instantly brightened. I had evidently hit, haphazard, on an interesting subject.

'You couldn't have chosen a better time,' he said. 'Our house has never been so cheerful as it is now.'

'Have you any visitors staying with you?'

'It's not exactly a visitor. It's a new member of the family who has come to live with us.'

'A new member of the family? May I ask who it is?'

Ambrose Meadowcroft considered before he replied; touched his horse with the whip; looked at me with a certain sheepish hesitation; and suddenly burst out with the truth, in the plainest possible words:

'It's just the nicest girl, sir, you ever saw in your life.'

'Ay ay! A friend of your sister's, I suppose?'

'A friend! Bless your heart! it's our little American cousin—Naomi Colebrook.'

I vaguely remembered that a younger sister of Mr Meadowcroft's had married an American merchant in the remote past, and had died many years since, leaving an only child. I was now further informed that the father also was dead. In his last moments he had committed his helpless daughter to the compassionate care of his wife's relations at Morwick.

'He was always a speculating man,' Ambrose went on. 'Tried one thing after another, and failed in all. Died, sir, leaving barely enough to bury him. My father was a little doubtful, before she came here, how his American niece would turn out. We are English, you know; and, though we do live in the United States, we stick fast to our English ways and habits. We don't much like American women in general, I can tell you; but when Naomi made her appearance, she conquered us all. Such a girl! Took her place as one of the family directly. Learnt to make herself useful in the dairy in a week's time. I tell you this—she hasn't been with us quite two months yet; and we wonder already how we ever got on without her!'

Once started on the subject of Naomi Colebrook, Ambrose held to that one topic, and talked on it without intermission. It required no great gift of penetration to discover the impression which the American cousin had produced in this case. The young fellow's enthusiasm communicated itself, in a certain tepid degree, to me. I really felt a mild flutter of anticipation at the prospect of seeing Naomi, when we drew up, towards the close of evening, at the gates of Morwick Farm.

II

Immediately on my arrival, I was presented to Mr Meadowcroft, the father.

The old man had become a confirmed invalid, confined by chronic rheumatism to his chair. He received me kindly, and a little wearily as well. His only unmarried daughter (he had long since been left a widower) was in the room, in attendance on her father. She was a melancholy, middle-aged woman, without visible attractions of any sort—one of those persons who appear to accept the obligation of living, under protest, as a burden which they would never have consented to bear if they had only been consulted first. We three had a dreary little interview in a parlour of bare walls; and then I was permitted to go upstairs, and unpack my portmanteau in my own room.

‘Supper will be at nine o’clock, sir,’ said Miss Meadowcroft.

She pronounced those words as if ‘supper’ was a form of domestic offence, habitually committed by the men, and endured by the women. I followed the groom up to my room, not over well pleased with my first experience of the farm.

No Naomi, and no romance, thus far!

My room was clean—oppressively clean. I quite longed to see a little dust somewhere. My library was limited to the Bible and the Prayer Book. My view from the window showed me a dead flat in a partial state of cultivation, fading sadly from view in the waning light. Above the head of my spruce white bed hung a scroll, bearing a damnatory quotation from scripture in emblazoned letters of red and black. The dismal presence of Miss Meadowcroft had passed over my bedroom, and had blighted it. My spirits sank as I looked round me. Supper-time was still an event in the future. I lit the candles, and took from my portmanteau what I firmly believe to have been the first French novel ever produced at Morwick Farm. It was one of the masterly and charming stories of Dumas the elder. In five minutes I was in a new world, and my melancholy room was full of the liveliest French company. The sound of an imperative and uncompromising bell recalled me in due time to the regions of reality. I looked at my watch. Nine o’clock.

Ambrose met me at the bottom of the stairs, and showed me the way to the supper-room.

Mr Meadowcroft’s invalid-chair had been wheeled to the head of the table. On his right-hand side sat his sad and silent daughter. She signed to me, with a ghostly solemnity, to take the vacant place on the left of her father. Silas Meadowcroft came in at the same moment, and was presented to me by his brother. There was a strong family likeness

between them, Ambrose being the taller and handsomer man of the two. But there was no marked character in either face. I set them down as men with undeveloped qualities, waiting (the good and evil qualities alike) for time and circumstances to bring them to their full growth.

The door opened again while I was still studying the two brothers, without, I honestly confess, being very favourably impressed by either of them. A new member of the family circle, who instantly attracted my attention, entered the room.

He was short, spare, and wiry; singularly pale for a person whose life was passed in the country. The face was in other respects, beside this, a striking face to see. As to the lower part, it was covered with a thick black beard and moustache, at a time when shaving was the rule, and beards the rare exception in America. As to the upper part of the face, it was irradiated by a pair of wild, glittering brown eyes, the expression of which suggested to me that there was something not quite right with the man's mental balance. A perfectly sane person in all his sayings and doings, so far as I could see, there was still something in those wild brown eyes which suggested to me, that, under exceptionally trying circumstances, he might surprise his oldest friends by acting in some exceptionally violent or foolish way. 'A little cracked'—that, is the popular phrase, was my impression of the stranger who now made his appearance in the supper-room.

Mr Meadowcroft the elder, having not spoken one word thus far, himself introduced the newcomer to me, with a side-glance at his sons, which had something like defiance in it—a glance which, as I was sorry to notice, was returned with a similar appearance of defiance by the two young men.

'Philip Lefrank, this is my overlooker, Mr Jago,' said the old man, formally presenting us. 'John Jago, this is my young relative by marriage, Mr Lefrank. He is not well! he has come over the ocean for rest, and change of scene. Mr Jago is an American, Philip. I hope you have no prejudice against Americans. Make acquaintance with Mr Jago. Sit together.' He cast another dark look at his sons; and the sons again returned it. They pointedly drew back from John Jago as he approached the empty chair next to me, and moved round to the opposite side of the table. It was plain that the man with the beard stood high in the father's favour, and that he was cordially disliked for that or for some other reason by the sons.

The door opened once more. A young lady quietly joined the party at the supper-table.

Was the young lady Naomi Colebrook? I looked at Ambrose, and saw the answer in his face. Naomi at last!

A pretty girl, and so far as I could judge by appearances, a good girl too. Describing her generally, I may say that she had a small head, well carried, and well set on her shoulders; bright grey eyes, that looked at you honestly, and meant what they looked; a trim, slight little figure—too slight for our English notions of beauty; a strong American accent; and (a rare thing in America) a pleasantly-toned voice, which made the accent agreeable to English ears. Our first impressions of people are, in nine cases out of ten, the right impressions. I liked Naomi Colebrook at first sight; liked her pleasant smile; liked her hearty shake of the hand when we were presented to each other. 'If I get on well with nobody else in this house,' I thought to myself, 'I shall certainly get on well with *you*.'

For once in a way, I proved a true prophet. In the atmosphere of smouldering enmities at Morwick Farm, the pretty American girl and I remained firm and true friends from first to last.

Ambrose made room for Naomi to sit between his brother and himself. She changed colour for a moment, and looked at him, with a pretty reluctant tenderness, as she took her chair. I strongly suspected the young farmer of squeezing her hand privately, under cover of the tablecloth.

The supper was not a merry one. The only cheerful conversation was the conversation across the table between Naomi and me.

For some incomprehensible reason, John Jago seemed to be ill at ease in the presence of his young countrywoman. He looked up at Naomi doubtfully from his plate, and looked down again slowly with a frown. When I addressed him, he answered constrainedly. Even when he spoke to Mr Meadowcroft, he was still on his guard—on his guard against the two young men, as I fancied by the direction which his eyes took on these occasions. When we began our meal, I had noticed for the first time that Silas Meadowcroft's left hand was strapped up with surgical plaster; and I now further observed that John Jago's wandering brown eyes, furtively looking at everybody round the table in turn, looked with a curious cynical scrutiny at the young man's injured hand.

By way of making my first evening at the farm all the more embarrassing to me as a stranger, I discovered before long that the father and sons were talking indirectly *at* each other, through Mr Jago and through me. When old Mr Meadowcroft spoke disparagingly to his overlooker of some past mistake made in the cultivation of the arable land of the farm, old Mr Meadowcroft's eyes pointed the application of his hostile criticism straight in the direction of his two sons. When the two sons seized a stray remark of mine about animals in general, and applied it satirically to the mismanagement of sheep

and oxen in particular, they looked at John Jago, while they talked to me. On occasions of this sort—and they happened frequently—Naomi struck in resolutely at the right moment, and turned the talk to some harmless topic. Every time she took a prominent part in this way in keeping the peace, melancholy Miss Meadowcroft looked slowly round at her in stern and silent disparagement of her interference. A more dreary and more disunited family party I never sat at the table with. Envy, hatred, malice, and uncharitableness are never so essentially detestable to my mind as when they are animated by a sense of propriety, and work under the surface. But for my interest in Naomi, and my other interest in the little love-looks which I now and then surprised passing between her and Ambrose, I should never have sat through that supper. I should certainly have taken refuge in my French novel and my own room.

At last the unendurably long meal, served with ostentatious profusion, was at an end. Miss Meadowcroft rose with her ghostly solemnity, and granted me my dismissal in these words:

‘We are early people at the farm, Mr Lefrank. I wish you good-night.’

She laid her bony hands on the back of Mr Meadowcroft’s invalid-chair, cut him short in his farewell salutation to me, and wheeled him out to his bed as if she were wheeling him out to his grave.

‘Do you go to your room immediately, sir? If not, may I offer you a cigar?—provided the young gentlemen will permit it.’

So, picking his words with painful deliberation, and pointing his reference to ‘the young gentlemen’ with one sardonic side-look at them, Mr John Jago performed the duties of hospitality on his side. I excused myself from accepting the cigar. With studied politeness, the man of the glittering brown eyes wished me a good night’s rest, and left the room.

Ambrose and Silas both approached me hospitably, with their open cigar cases in their hands.

‘You were quite right to say “No,”’ Ambrose began. ‘Never smoke with John Jago. His cigars will poison you.’

‘And never believe a word John Jago says to you,’ added Silas. ‘He is the greatest liar in America, let the other be whom he may.’

Naomi shook her forefinger reproachfully at them, as if the two sturdy young farmers had been two children.

‘What will Mr Lefrank think,’ she said, ‘if you talk in that way of a person whom your father respects and trusts? Go and smoke. I am ashamed of both of you.’

Silas slunk away without a word of protest. Ambrose stood his ground, evidently bent on making his peace with Naomi before he left her.

Seeing that I was in the way, I walked aside towards a glass door at the lower end of the room. The door opened on the trim little farm-garden, bathed at that moment in lovely moonlight. I stepped out to enjoy the scene, and found my way to a seat under an elm tree. The grand repose of Nature had never looked so unutterably solemn and beautiful as it now appeared, after what I had seen and heard inside the house. I understood, or thought I understood, the sad despair of humanity which led men into monasteries in the old time. The misanthropical side of my nature (where is the sick man who is not conscious of that side of him?) was fast getting the upper hand of me—when I felt a light touch laid on my shoulder, and found myself reconciled to my species once more by Naomi Colebrook.

III

‘I want to speak to you,’ Naomi began. ‘You don’t think ill of me for following you out here? We are not accustomed to stand much on ceremony in America.’

‘You are quite right in America. Pray sit down.’

She seated herself by my side, looking at me frankly and fearlessly by the light of the moon.

‘You are related to the family here,’ she resumed, ‘and I am related too. I guess I may say to *you* what I couldn’t say to a stranger. I am right glad you have come here, Mr Lefrank; and for a reason, sir, which you don’t suspect.’

‘Thank you for the compliment you pay me Miss Colebrook, whatever the reason may be.’

‘She took no notice of my reply: she steadily pursued her own train of thought.’

‘I guess you may do some good, sir, in this wretched house,’ the girl went on, with her eyes still fixed earnestly on my face. ‘There is no love, no trust, no peace at Morwick Farm. They want somebody here—except Ambrose: don’t think ill of Ambrose; he is only thoughtless—I say, the rest of them want somebody here to make them ashamed of their hard hearts, and their horrid, false, envious ways. You are a gentleman; you know more than they know: they can’t help themselves, they must look up to *you*. Try, Mr Lefrank, when you have the opportunity—pray try, sir, to make peace among them. You heard what went on at supper-time; and you were disgusted with it. Oh, yes, you were! I saw you frown to yourself; and I know what *that* means in you Englishmen.’

There was no choice but to speak one’s mind plainly to Naomi. I acknowledged the impression which had been produced on me at

supper-time just as plainly as I have acknowledged it in these pages. Naomi nodded her head in undisguised approval of my candour.

'That will do; that's speaking out,' she said. 'But—oh, my! you put it a deal too mildly, sir, when you say the men don't seem to be on friendly terms together here. They hate each other. That's the word, Mr Lefrank—hate; bitter, bitter, bitter hate!' She clenched her little fists; she shook them vehemently, by way of adding emphasis to her last words; and then she suddenly remembered Ambrose. 'Except Ambrose,' she added, opening her hand again, and laying it very earnestly on my arm. 'Don't go and misjudge Ambrose, sir. There is no harm in poor Ambrose.'

The girl's innocent frankness was really irresistible.

'Should I be altogether wrong,' I asked, 'if I guessed that you were a little partial to Ambrose?'

An Englishwoman would have felt, or would at least have assumed, some little hesitation at replying to my question. Naomi did not hesitate for an instant.

'You are quite right, sir,' she said, with the most perfect composure. 'If things go well, I mean to marry Ambrose.'

'If things go well,' I repeated. 'What does that mean? Money?'

She shook her head.

'It means a fear that I have in my own mind,' she answered—'a fear, Mr Lefrank, of matters taking a bad turn among the men here—the wicked, hard-hearted, unfeeling men. I don't mean Ambrose, sir: I mean his brother Silas, and John Jago. Did you notice Silas's hand? John Jago did that, sir, with a knife.'

'By accident?' I asked.

'On purpose,' she answered. 'In return for a blow.'

This plain revelation of the state of things at Morwick Farm rather staggered me. Blows and knives under the rich and respectable roof-tree of old Mr Meadowcroft!—blows and knives not among the labourers, but among the masters! My first impression was like *your* first impression, no doubt. I could hardly believe it.

'Are you sure of what you say?' I enquired.

'I have it from Ambrose. Ambrose would never deceive me. Ambrose knows all about it.'

My curiosity was powerfully excited. To what sort of household had I rashly voyaged across the ocean in search of rest and quiet?

'May I know all about it too?' I said.

'Well, I will try and tell you what Ambrose told me. But you must promise me one thing first, sir. Promise you won't go away and leave us when you know the whole truth. Shake hands on it, Mr Lefrank; come, shake hands on it.'

There was no resisting her fearless frankness. I shook hands on it. Naomi entered on her narrative the moment I had given her my pledge, without wasting a word by way of preface.

'When you are shown over the farm here,' she began, 'you will really see that it is really two farms in one. On this side of it, as we look from under this tree, they raise crops: on the other side—on much the larger half of the land, mind—they raise cattle. When Mr Meadowcroft got too old and too sick to look after his farm himself, the boys (I mean Ambrose and Silas) divided the work between them. Ambrose looked after the crops, and Silas after the cattle. Things didn't go well, somehow, under their management. I can't tell you why. I am only sure Ambrose was not in fault. The old man got more and more dissatisfied, especially about his beasts. His pride is in his beasts. Without saying a word to the boys, he looked about privately (*I think he was wrong in that, sir; don't you?*)—he looked about privately for help; and, in an evil hour, he heard of John Jago. Do you like John Jago, Mr Lefrank?'

'So far, no. I don't like him.'

'Just my sentiments, sir. But I don't know: it's likely we may be wrong. There's nothing against John Jago, except that he is so odd in his ways. They do say he wears all that nasty hair on his face (I hate hair on a man's face) on account of a vow he made when he lost his wife. Don't you think, Mr Lefrank, a man must be a little mad who shows his grief at losing his wife by vowing that he will never shave himself again? Well, that's what they do say John Jago vowed. Perhaps it's a lie. People are such liars here! Anyway, it's truth (the boys themselves confess *that*), when John came to the farm he came with a first-rate character. The old man here isn't easy to please; and he pleased the old father. Yes, that's so. Mr Meadowcroft don't like my countrymen in general. He's like his sons—English, bitter English, to the marrow of his bones. Somehow, in spite of that, John Jago got round him; maybe because John does certainly know his business. Oh, yes! Cattle and crops, John knows his business. Since he's been overlooker, things have prospered as they didn't prosper in the time of the boys. Ambrose owned as much to me himself. Still, sir, it's hard to be set aside for a stranger isn't it? John gives the orders now. The boys do the work; but they have no voice in it when John and the old man put their heads together over the business of the farm. I have been long in telling you of it, sir; but now you know how the envy and the hatred grew among the men, before my time. Since I have been here, things seem to get worse and worse. There's hardly a day goes by that hard words don't pass between the boys and John, or the boys and their father. The old man has an aggravating way, Mr Lefrank—a nasty

way, as we do call it—of taking John Jago's part. Do speak to him about it when you get the chance. The main blame of the quarrel between Silas and John the other day lies at his door, I think. I don't want to excuse Silas, either. It was brutal of him—though he is Ambrose's brother—to strike John, who is the smaller and weaker man of the two. But it was worse than brutal in John, to out with his knife, and try to stab Silas. Oh, he did it! If Silas had not caught the knife in his hand (his hand's awfully cut, I can tell you: I dressed it myself), it might have ended, for anything I know, in murder——'

She stopped as the word passed her lips, looked back over her shoulder, and started violently.

I looked where my companion was looking. The dark figure of a man was standing, watching us, in the shadow of the elm tree. I rose directly to approach him. Naomi recovered her self-possession, and checked me before I could interfere.

'Who are you?' she asked, turning sharply towards the stranger. 'What do you want there?'

The man stepped out from the shadow into the moonlight, and stood revealed to us as John Jago.

'I hope I am not intruding?' he said, looking hard at me.

'What do you want?' Naomi repeated.

'I don't wish to disturb you, or to disturb this gentleman,' he proceeded. 'When you are quite at leisure, Miss Naomi, you would be doing me a favour if you would permit me to say a few words to you in private.'

He spoke with the most scrupulous politeness; trying, and trying vainly, to conceal some strong agitation which was in possession of him. His wild brown eyes—wilder than ever in the moonlight—rested entreatingly, with a strange underlying expression of despair, on Naomi's face. His hands, clasped tightly in front of him, trembled incessantly. Little as I liked the man, he did really impress me as a pitiable object at that moment.

'Do you mean that you want to speak to me tonight?' Naomi asked, in undisguised surprise.

'Yes, miss, if you please, at your leisure and at Mr Lefrank's.'

Naomi hesitated.

'Won't it keep till tomorrow?' she said.

'I shall be away on farm business tomorrow, miss, for the whole day. Please to give me a few minutes this evening.' He advanced a step towards her: his voice faltered, and dropped timidly to a whisper. 'I really have something to say to you, Miss Naomi. It would be a kindness on your part—a very, very great kindness—if you will let me say it before I rest tonight.'

I rose again to resign my place to him. Once more Naomi checked me.

'No,' she said. 'Don't stir.' She addressed John Jago very reluctantly: 'If you are so much in earnest about it, Mr John, I suppose it must be. I can't guess what *you* can possibly have to say to me which cannot be said before a third person. However, it wouldn't be civil, I suppose, to say "No" in my place. You know it's my business to wind up the hall-clock at ten every night. If you choose to come and help me, the chances are that we shall have the hall to ourselves. Will that do?'

'Not in the hall, miss, if you will excuse me.'

'Not in the hall!'

'And not in the house either, if I may make so bold.'

'What do you mean?' She turned impatiently, and appealed to me. 'Do *you* understand him?'

John Jago signed to me imploringly to let him answer for himself.

'Bear with me, Miss Naomi,' he said. 'I think I can make you understand me. There are eyes on the watch, and ears on the watch, in the house; and there are some footsteps—I won't say whose—so soft, that no person can hear them.'

The last allusion evidently made itself understood. Naomi stopped him before he could say more.

'Well, where is it to be?' she asked, resignedly. 'Will the garden do, Mr John?'

'Thank you kindly, miss: the garden will do.' He pointed to a gravel-walk beyond us, bathed in the full flood of the moonlight. 'There,' he said, 'where we can see all round us, and be sure that nobody is listening. At ten o'clock.' He paused and addressed himself to me. 'I beg to apologize, sir, for intruding myself on your conversation. Please to excuse me.'

His eyes rested with a last anxious pleading look on Naomi's face. He bowed to us, and melted away into the shadow of the tree. The distant sound of a door, closed softly, came to us through the stillness of the night. John Jago had re-entered the house.

Now that he was out of hearing, Naomi spoke to me very earnestly:

'Don't suppose, sir, I have any secrets with *him*,' she said. 'I know no more than you do what he wants with me. I have half a mind not to keep the appointment. It's close on ten now. What would you do in my place?'

'Having made the appointment,' I answered, 'it seems to be due to yourself to keep it. If you feel the slightest alarm, I will wait in another part of the garden, so that I can hear if you call me.'

She received my proposal with a saucy toss of the head, and a smile of pity for my ignorance.

'You are a stranger, Mr Lefrank, or you would never talk to me in that way. In America, we don't do the men the honour of letting them alarm us. In America, the women take care of themselves. He has got my promise to meet him, as you say; and I must keep my promise. Only think,' she added, speaking more to herself than to me, 'of John Jago finding out Miss Meadowcroft's nasty, sly, underhand ways in the house! Most men would never had noticed her!'

I was completely taken by surprise. Sad and severe Miss Meadowcroft a listener and a spy! What next at Morwick Farm?

'Was that hint at the watchful eyes and ears, and the soft footsteps, really an allusion to Mr Meadowcroft's daughter?' I asked.

'Of course it was. Ah! she has imposed on you as she imposes on everybody else. The false wretch! She is secretly at the bottom of half the bad feeling among the men. I am certain of it—she keeps Mr Meadowcroft's mind bitter towards the boys. Old as she is, Mr Lefrank, and ugly as she is, she wouldn't object (if she could only make him ask her) to be John Jago's second wife. No, sir; and she wouldn't break her heart if the boys were not left a stick or a stone on the farm when the father dies. I have watched her, and I know it. Ah! I could tell you such things. But there's no time now—there's ten o'clock striking! we must say good-night. I am right glad I have spoken to you, sir. I say again, at parting, what I have said already: use your influence, pray use your influence, to soften them, and to make them ashamed of themselves, in this wicked house. We will have more talk about what you can do tomorrow, when you are shown over the farm. Say good-bye now; I must keep my appointment. Look! here is John Jago stealing out again in the shadow of the tree! Good-night, friend Lefrank; and pleasant dreams.'

With one hand she took mine, and pressed it cordially: with the other she pushed me away without ceremony in the direction of the house. A charming girl!—an irresistible girl! I was nearly as bad as the boys. I declare, *I* almost hated John Jago, too, as we crossed each other in the shadow of the tree.

Arrived at the glass door, I stopped, and looked back at the gravel-walk.

They had met. I saw the two shadowy figures slowly pacing backwards and forwards in the moonlight, the woman a little in advance of the man. What was he saying to her? Why was he so anxious that not a word of it should be heard? Our presentiments are sometimes, in certain rare cases, the faithful prophecy of the future. A vague distrust of that moonlight-meeting stealthily took a hold on my mind. 'Will mischief come of it?' I asked myself, as I closed the door and entered the house.

Mischief *did* come of it. You shall hear how.

IV

Persons of sensitive nervous temperament, sleeping for the first time in a strange house, and in a bed that is new to them, must make up their minds to pass a wakeful night. My first night at Morwick Farm was no exception to this rule. The little sleep I had was broken and disturbed by dreams. Towards six o'clock in the morning my bed became unendurable to me. The sun was shining in brightly at the window. I determined to try the reviving influence of a stroll in the fresh morning air.

Just as I got out of bed, I heard footsteps and voices under my window.

The footsteps stopped, and the voices became recognizable. I had passed the night with my window open: I was able, without exciting notice from below, to look out.

The persons beneath me were Silas Meadowcroft, John Jago, and three strangers, whose dress and appearance indicated plainly enough that they were labourers on the farm. Silas was swinging a stout beechen stick in his hand, and was speaking to Jago, coarsely and insolently enough, of his moonlight-meeting with Naomi on the previous night.

'Next time you go courting a young lady in secret,' said Silas, 'make sure that the moon goes down first, or wait for a cloudy sky. You were seen in the garden, Master Jago; and you may as well tell us the truth for once in a way. Did you find her open to persuasion, sir? Did she say "Yes?"'

John Jago kept his temper.

'If you must have your joke, Mr Silas,' he said, quietly and firmly, 'be pleased to joke on some other subject. You are quite wrong, sir, in what you suppose to have passed between the young lady and me.'

Silas turned about, and addressed himself ironically to the three labourers.

'You hear him, boys? He can't tell the truth, try him as you may. He wasn't making love to Naomi in the garden last night—oh, dear, no! He has had one wife already; and he knows better than to take the yoke on his shoulders for the second time!'

Greatly to my surprise, John Jago met this clumsy jesting with a formal and serious reply.

'You are quite right, sir,' he said. 'I have no intention of marrying for the second time. What I was saying to Miss Naomi doesn't matter to you. It was not at all what you choose to suppose; it was something

of quite another kind, with which you have no concern. Be pleased to understand once for all, Mr Silas, that not so much as the thought of making love to the young lady has ever entered my head. I respect her; I admire her good qualities: but if she was the only woman left in the world, and if I was a much younger man than I am, I should never think of asking her to be my wife.' He burst out suddenly into a harsh uneasy laugh. 'No, no! not my style, Mr Silas—not my style!'

Something in those words, or in his manner of speaking them, appeared to exasperate Silas. He dropped his clumsy irony, and addressed himself directly to John Jago in a tone of savage contempt.

'Not your style?' he repeated. 'Upon my soul, that's a cool way of putting it, for a man in your place! What do you mean by calling her "not your style"? You impudent beggar! Naomi Colebrook is meat for your master!'

John Jago's temper began to give way at last. He approached defiantly a step or two nearer to Silas Meadowcroft.

'Who is my master?' he asked.

'Ambrose will show you, if you go to him,' answered the other. 'Naomi is *his* sweetheart, not mine. Keep out of his way, if you want to keep a whole skin on your bones.'

John Jago cast one of his sardonic sidelooks at the farmer's wounded left hand. 'Don't forget your own skin, Mr Silas, when you threaten mine! I have set my mark on you once, sir. Let me by on my business, or I may mark you for a second time.'

Silas lifted his beechen stick. The labourers roused to some rude sense of the serious turn which the quarrel was taking, got between the two men, and parted them. I had been hurriedly dressing myself while the altercation was proceeding; and now I ran downstairs to try what my influence could do towards keeping the peace at Morwick Farm.

The war of angry words was still going on when I joined the men outside.

'Be off with you on your business, you cowardly hound!' I heard Silas say. 'Be off with you to the town! and take care you don't meet Ambrose on the way!'

'Take *you* care you don't feel my knife again before I go!' cried the other man.

Silas made a desperate effort to break away from the labourers who were holding him.

'Last time you only felt my fist!' he shouted. 'Next time you shall feel *this*!'

He lifted the stick as he spoke. I stepped up, and snatched it out of his hand.

'Mr Silas,' I said, 'I am an invalid, and I am going out for a walk. Your stick will be useful to me. I beg leave to borrow it.'

The labourers burst out laughing. Silas fixed his eyes on me with a stare of angry surprise. John Jago, immediately recovering his self-possession, took off his hat, and made me a deferential bow.

'I had no idea, Mr Lefrank, that we were disturbing you,' he said. 'I am very much ashamed of myself, sir. I beg to apologize.'

'I accept your apology, Mr Jago,' I answered, 'on the understanding that you, as the older man, will set the example of forbearance, if your temper is tried on any future occasion as it has been tried today. And I have further to request,' I added, addressing myself to Silas, 'that you will do me a favour, as your father's guest. The next time your good spirits lead you into making jokes at Mr Jago's expense, don't carry them quite so far. I am sure you meant no harm, Mr Silas. Will you gratify me by saying so yourself? I want to see you and Mr Jago shake hands.'

John Jago instantly held out his hand, with an assumption of good feeling which was a little overacted, to my thinking. Silas Meadowcroft made no advance of the same friendly sort on his side.

'Let him go about his business,' said Silas. 'I won't waste any more words on him, Mr Lefrank, to please *you*. But (saving your presence) I'm damned if I take his hand!'

Further persuasion was plainly useless, addressed to such a man as this. Silas gave me no further opportunity of remonstrating with him, even if I had been inclined to do so. He turned about in sulky silence, and, retracing his steps along the path, disappeared round the corner of the house. The labourers withdrew next, in different directions, to begin the day's work. John Jago and I were alone.

I left it to the man of the wild brown eyes to speak first.

'In half an hour's time, sir,' he said, 'I shall be going on business to Narrabee, our market-town here. Can I take any letters to the post for you? or is there anything else that I can do in the town?'

I thanked him, and declined both proposals. He made me another deferential bow, and withdrew into the house. I mechanically followed the path, in the direction which Silas had taken before me.

Turning the corner of the house, and walking on for a little way, I found myself at the entrance to the stables, and face to face with Silas Meadowcroft once more. He had his elbows on the gate of the yard, swinging it slowly backwards and forwards, and turning and twisting a straw between his teeth. When he saw me approaching him, he advanced a step from the gate, and made an effort to excuse himself, with a very ill grace.

'No offence, mister. Ask me what you will besides, and I'll do it for

you. But don't ask me to shake hands with John Jago; I hate him too badly for that. If I touched him with one hand, sir, I tell you this, I should throttle him with the other!

'That's your feeling towards the man, Mr Silas, is it?'

'That's my feeling, Mr Lefrank; and I'm not ashamed of it, either.'

'Is there any such place as a church in your neighbourhood, Mr Silas?'

'Of course there is.'

'And do you ever go to it?'

'Of course I do.'

'At long intervals, Mr Silas?'

'Every Sunday, sir, without fail.'

Some third person behind me burst out laughing; some third person had been listening to our talk. I turned round, and discovered Ambrose Meadowcroft.

'I understand the drift of your catechism, though my brother doesn't,' he said. 'Don't be hard on Silas, sir. He isn't the only Christian who leaves his Christianity in the pew when he goes out of church. You will never make us friends with John Jago, try as you may. Why, what have you got there, Mr Lefrank? May I die if it isn't my stick! I have been looking for it everywhere!'

The thick beechen stick had been feeling uncomfortably heavy in my invalid hand for some time past. There was no sort of need for my keeping it any longer. John Jago was going away to Narrabee, and Silas Meadowcroft's savage temper was subdued to a sulky repose. I handed the stick back to Ambrose. He laughed as he took it from me.

'You can't think how strange it feels, Mr Lefrank, to be without one's stick,' he said. 'A man gets used to his stick, sir; doesn't he? Are you ready for your breakfast?'

'Not just yet. I thought of taking a little walk first.'

'All right, sir. I wish I could go with you; but I have got my work to do this morning, and Silas has his work too. If you go back by the way you came, you will find yourself in the garden. If you want to go further, the wicket-gate at the end will lead you into the lane.'

Through sheer thoughtlessness, I did a very foolish thing. I turned back as I was told, and left the brothers together at the gate of the stable-yard.

V

Arrived at the garden, a thought struck me. The cheerful speech and easy manner of Ambrose plainly indicated that he was ignorant thus far of the quarrel which had taken place under my window. Silas might

confess to having taken his brother's stick, and might mention whose head he had threatened with it. It was not only useless, but undesirable, that Ambrose should know of the quarrel. I retraced my steps to the stable-yard. Nobody was at the gate. I called alternately to Silas and to Ambrose. Nobody answered. The brothers had gone away to their work.

Returning to the garden, I heard a pleasant voice wishing me 'Good morning'. I looked round. Naomi Colebrook was standing at one of the lower windows of the farm. She had her working-apron on, and she was industriously brightening the knives for the breakfast table, on an old-fashioned board. A sleek black cat balanced himself on her shoulder watching the flashing motion of the knife as she passed it rapidly to and fro on the leather-covered surface of the board.

'Come here,' she said: 'I want to speak to you.'

I noticed as I approached, that her pretty face was cloudy and anxious. She pushed the cat irritably off her shoulder: she welcomed me with only the faint reflection of her bright customary smile.

'I have seen John Jago,' she said. 'He has been hinting at something which he says happened under your bedroom window this morning. When I begged him to explain himself he only answered, "Ask Mr Lefrank: I must be off to Narrabee." What does it mean? Tell me right away, sir! I'm out of temper, and I can't wait!'

Except that I made the best instead of the worst of it, I told her what had happened under my window as plainly as I have told it here. She put down the knife that she was cleaning, and folded her hands before her, thinking.

'I wish I had never given John Jago that meeting,' she said. 'When a man asks anything of a woman, the woman, I find, mostly repents it if she says "Yes".'

She made that quaint reflection with a very troubled brow. The moonlight-meeting had left some unwelcome remembrances in her mind. I saw that as plainly as I saw Naomi herself.

What had John Jago said to her? I put the question with all needful delicacy, making my apologies beforehand.

'I should like to tell *you*,' she began, with a strong emphasis on the last word.

There she stopped. She turned pale; then suddenly flushed again to the deepest red. She took up the knife once more, and went on cleaning it as industriously as ever.

'I mustn't tell you,' she resumed, with her head down over the knife. 'I have promised not to tell anybody. That's the truth. Forget all about it, sir, as soon as you can. Hush! here's the spy who saw us last night on the walk, and who told Silas!'

Dreary Miss Meadowcroft opened the kitchen door. She carried an ostentatiously large Prayer Book; and she looked at Naomi as only a jealous woman of middle age *can* look at a younger and prettier woman than herself.

'Prayers, Miss Colebrook,' she said, in her sourest manner. She paused, and noticed me standing under the window. 'Prayers, Mr Lefrank,' she added, with a look of devout pity, directed exclusively to my address.

'We will follow you directly, Miss Meadowcroft,' said Naomi.

'I have no desire to intrude on your secrets, Miss Colebrook.'

With that acrid answer, our priestess took herself and her Prayer Book out of the kitchen. I joined Naomi, entering the room by the garden door. She met me eagerly.

'I am not quite easy about something,' she said. 'Did you tell me that you left Ambrose and Silas together?'

'Yes.'

'Suppose Silas tells Ambrose of what happened this morning?'

The same idea, as I have already mentioned, had occurred to my mind. I did my best to reassure Naomi.

'Mr Jago is out of the way,' I replied. 'You and I can easily put things right in his absence.'

She took my arm.

'Come into prayers,' she said. 'Ambrose will be there, and I shall find an opportunity of speaking to him.'

Neither Ambrose nor Silas was in the breakfast-room when we entered it. After waiting vainly for ten minutes, Mr Meadowcroft told his daughter to read the prayers. Miss Meadowcroft read, thereupon, in the tone of an injured woman taking the throne of mercy by storm, and insisting on her rights. Breakfast followed; and still the brothers were absent. Miss Meadowcroft looked at her father, and said, 'From bad to worse, sir. What did I tell you?' Naomi instantly applied the antidote: 'The boys are no doubt detained over their work, uncle.' She turned to me. 'You want to see the farm, Mr Lefrank. Come and help me to find the boys.'

For more than an hour we visited one part of the farm after another, without discovering the missing men. We found them at last near the outskirts of a small wood, sitting, talking together, on the trunk of a felled tree.

Silas rose as we approached, and walked away without a word of greeting or apology, into the wood. As he got on his feet I noticed that his brother whispered something in his ear; and I heard him answer, 'All right!'

'Ambrose, does that mean you have something to keep a secret from

us?' asked Naomi, approaching her lover with a smile. 'Is Silas ordered to hold his tongue?'

Ambrose kicked sulkily at the loose stones lying about him. I noticed, with a certain surprise, that his favourite stick was not in his hand, and was not lying near him.

'Business,' he said, in answer to Naomi, not very graciously—'business between Silas and me. That's what it means, if you must know.'

Naomi went on, woman-like, with her questions, heedless of the reception which they might meet with from an irritated man.

'Why were you both away at prayers and breakfast time?' she asked next.

'We had too much to do,' Ambrose gruffly replied, 'and we were too far from the house.'

'Very odd,' said Naomi. 'This has never happened before, since I have been at the farm.'

'Well, live and learn. It has happened now.'

The tone in which he spoke would have warned any man to let him alone. But warnings which speak by implication only are thrown away on women. The woman, having still something in her mind to say, said it.

'Have you seen anything of John Jago this morning?'

The smouldering ill-temper of Ambrose burst suddenly—why, it was impossible to guess—into a flame.

'How many more questions am I to answer?' he broke out, violently. 'Are you the parson, putting me through my catechism? I have seen nothing of John Jago, and I have got my work to go on with. Will that do for you?'

He turned with an oath, and followed his brother into the wood. Naomi's bright eyes looked up at me, flashing with indignation.

'What does he mean, Mr Lefrank, by speaking to me in that way? Rude brute! How dare he do it?' She paused: her voice, look, and manner suddenly changed. 'This has never happened before, sir. Has anything gone wrong? I declare, I shouldn't know Ambrose again, he is so changed. Say, how does it strike you?'

I made the best of a bad case.

'Something has upset his temper,' I said. 'The merest trifle, Miss Colebrook, upsets a man's temper sometimes. I speak as a man, and I know it. Give him time, and he will make his excuses, and all will be well again.'

My presentation of the case entirely failed to reassure my pretty companion. We went back to the house. Dinner-time came, and the brothers appeared. Their father spoke to them of their absence from

morning prayers—with needless severity, as I thought. They resented the reproof with needless indignation on their side, and left the room. A sour smile of satisfaction showed itself on Miss Meadowcroft's thin lips. She looked at her father; then raised her eyes sadly to the ceiling, and said, 'We can only pray for them, sir.'

Naomi disappeared after dinner. When I saw her again, she had some news for me.

'I have been with Ambrose,' she said, 'and he has begged my pardon. We have made it up, Mr Lefrank. Still—still——'

'Still—*what*, Miss Naomi?'

'He is not like himself, sir. He denies it; but I can't help thinking he is hiding something from me.'

The day wore on: the evening came. I returned to my French novel. But not even Dumas himself could keep my attention to the story. What else I was thinking of I cannot say. Why I was out of spirits I am unable to explain. I wished myself back in England: I took a blind unreasonable hatred to Morwick Farm.

Nine o'clock struck; and we all assembled again at supper, with the exception of John Jago. He was expected back to supper; and we waited for him a quarter of an hour, by Mr Meadowcroft's own directions. John Jago never appeared.

The night wore on, and still the absent man failed to return. Miss Meadowcroft volunteered to sit up for him. Naomi eyed her, a little maliciously I must own, as the two women parted for the night. I withdrew to my room; and again I was unable to sleep. When sunrise came, I went out, as before, to breathe the morning air.

On the staircase I met Miss Meadowcroft ascending to her own room. Not a curl of her stiff grey hair was disarranged: nothing about the impenetrable woman betrayed that she had been watching through the night.

'Has Mr Jago not returned?' I asked.

Miss Meadowcroft slowly shook her head, and frowned at me.

'We are in the hands of Providence, Mr Lefrank. Mr Jago must have been detained for the night at Narrabee.'

The daily routine of the meals resumed its unalterable course. Breakfast-time came and dinner-time came, and no John Jago darkened the doors of Morwick Farm. Mr Meadowcroft and his daughter consulted together, and determined to send in search of the missing man. One of the more intelligent of the labourers was despatched to Narrabee to make inquiries.

The man returned late in the evening, bringing startling news to the farm. He had visited all the inns and all the places of business resort in Narrabee; he had made endless inquiries in every direction, with

this result—no one had set eyes on John Jago. Everybody declared that John Jago had not entered the town.

We all looked at each other, excepting the two brothers, who were seated together in a dark corner of the room. The conclusion appeared to be inevitable. John Jago was a lost man.

VI

Mr Meadowcroft was the first to speak.

‘Somebody must find John,’ he said.

‘Without losing a moment,’ added his daughter.

Ambrose suddenly stepped out of the dark corner of the room.

‘I will inquire,’ he said.

Silas followed him.

‘I will go with you,’ he added.

Mr Meadowcroft interposed his authority.

‘One of you will be enough; for the present, at least. You go, Ambrose. Your brother may be wanted later. If any accident has happened (which God forbid), we may have to inquire in more than one direction. Silas, you will stay at the farm.’

The brothers withdrew together—Ambrose to prepare for his journey, Silas to saddle one of the horses for him. Naomi slipped out after them: left in company with Mr Meadowcroft and his daughter (both devoured by anxiety about the missing man, and both trying to conceal it under an assumption of devout resignation to circumstances), I need hardly add that I too, retired, as soon as it was politely possible for me to leave the room. Ascending the stairs on my way to my own quarters, I discovered Naomi half-hidden in a recess formed by an old-fashioned window-seat on the first landing. My bright little friend was in sore trouble. Her apron was over her face, and she was crying bitterly. Ambrose had not taken his leave as tenderly as usual. She was more firmly persuaded than ever that ‘Ambrose was hiding something from her’. We all waited anxiously for the next day. The next day made the mystery deeper than ever.

The horse which had taken Ambrose to Narrabee was ridden back to the farm by a groom from the hotel. He delivered a written message from Ambrose which startled us. Further inquiries had positively proved that the missing man had never been near Narrabee. The only attainable tidings of his whereabouts were tidings derived from vague report. It was said that a man like John Jago had been seen the previous day in a railway car, travelling on the line to New York. Acting on this imperfect information, Ambrose had decided on verifying the truth of the report by extending his enquiries to New York.

This extraordinary proceeding forced the suspicion on me that something had really gone wrong. I kept my doubts to myself; but I was prepared, from that moment, to see the disappearance of John Jago followed by very grave results.

The same day the results declared themselves.

Time enough had now elapsed for report to spread through the district the news of what had happened at the farm. Already aware of the bad feeling existing between the men, the neighbours had been now informed (no doubt by the labourers present) of the deplorable scene that had taken place under my bedroom window. Public opinion declares itself in America without the slightest reserve, or the slightest care for consequences. Public opinion declared on this occasion that the lost man was the victim of foul play, and held one or both of the brothers Meadowcroft responsible for his disappearance. Later in the day, the reasonableness of this serious view of the case was confirmed in the popular mind by a startling discovery. It was announced that a Methodist preacher lately settled at Morwick, and greatly respected throughout the district, had dreamed of John Jago in the character of a murdered man, whose bones were hidden at Morwick Farm. Before night the cry was general for a verification of the preacher's dream. Not only in the immediate district, but in the town of Narrabee itself, the public voice insisted on the necessity of a search for the mortal remains of John Jago at Morwick Farm.

In the terrible turn which matters had now taken, Mr Meadowcroft the elder displayed a spirit and an energy for which I was not prepared.

'My sons have their faults,' he said—'serious faults, and nobody knows it better than I do. My sons have behaved badly and ungratefully towards John Jago; I don't deny that either. But Ambrose and Silas are not murderers. Make your search. I ask for it; no, I insist on it, after what has been said, in justice to my family and my name!'

The neighbours took him at his word. The Morwick section of the American nation organized itself on the spot. The sovereign people met in committee, made speeches, elected competent persons to represent the public interests, and began the search the next day. The whole proceeding, ridiculously informal from a legal point of view, was carried on by these extraordinary people with as stern and strict a sense of duty as if it had been sanctioned by the highest tribunal in the land.

Naomi met the calamity that had fallen on the household as resolutely as her uncle himself. The girl's courage rose with the call which was made on it. Her one anxiety was for Ambrose.

'He ought to be here,' she said to me. 'The wretches in this neighbourhood are wicked enough to say that his absence is a

confession of his guilt.'

She was right. In the present temper of the popular mind the absence of Ambrose was a suspicious circumstance in itself.

'We might telegraph to New York,' I suggested, 'if you only knew where a message would be likely to find him.'

'I know the hotel which the Meadowcrofts use at New York,' she replied. 'I was sent there after my father's death, to wait till Miss Meadowcroft could take me to Morwick.'

We decided on telegraphing to the hotel. I was writing the message, and Naomi was looking over my shoulder, when we were startled by a strange voice speaking close behind us.

'Oh! that's his address, is it?' said the voice. 'We wanted his address rather badly.'

The speaker was a stranger to me. Naomi recognized him as one of the neighbours.

'What do you want his address for?' she asked, sharply.

'I guess we've found the mortal remains of John Jago, miss,' the man replied. 'We have got Silas already, and we want Ambrose, too, on suspicion of murder.'

'It's a lie!' cried Naomi, furiously—'a wicked lie!'

The man turned to me.

'Take her into the next room, mister,' he said, 'and let her see for herself.'

We went together into the next room.

In one corner, sitting by her father, and holding his hand, we saw stern and stony Miss Meadowcroft, weeping silently. Opposite to them, crouched on the window-seat—his eyes wandering, his hands hanging helpless—we next discovered Silas Meadowcroft, plainly self-betrayed as a panic-stricken man. A few of the persons who had been engaged in the search were seated near, watching him. The mass of the strangers present stood congregated round a table in the middle of the room. They drew aside as I approached with Naomi, and allowed us to have a clear view of certain objects placed on the table.

The centre object of the collection was a little heap of charred bones. Round this were ranged a knife, two metal buttons, and a stick partially burnt. The knife was recognized by the labourers as the weapon John Jago habitually carried about with him—the weapon with which he had wounded Silas Meadowcroft's hand. The buttons Naomi herself declared to have a peculiar pattern on them, which had formerly attracted her attention to John Jago's coat. As for the stick, burnt as it was, I had no difficulty in identifying the quaintly-carved nob at the top. It was the heavy beechen stick which I had restored to Ambrose on his claiming it as his own. In reply to my inquiries, I was

informed that the bones, the knife, the buttons and the stick, had all been found together in a lime-kiln then in use on the farm.

'Is it serious?' Naomi whispered to me, as we drew back from the table.

It would have been sheer cruelty to deceive her now.

'Yes,' I whispered back; 'it *is* serious.'

The search committee conducted its proceedings with the strictest regularity. The proper applications were made forthwith to a justice of the peace, and the justice issued his warrant. That night Silas was committed to prison; and an officer was despatched to arrest Ambrose in New York.

For my part, I did the little I could to make myself useful. With the silent sanction of Mr Meadowcroft and his daughter, I went to Narrabee, and secured the best legal assistance for the defence which the town could place at my disposal. This done, there was no choice but to wait for news of Ambrose, and for the examination before the magistrate which was to follow. I shall pass over the misery in the house during the interval of expectation: no useful purpose could be served by describing it now. Let me only say that Naomi's conduct strengthened me in the conviction that she possessed a noble nature. I was unconscious of the state of my own feelings at the time; but I am now disposed to think that this was the epoch at which I began to envy Ambrose the wife whom he had won.

The telegraph brought us our first news of Ambrose. He had been arrested at the hotel, and he was on his way to Morwick. The next day he arrived, and followed his brother to prison. The two were confined in separate cells, and were forbidden all communication with each other.

Two days later, the preliminary examination took place. Ambrose and Silas Meadowcroft were charged before the magistrate with the wilful murder of John Jago. I was cited to appear as one of the witnesses; and, at Naomi's own request, I took the poor girl into court, and sat by her during the proceedings. My host also was present in his invalid-chair, with his daughter by his side.

Such was the result of my voyage across the ocean in search of rest and quiet; and thus did time and chance fulfil my first hasty forebodings of the dull life I was to lead to Morwick Farm!

VII

On our way to the chairs allotted to us in the magistrate's court, we passed the platform on which the prisoners were standing together.

Silas took no notice of us. Ambrose made a friendly sign of

recognition, and then rested his hand on the 'bar' in front of him. As she passed beneath him, Naomi was just tall enough to reach his hand on tiptoe. She took it. 'I know you are innocent,' she whispered, and gave him one look of loving encouragement as she followed me to her place. Ambrose never lost his self-control. I may have been wrong; but I thought this a bad sign.

The case, as stated for the prosecution, told strongly against the suspected men.

Ambrose and Silas Meadowcroft were charged with the murder of John Jago (by means of the stick or by use of some other weapon), and with the deliberate destruction of the body by throwing it into the quicklime. In proof of this latter assertion, the knife which the deceased habitually carried about him, and the metal buttons which were known to belong to his coat, were produced. It was argued that these indestructible substances, and some fragments of the larger bones, had alone escaped the action of the burning lime. Having produced medical witnesses to support this theory by declaring the bones to be human, and having thus circumstantially asserted the discovery of the remains in the kiln, the prosecution next proceeded to prove that the missing man had been murdered by the two brothers, and had been by them thrown into the quicklime as a means of concealing their guilt.

Witness after witness deposed to the inveterate enmity against the deceased displayed by Ambrose and Silas. The threatening language they habitually used towards him; their violent quarrels with him, which had become a public scandal throughout the neighbourhood, and which had ended (on one occasion at least) in a blow; the disgraceful scene which had taken place under my window; and the restoration to Ambrose, on the morning of the fatal quarrel, of the very stick which had been found among the remains of the dead man—these facts and events, and a host of minor circumstances besides, sworn to by witnesses whose credit was unimpeachable, pointed with terrible directness to the conclusion at which the prosecution had arrived.

I looked at the brothers as the weight of the evidence pressed more and more heavily against them. To outward view, at least, Ambrose still maintained his self-possession. It was far otherwise with Silas. Abject terror showed itself in his ghastly face; in his great knotty hands, clinging convulsively to the bar at which he stood; in his staring eyes, fixed in vacant horror on each witness who appeared. Public feeling judged him on the spot. There he stood, self-betrayed already, in the popular opinion, as a guilty man!

The one point gained in cross-examination by the defence related to the charred bones.

Pressed on this point, a majority of the medical witnesses admitted that their examination had been a hurried one, and that it was just possible that the bones might yet prove to be the remains of an animal, and not of a man. The presiding magistrate decided upon this, that a second examination should be made, and that the number of the medical experts should be increased.

Here the preliminary proceedings ended. The prisoners were remanded for three days.

The prostration of Silas at the close of the inquiry was so complete, that it was found necessary to have two men to support him on his leaving the court. Ambrose leaned over the bar to speak to Naomi before he followed the gaoler out. 'Wait,' he whispered confidently, 'till they hear what I have to say!' Naomi kissed her hand to him affectionately, and turned to me with the bright tears in her eyes.

'Why don't they hear what he has to say at once?' she asked. 'Anybody can see that Ambrose is innocent. It's a crying shame, sir, to send him back to prison. Don't you think so yourself?'

If I had confessed what I really thought, I should have said that Ambrose had proved nothing to my mind, except that he possessed rare powers of self-control. It was impossible to acknowledge this to my little friend. I diverted her mind from the question of her lover's innocence, by proposing that we should get the necessary order and visit him in his prison on the next day. Naomi dried her tears, and gave me a little grateful squeeze of the hand.

'Oh, my! what a good fellow you are!' cried the outspoken American girl. 'When your time comes to be married, sir, I guess the woman won't repent saying "Yes" to *you*!'

Mr Meadowcroft preserved unbroken silence as we walked back to the farm on either side of his invalid-chair. His last reserves of resolution seemed to have given way under the overwhelming strain laid on them by the proceedings in court. His daughter in stern indulgence to Naomi, mercifully permitted her opinion to glimmer on us only, through the medium of quotation from scripture-texts. If the texts meant anything, they meant that she had foreseen all that had happened, and that the one sad aspect of the case, to her mind, was the death of John Jago, unprepared to meet his end.

I obtained the order of admission to the prison the next morning.

We found Ambrose still confident of the favourable result, for his brother and for himself, of the inquiry before the magistrate. He seemed to be almost as eager to tell, as Naomi was to hear, the true story of what had happened at the lime-kiln. The authorities of the prison—present, of course, at the interview—warned him to remember that what he said might be taken down in writing and

produced against him in court.

'Take it down, gentlemen, and welcome,' Ambrose replied. 'I have nothing to fear; I am only telling the truth.'

With that he turned to Naomi, and began his narrative, as nearly as I can remember, in these words:

'I may as well make a clean breast of it at starting, my girl. After Mr Lefrank left us that morning, I asked Silas how he came by my stick. In telling me how, Silas also told me of the words that had passed between him and John Jago under Mr Lefrank's window. I was angry and jealous; and I own it freely, Naomi, I thought the worst that could be thought about you and John.'

Here Naomi stopped him without ceremony.

'Was that what made you speak to me as you spoke when we found you at the wood?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'And was that what made you leave me, when you went away to Narrabee, without giving me a kiss at parting?'

'It was.'

'Beg my pardon for it before you say a word more.'

'I beg your pardon.'

'Say you are ashamed of yourself.'

'I am ashamed of myself,' Ambrose answered, penitently.

'Now you may go on,' said Naomi. 'Now I'm satisfied.'

Ambrose went on.

'We were on our way to the clearing at the other side of the wood while Silas was talking to me; and, as ill luck would have it, we took the path that led by the lime-kiln. Turning the corner, we met John Jago on his way to Narrabee. I was too angry, I tell you, to let him pass quietly. I gave him a bit of my mind. His blood was up too, I suppose; and he spoke out, on his side, as freely as I did. I own I threatened him with the stick; but I'll swear to it I meant him no harm. You know—after dressing Silas's hand—that John Jago is ready with his knife. He comes from out West, where they are always ready with one weapon or another handy in their pockets. It's likely enough *he* didn't mean to harm me, either; but how could I be sure of that? When he stepped up to me, and showed his weapon, I dropped the stick, and closed with him. With one hand I wrenched the knife away from him; and with the other I caught him by the collar of his rotten old coat, and gave him a shaking that made his bones rattle in his skin. A big piece of the cloth came away in my hand. I shied it into the quicklime close by us, and I pitched the knife after the cloth; and, if Silas hadn't stopped me, I think it's likely I might have shied John Jago himself into the lime next. As it was, Silas kept hold of me. Silas shouted out to him, 'Be

and closed with him. With one hand I wrenched the knife away from him; and with the other I caught him by the collar of his rotten old coat, and gave him a shaking that made his bones rattle in his skin. A big piece of the cloth came away in my hand. I shied it into the quicklime close by us, and I pitched the knife after the cloth; and, if Silas hadn't stopped me, I think it's likely I might have shied John Jago himself into the lime next. As it was, Silas kept hold of me. Silas shouted out to him, 'Be off with you! and don't come back again, if you don't want to be burnt in the kiln!' He stood looking at us for a minute, fetching his breath, and holding his torn coat round him. Then he spoke with a deadly-quiet voice and a deadly-quiet look: "Many a true word, Mr Silas," he says, "is spoken in jest. *I shall not come back again.*" He turned about, and left us. We stood staring at each other like a couple of fools. "You don't think he means it?" I says. "Bosh!" says Silas. "He's too sweet on Naomi not to come back." What's the matter now, Naomi?

I had noticed it too. She started and turned pale, when Ambrose repeated to her what Silas had said to him.

'Nothing is the matter,' Naomi answered. 'Your brother has no right to take liberties with my name. Go on. Did Silas say any more while he was about it?'

'Yes: he looked into the kiln; and he says "What made you throw away the knife, Ambrose?"—"How does a man knowm why he does anything," I says, "when he does it in a passion?"—"It's a ripping-good knife," says Silas: "in your place, I should have kept it." I picked up the stick off the ground. "Who says I've lost it yet?" I answered him; and with that I got up on the side of the kiln, and began sounding for the knife, to bring it, you know, by means of the stick, within easy reach of a shovel, or some such thing. "Give us your hand," I says to Silas. "Let me stretch out a bit, and I'll have it in no time." Instead of finding the knife, I came nigh to falling myself into the burning lime. The vapour overpowered me, I suppose. All I know is, I turned giddy, and dropped the stick in the kiln. I should have followed the stick, to a dead certainty, but for Silas pulling me back by the hand. "Let it be," says Silas. "If I hadn't had hold of you, John Jago's knife might have been the death of you, after all!" He led me away by the arm, and we went on together on the road to the wood. We stopped where you found us, and sat down on the felled tree. We had a little more talk about John Jago. It ended in our agreeing to wait and see what happened, and to keep our own counsel in the meantime. You and Mr Lefrank came upon us, Naomi, while we were still talking; and you guessed right when you guessed that we had a secret from you. You know the secret now.'

There he stopped. I put the question to him—the first that I had asked yet.

‘Had you or your brother any fear at that time of the charge which has since been brought against you?’ I said.

‘No such thought entered our heads, sir,’ Ambrose answered. ‘How could *we* foresee that the neighbours would search the kiln, and say what they have said of us? All we feared was, that the old man might hear of the quarrel, and be bitterer against us than ever. I was the more anxious of the two to keep things secret, because I had Naomi to consider as well as the old man. Put yourself in my place, and you will own, sir, that the prospect at home was not a pleasant one for *me*, if John Jago really kept away from the farm, and if it came out that it was all my doing.’

(This was certainly an explanation of his conduct; but it was not quite satisfactory to my mind.)

‘As *you* believe, then,’ I went on, ‘John Jago has carried out his threat of not returning to the farm? According to you, he is now alive and in hiding somewhere?’

‘Certainly!’ said Ambrose.

‘Certainly!’ repeated Naomi.

‘Do you believe the report that he was seen travelling on the railway to New York?’

‘I believe it firmly, sir; and, what is more, I believe I was on his track. I was only too anxious to find him; and I say I could have found him, if they would have let me stay in New York.’

I looked at Naomi.

‘I believe it too,’ she said. ‘John Jago is keeping away.’

‘Do you suppose he is afraid of Ambrose and Silas?’

She hesitated.

‘He *may* be afraid of them,’ she replied, with a strong emphasis on the word ‘*may*’.

‘But you don’t think it likely?’

She hesitated again. I pressed her again.

‘Do you think there is any other motive for his absence?’

Her eyes dropped to the floor. She answered obstinately, almost doggedly—

‘I can’t say.’

I addressed myself to Ambrose.

‘Have you anything more to tell us?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I have told you all I know about it.’

I rose to speak to the lawyer whose services I had retained. He had helped us to get the order of admission, and he had accompanied us to the prison. Seated apart, he had kept silence throughout, attentively

watching the effect of Ambrose Meadowcroft's narrative on the officers of the prison and on me.

'Is this the defence?' I inquired, in a whisper.

'This is the defence, Mr Lefrank. What do you think between ourselves?'

'Between ourselves, I think the magistrate will commit them for trial.'

'On the charge of murder?'

'Yes; on the charge of murder.'

VIII

My replies to the lawyer accurately expressed the conviction in my mind. The narrative related by Ambrose had all the appearance, in my eyes, of a fabricated story, got up, and clumsily got up, to pervert the plain meaning of the circumstantial evidence produced by the prosecution. I reached this conclusion reluctantly and regretfully, for Naomi's sake. I said all I could say to shake the absolute confidence which she felt in the discharge of the prisoners at the next examination.

The day of the adjourned inquiry arrived.

Naomi and I again attended the court together. Mr Meadowcroft was unable, on this occasion, to leave the house. His daughter was present, walking to the court by herself, and occupying a seat by herself.

On his second appearance at the 'bar', Silas was more composed, and more like his brother: no new witnesses were called by the prosecution. We began the battle over the medical evidence relating to the charred bones; and, to some extent, we won the victory. In other words we forced the doctors to acknowledge that they differed widely in their opinions. They confessed that they were not certain. Two went still further, and declared that the bones were the bones of an animal, not of a man. We made the most of this; and then we entered upon the defence, founded on Ambrose Meadowcroft's story.

Necessarily, no witnesses could be called on our side. Whether this circumstance discouraged him, or whether he privately shared my opinion of his client's statement, I cannot say—it is only certain that the lawyer spoke mechanically, doing his best, no doubt, but doing it without genuine conviction or earnestness on his own part. Naomi cast an anxious glance at me as he sat down. The girl's hand, when I took it, turned cold in mine. She saw plain signs of the failure of the defence in the look and manner of the counsel for the prosecution; but she waited resolutely until the presiding magistrate announced his decision. I had only too clearly foreseen what he would feel it to be

his duty to do. Naomi's head dropped on my shoulder as he said the terrible words which committed Ambrose and Silas Meadowcroft to take their trial on the charge of murder.

I led her out of the court into the air. As I passed the 'bar', I saw Ambrose, deadly pale, looking after us as we left him; the magistrate's decision had evidently daunted him. His brother Silas had dropped in abject terror on the gaoler's chair; the miserable wretch shook and shuddered dumbly like a cowed dog.

Miss Meadowcroft returned with us to the farm, preserving unbroken silence on the way back. I could detect nothing in her bearing which suggested any compassionate feeling for the prisoners in her stern and secret nature. On Naomi's withdrawal to her own room, we were left together for a few minutes; and then, to my astonishment, the outwardly merciless woman showed me that she, too, was one of Eve's daughters, and could feel and suffer, in her own hard way, like the rest of us. She suddenly stepped close up to me, and laid her hand on my arm.

'You are a lawyer, ain't you?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Have you had any experience in your profession?'

'Ten years' experience.'

'Do *you* think——' She stopped abruptly, her hard face softened; her eyes dropped to the ground. 'Never mind,' she said, confusedly. 'I'm upset by all this misery, though I may not look like it. Don't notice me.'

She turned away. I waited, in the firm persuasion that the unspoken question in her mind would sooner or later force its way to utterance by her lips. I was right. She came back to me unwillingly, like a woman acting under some influence which the utmost exertion of her will was powerless to resist.

'Do *you* believe John Jago is still a living man?'

She put the question vehemently, desperately, as if the words rushed out of her mouth in spite of her.

'I do *not* believe it,' I answered.

'Remember what John Jago has suffered at the hands of my brothers,' she persisted. 'Is it not in your experience that he should take a sudden resolution to leave the farm?'

I replied, as plainly as before—

'It is *not* in my experience.'

She stood looking at me for a moment with a face of blank despair; then bowed her grey head in silence, and left me. As she crossed the room to the door, I saw her look upward; and I heard her say to herself softly, between her teeth, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.'

It was the requiem of John Jago, pronounced by the woman who loved him.

When I next saw her, her mask was on once more. Miss Meadowcroft was herself again. Miss Meadowcroft could sit by, impenetrably calm, while the lawyers discussed the terrible position of her brothers, with the scaffold in view as one of the possibilities of the 'case'.

Left by myself, I began to feel uneasy about Naomi. I went upstairs, and, knocking softly at her door, made my inquiries from outside. The clear young voice answered me sadly, 'I am trying to bear it: I won't distress you when we meet again.' I descended the stairs, feeling my first suspicion of the true nature of my interest in the American girl. Why had her answer brought the tears into my eyes? I went out walking, alone, to think undisturbedly. Why did the tones of her voice dwell on my ear all the way? Why did my hand still feel the last cold faint pressure of her fingers when I led her out of court?

I took a sudden resolution to go back to England.

When I returned to the farm, it was evening. The lamp was not yet lit in the hall. Pausing to accustom my eyes to the obscurity indoors, I heard the voice of the lawyer whom we had employed for the defence, speaking to someone very earnestly.

'I'm not to blame,' said the voice. 'She snatched the paper out of my hand before I was aware of her.'

'Do you want it back?' asked the voice of Miss Meadowcroft.

'No: it's only a copy. If keeping it will help to quiet her, let her keep it by all means. Good evening.'

Saying those last words, the lawyer approached me on his way out of the house. I stopped him without ceremony: I felt an ungovernable curiosity to know more.

'Who snatched the paper out of your hand?' I asked, bluntly.

The lawyer started. I had taken him by surprise. The instinct of professional reticence made him pause before he answered me.

In the brief interval of silence, Miss Meadowcroft replied to my question from the other end of the hall.

'Naomi Colebrook snatched the paper out of his hand.'

'What paper?'

A door opened softly behind me. Naomi herself appeared on the threshold; Naomi herself answered my question.

'I will tell you,' she whispered. 'Come in here.'

One candle only was burning in the room. I looked at her by the dim light. My resolution to return to England instantly became the last one of the lost ideas of my life.

'Good God!' I exclaimed, 'what has happened now?'

She gave me the paper which she had taken from the lawyer's hand.

The 'copy' to which he had referred was a copy of the written confession of Silas Meadowcroft on his return to prison. He accused his brother Ambrose of the murder of John Jago. He declared on his oath that he had seen his brother Ambrose commit the crime.

In the popular phrase, I could 'hardly believe my own eyes'. I read the last sentences of the confession for the second time:

'... I heard their voices at the lime-kiln. They were having words about Cousin Naomi. I ran to the place to part them. I was not in time. I saw Ambrose strike the deceased a terrible blow on the head with his (Ambrose's) heavy stick. The deceased dropped without a cry. I put my hand on his heart. He was dead. I was horribly frightened. Ambrose threatened to kill *me* next if I said a word to any living soul. He took up the body and cast it into the quicklime, and threw the stick in after it. We went on together to the wood. We sat down on a felled tree outside the wood. Ambrose made up the story that we were to tell if what he had done was found out. He made me repeat it after him like a lesson. We were still at it when Cousin Naomi and Mr Lefrank came up to us. They know the rest. This, on my oath, is a true confession. I make it of my own free will, repenting me sincerely that I did not make it before.

(Signed) 'SILAS MEADOWCROFT'

I laid down the paper, and looked at Naomi once more. She spoke to me with a strange composure. Immovable determination was in her eye, immovable determination was in her voice.

'Silas has lied away his brother's life to save himself,' she said. 'I see cowardly falsehood and cowardly cruelty in every line on that paper. Ambrose is innocent, and the time has come to prove it.'

'You forget,' I said, 'that we have just failed to prove it.'

She took no notice of my objection.

'John Jago is alive, in hiding from us,' she went on. 'Help me, friend Lefrank, to advertise for him in the newspapers.'

I drew back from her in speechless distress. I own I believed that the new misery which had fallen on her had affected her brain.

'You don't believe it?' she said. 'Shut the door.'

I obeyed her. She seated herself, and pointed to a chair near her.

'Sit down,' she proceeded. 'I am going to do a wrong thing, but there is no help for it. I am going to break a sacred promise. You remember that moonlight night when I met him on the garden-walk?'

'John Jago?'

'Yes. Now listen. I am going to tell you what passed between John Jago and me.'

IX

I waited in silence for the disclosure that was now to come. Naomi began by asking me a question.

'You remember when we went to see Ambrose in prison?' she said.

'Perfectly.'

'Ambrose told us of something which his villain of a brother said of John Jago and me. Do you remember what it was?'

I remember perfectly. Silas had said, 'John Jago is too sweet on Naomi not to come back.'

'That's so,' Naomi remarked, when I had repeated the words. 'I couldn't help starting when I heard what Silas had said; and I thought you noticed me.'

'I did notice you.'

'Did you wonder what it meant?'

'Yes.'

'I'll tell you. It meant this: what Silas Meadowcroft said to his brother of John Jago, was what I myself was thinking of John Jago at that very moment. It startled me to find my own thought in a man's mind, spoken for me by a man. I am the person, sir, who has driven John Jago away from Morwick Farm; and I am the person who can and will bring him back again.'

There was something in her manner, more than in her words, which let the light in suddenly on my mind.

'You have told me the secret,' I said. 'John Jago is in love with you.'

'Mad about me!' she rejoined, dropping her voice to a whisper. 'Stark, staring mad!—that's the only word for him. After we had taken a few turns on the gravel-walk, he suddenly broke out like a man beside himself. He fell down on his knees; he kissed my gown, he kissed my feet; he sobbed and cried for love of me. I'm not badly off for courage, sir, considering I'm a woman. No man, that I can call to mind, every really scared me before. But, I own, John Jago frightened me: oh, my! he did frighten me! My heart was in my mouth, and my knees shook under me. I begged and prayed of him to get up and go away. No; there he knelt, and held by the skirt of my gown. The words poured out from him like—well, like nothing I can think of but water from a pump. His happiness and his life, and his hopes in earth and heaven, and Lord only knows what besides, all depended, he said, on a word from me. I plucked up spirit enough at that to remind him that I was promised to Ambrose. "I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself," I said, "to own that you are wicked enough to love me when you know I am promised to another man!" When I spoke to him, he took a new turn: he began abusing Ambrose. *That* straightened me up. I snatched my gown out of his hand,

and I gave him my whole mind. "I hate you!" I said. "Even if I wasn't promised to Ambrose, I wouldn't marry you; no! not if there wasn't another man left in the world to ask me. I hate you, Mr Jago! I hate you!" He saw I was in earnest at last. He got up from my feet, and he settled down quiet again, all on a sudden. "You have said enough" (that was how he answered me). "You have broken my life. I have no hopes and no prospects now. I had a pride in the farm, miss, and a pride in my work; I bore with your brutish cousins' hatred of me; I was faithful to Mr Meadowcroft's interests; all for your sake, Naomi Colebrook—all for your sake! I have done with it now; I have done with my life at the farm. You will never be troubled with me again. I am going away, as the dumb creatures go when they are sick, to hide myself in a corner, and die. Do me one last favour. Don't make me the laughing-stock of the whole neighbourhood. I can't bear that: it maddens me, only to think of it. Give me your promise never to tell any living soul what I have said to you tonight—your sacred promise to the man whose life you have broken!" I did as he bade me: I gave him my sacred promise with the tears in my eyes. Yes; that is so. After telling him I hated him (and I did hate him), I cried over his misery; I did. Mercy, what fools women are! What is the horrid perversity, sir, which makes us always ready to pity the men? He held out his hand to me; and he said, "Good-bye for ever!" and I pitied him. I said, "I'll shake hands with you if you will give me your promise in exchange for mine. I beg of you not to leave the farm. What will my uncle do if you go away? Stay here and be friends with me; and forget and forgive, Mr John." He gave me his promise (he can refuse me nothing); and he gave it again when I saw him again the next morning. Yes, I'll do him justice, though I do hate him! I believe he honestly meant to keep his word as long as my eye was on him. It was only when he was left to himself that the Devil tempted him to break his promise, and leave the farm. I was brought up to believe in the Devil, Mr Lefrank; and I find it explains many things. It explains John Jago. Only let me find out where he has gone, and I'll engage he shall come back and clear Ambrose of the suspicion which his vile brother has cast on him. Here is the pen already for you. Advertise for him, friend Lefrank; and do it right away, for my sake!

I let her run on, without attempting to dispute her conclusions, until she could say no more. When she put the pen into my hand, I began the composition of the advertisement, as obediently as if I, too, believed that John Jago was a living man.

In the case of anyone else, I should have openly acknowledged that my own convictions remained unshaken. If no quarrel had taken place at the lime-kiln, I should have been quite ready, as I viewed the case,

to believe that John Jago's disappearance was referable to the terrible disappointment which Naomi had inflicted on him. The same morbid dread of ridicule which had led him to assert that he cared nothing for Naomi, when he and Silas had quarrelled under my bedroom window, might also have impelled him to withdraw himself secretly and suddenly from the scene of his discomfiture. But to ask me to believe, after what had happened at the lime-kiln, that he was still living, was to ask me to take Ambrose Meadowcroft's statement for granted as a true statement of facts.

I had refused to do this from the first; and I still persisted in taking that course. If I had been called upon to decide the balance of probability between the narrative related by Ambrose in his defence and the narrative related by Silas in his confession, I must have owned, no matter how unwillingly, that the confession was, to my mind, the least incredible story of the two.

Could I say this to Naomi? I would have written fifty advertisements inquiring for John Jago rather than say it; and you would have done the same, if you had been so fond of her as I was.

I drew out the advertisement, for insertion in 'The Morwick Mercury', in these terms:

MURDER.—Printers of newspapers throughout the United States are desired to publish that Ambrose Meadowcroft and Silas Meadowcroft, of Morwick Farm, Morwick County, are committed for trial on the charge of murdering John Jago, now missing from the farm and from the neighbourhood. Any person who can give information of the existence of said Jago may save the lives of two wrongly accused men by making immediate communication. Jago is about five feet four inches high. He is spare and wiry; his complexion is extremely pale; his eyes are dark, and very bright and restless. The lower part of his face is concealed by a thick black beard and moustache. The whole appearance of the man is wild and flighty.

I added the date and address. That evening a servant was sent on horseback to Narrabee to procure the insertion of the advertisement in the next issue of the newspaper.

When we parted that night, Naomi looked almost like her brighter and happier self. Now that the advertisement was on its way to the printing-office, she was more than sanguine: she was certain of the result.

'You don't know how you have comforted me,' she said, in her frank, warm-hearted way, when we parted for the night. 'All the newspapers will copy it, and we shall hear of John Jago before the week is out.' She turned to go, and came back again to me. 'I will never forgive Silas for writing that confession!' she whispered in my ear. 'If he ever lives under the same roof with Ambrose again, I—well, I

believe I wouldn't marry Ambrose if he did! There!

She left me. Through the wakeful hours of the night my mind dwelt on her last words. That she should contemplate, under any circumstances, even the bare possibility of not marrying Ambrose, was, I am ashamed to say, a direct encouragement to certain hopes which I had already begun to form in secret. The next day's mail brought me a letter on business. My clerk wrote to inquire if there was any chance of my returning to England in time to appear in court at the opening of next law term. I answered, without hesitation, 'It is still impossible for me to fix the date of my return.' Naomi was in the room while I was writing. How would she have answered, I wonder, if I had told her the truth, and said, 'You are responsible for this letter'?

X

The question of time was now a serious question at Morwick Farm. In six weeks, the court for the trial of criminal cases was to be opened at Narrabee.

During this interval, no new event of any importance occurred.

Many idle letters reached us relating to the advertisement for John Jago; but no positive information was received. Not the slightest trace of the lost man turned up; not the shadow of a doubt was cast on the assertion of the prosecution, that his body had been destroyed in the kiln. Silas Meadowcroft held firmly to the horrible confession that he had made. His brother Ambrose, with equal resolution, asserted his innocence, and reiterated the statement which he had already advanced. At regular periods I accompanied Naomi to visit him in the prison. As the day appointed for the opening of the court approached, he seemed to falter a little in his resolution; his manner became restless; and he grew irritably suspicious about the merest trifles. This change did not necessarily imply the consciousness of guilt: it might merely have indicated natural nervous agitation as the time for the trial drew near. Naomi noticed the alteration in her lover. It greatly increased her anxiety, though it never shook her confidence in Ambrose. Except at meal-times, I was left, during the period of which I am now writing, almost constantly alone with the charming American girl. Miss Meadowcroft searched the newspapers for tidings of the living John Jago in the privacy of her own room. Mr Meadowcroft would see nobody but his daughter and his doctor, and occasionally one or two old friends. I have since had reason to believe that Naomi, in these days of our intimate association, discovered the true nature of the feeling with which she had inspired me. But she kept her secret. Her manner towards me steadily remained the manner of a sister: she never

overstepped by a hair's breadth the safe limits of the character she had assumed.

The sittings of the court began. After hearing the evidence, and examining the confession of Silas Meadowcroft, the grand jury found a true bill against both the prisoners. The day appointed for the trial was the first day in the new week.

I had carefully prepared Naomi's mind for the decision of the grand jury. She bore the new blow bravely.

'If you are not tired of it,' she said, 'come with me to the prison tomorrow. Ambrose will need a little comfort by that time.' She paused, and looked at the day's letters lying on the table. 'Still not a word about John Jago,' she said. 'And all the papers have copied the advertisement. I felt so sure we should hear of him long before this!'

'Do you still feel sure that he is living?' I ventured to ask.

'I am as certain of it as ever,' she replied firmly. 'He is somewhere in hiding: perhaps he is in disguise. Suppose we know no more of him than we know now, when the trial begins? Suppose the jury——' She stopped, shuddering. Death—shameful death on the scaffold—might be the terrible result of the consultation of the jury. 'We have waited for news to come to us long enough,' Naomi resumed. 'We must find the tracks of John Jago for ourselves. There is a week yet before the trial begins. Who will help me to make inquiries? Will you be the man, friend Lefrank?'

It is needless to add (though I knew nothing would come of it) that I consented to be the man.

We arranged to apply that day for the order of admission to the prison, and, having seen Ambrose, to devote ourselves immediately to the contemplated search. How that search was to be conducted was more than I could tell, and more than Naomi could tell. We were to begin by applying to the police to help us to find John Jago, and we were then to be guided by circumstances. Was there ever a more hopeless programme than this?

'Circumstances' declared themselves against us at starting. I applied, as usual, for the order of admission to the prison, and the order was for the first time refused; no reason being assigned by the persons in authority for taking this course. Inquire as I might, the only answer given was, 'Not today'.

At Naomi's suggestion, we went to the prison to seek the explanation which was refused to us at the office. The gaoler on duty at the outer gate was one of Naomi's many admirers. He solved the mystery cautiously in a whisper. The sheriff and the governor of the prison were then speaking privately with Ambrose Meadowcroft in his cell: they had expressly directed that no persons should be admitted

to see the prisoner that day but themselves.

What did it mean? We returned, wondering, to the farm. There Naomi, speaking by chance to one of the female servants, made certain discoveries.

Early that morning the sheriff had been brought to Morwick by an old friend of the Meadowcrofts. A long interview had been held between Mr Meadowcroft and his daughter and the official personage introduced by the friend. Leaving the farm, the sheriff had gone straight to the prison, and had proceeded with the governor to visit Ambrose in his cell. Was some potent influence being brought privately to bear on Ambrose? Appearances certainly suggested that inquiry. Supposing the influence to have been really exerted, the next question followed: What was the object in view? We could only wait and see.

Our patience was not severely tried. The event of the next day enlightened us in a very unexpected manner. Before noon, the neighbours brought startling news from the prison to the farm.

Ambrose Meadowcroft had confessed himself to be the murderer of John Jago! He had signed the confession in the presence of the sheriff and the governor on that very day!

I saw the document. It is needless to reproduce it here. In substance, Ambrose confessed what Silas had confessed; claiming, however, to have only struck Jago under intolerable provocation, so as to reduce the nature of his offence against the law from murder to manslaughter. Was the confession really the true statement of what had taken place? or had the sheriff and the governor, acting in the interests of the family name, persuaded Ambrose to try this desperate means of escaping the ignominy of death on the scaffold? The sheriff and the governor preserved impenetrable silence until the pressure put on them judicially at the trial obliged them to speak.

Who was to tell Naomi of this last and saddest of all the calamities which had fallen on her? Knowing how I loved her in secret, I felt an invincible reluctance to be the person who revealed Ambrose Meadowcroft's degradation to his betrothed wife. Had any other member of the family told her what had happened? The lawyer was able to answer me: Miss Meadowcroft had told her.

I was shocked when I heard it. Miss Meadowcroft was the last person in the house to spare the poor girl: Miss Meadowcroft would make the hard tidings doubly terrible to bear in the telling. I tried to find Naomi, without success. She had been always accessible at other times. Was she hiding herself from me now? The idea occurred to me as I was descending the stairs after vainly knocking at the door of her room. I was determined to see her. I waited a few minutes, and then ascended the stairs again suddenly. On the landing I met her, just leaving her room.

She tried to run back. I caught her by the arm, and detained her. With her free hand she held her handkerchief over her face so as to hide it from me.

'You once told me I had comforted you,' I said to her, gently. 'Won't you let me comfort you now?'

She still struggled to get away, and still kept her head turned from me.

'Don't you see that I am ashamed to look you in the face?' she said, in low broken tones. 'Let me go.'

I still persisted in trying to soothe her. I drew her to the window-seat. I said I would wait until she was able to speak to me.

She dropped on the seat, and wrung her hands on her lap. Her downcast eyes still obstinately avoided meeting mine.

'Oh!' she said to herself, 'what madness possessed me? Is it possible that I ever disgraced myself by loving Ambrose Meadowcroft?' She shuddered as the idea found its way to expression on her lips. The tears rolled slowly over her cheeks. 'Don't despise me, Mr Lefrank!' she said, faintly.

I tried, honestly tried, to put the confession before her in its least unfavourable light.

'His resolution has given way,' I said. 'He has done this, despairing of proving his innocence, in terror of the scaffold.'

She rose, with an angry stamp of her foot. She turned her face on me with the deep-red flush of shame in it, and the big tears glistening in her eyes.

'No more of him!' she said, sternly. 'If he is not a murderer, what else is he? A liar and a coward! In which of his characters does he disgrace me most? I have done with him for ever! I will never speak to him again!' She pushed me furiously away from her; advanced a few steps towards her own door; stopped, and came back to me. The generous nature of the girl spoke in her next words. 'I am not ungrateful to *you*, friend Lefrank. A woman in my place is only a woman; and, when she is shamed as I am, she feels it very bitterly. Give me your hand! God bless you!'

She put my hand to her lips before I was aware of her, and kissed it, and ran back to her room.

I sat down on the place which she had occupied. She had looked at me for one moment when she kissed my hand. I forgot Ambrose and his confession; I forgot the coming trial; I forgot my professional duties and my English friends. There I sat, in a fool's Elysium of my own making, with absolutely nothing in my mind but the picture of Naomi's face at the moment when she had last looked at me!

I have already mentioned that I was in love with her. I merely add this to satisfy you that I tell the truth.

XI

Miss Meadowcroft and I were the only representatives of the family at the farm who attended the trial. We went separately to Narrabee. Excepting the ordinary greetings at morning and night, Miss Meadowcroft had not said one word to me since the time when I told her that I did *not* believe John Jago to be a living man.

I have purposely abstained from encumbering my narrative with legal details. I now propose to state the nature of the defence in the briefest outline only.

We insisted on making both the prisoners plead 'Not guilty'. This done, we took an objection to the legality of the proceedings at starting. We appealed to the old English law, that there should be no conviction for murder until the body of the murdered person was found, or proof of its destruction obtained beyond a doubt. We denied that sufficient proof had been obtained in the case now before the court.

The judges consulted, and decided that the trial should go on. We took our next objection when the Confessions were produced in evidence. We declared that they had been extorted by terror, or by undue influence; and we pointed out certain minor particulars in which the two confessions failed to corroborate each other. For the rest, our defence on this occasion was, as to essentials, what our defence had been at the inquiry before the magistrate. Once more the judges consulted, and once more they overruled our objection. The Confessions were admitted in evidence.

On their side, the prosecution produced one new witness in support of their case. It is needless to waste time in recapitulating his evidence. He contradicted himself gravely on cross-examination. We showed plainly, and after investigation proved, that he was not to be believed on his oath.

The Chief Justice summed up.

He charged, in relation to the Confessions, that no weight should be attached to confession incited by hope or fear; and he left it to the jury to determine whether the Confessions in this case had been so influenced. In the course of the trial, it had been shown for the defence that the sheriff and the governor of the prison had told Ambrose, with his father's knowledge and sanction, that the case was clearly against him; that the only chance of sparing his family the disgrace of his death by public execution lay in making a confession; and that they would do their best, if he did confess, to have his sentence commuted to transportation for life. As for Silas, he was proved to have been beside himself with terror when he made his abominable charge against his brother. We had vainly trusted to the evidence on these two points to

induce the court to reject the Confessions; and we were destined to be once more disappointed in anticipating that the same evidence would influence the verdict of the jury on the side of mercy. After an absence of an hour, they returned into court with a verdict of 'Guilty' against both the prisoners.

Being asked in due form if they had anything to say in mitigation of their sentence, Ambrose and Silas solemnly declared their innocence, and publicly acknowledged that their respective confessions had been wrung from them with the hope of escaping the hangman's hands. This statement was not noticed by the bench. The prisoners were both sentenced to death.

On my return to the farm, I did not see Naomi. Miss Meadowcroft informed her of the result of the trial. Half an hour later, one of the women servants handed to me an envelope bearing my name on it in Naomi's handwriting.

The envelope enclosed a letter, and with it a slip of paper on which Naomi had hurriedly written these words: 'For God's sake, read the letter I send to you, and do something about it immediately!'

I looked at the letter. It assumed to be written by a gentleman in New York. Only the day before, he had, by the merest accident, seen the advertisement for John Jago, cut out of a newspaper and pasted into a book of 'curiosities' kept by a friend. Upon this he wrote to Morwick Farm to say that he had seen a man exactly answering to the description of John Jago, but bearing another name, working as a clerk in a merchant's office in Jersey City. Having time to spare before the mail went out, he had returned to the office to take another look at the man before he posted his letter. To his surprise, he was informed that the clerk had not appeared at his desk that day. His employer had sent to his lodgings, and had been informed that he had suddenly packed up his bag after reading the newspaper at breakfast; had paid his rent honestly, and had gone away, nobody knew where!

It was late in the evening when I read these lines. I had time for reflection before it would be necessary for me to act.

Assuming the letter to be genuine, and adopting Naomi's explanation of the motive which had led John Jago to absent himself secretly from the farm, I reached the conclusion that the search for him might be usefully limited to Narrabee and to the surrounding neighbourhood.

The newspaper at his breakfast had no doubt given him his first information of the 'finding' of the grand jury, and of the trial to follow. It was in my experience of human nature that he should venture back to Narrabee under these circumstances, and under the influence of his infatuation for Naomi. More than this, it was again in my experience, I am sorry to say, that he should attempt to make the critical position

of Ambrose a means of extorting Naomi's consent to listen favourably to his suit. Cruel indifference to the injury and the suffering which his sudden absence might inflict on others, was plainly implied in his secret withdrawal from the farm. The same cruel indifference, pushed to a further extreme, might well lead him to press his proposals privately on Naomi, and to fix her acceptance of them as the price to be paid for saving her cousins' life.

To these conclusions I arrived after much thinking. I had determined, on Naomi's account, to clear the matter up; but it is only candid to add, that my doubts of John Jago's existence remained unshaken by the letter. I believed it to be nothing more or less than a heartless and stupid 'hoax'.

The striking of the hall clock roused me from my meditations. I counted the strokes—midnight!

I rose to go up to my room. Everybody else in the farm had retired to bed, as usual, more than an hour since. The stillness in the house was breathless. I walked softly, by instinct, as I crossed the room to look out at the night. A lovely moonlight met my view: it was like the moonlight on the fatal evening when Naomi had met John Jago on the garden walk.

My bedroom candle was on the side-table: I had just lit it. I was just leaving the room, when the door suddenly opened, and Naomi herself stood before me!

Recovering the first shock of her sudden appearance, I saw instantly, in her eager eyes, in her deadly pale cheeks, that something serious had happened. A large cloak was thrown over her; a white handkerchief was tied over her head. Her hair was in disorder: she had evidently just risen in fear and in haste from her bed.

'What is it?' I asked, advancing to meet her.

She clung trembling with agitation to my arm.

'John Jago!' she whispered.

You will think my obstinacy invincible. I could hardly believe it, even then!

'Do you mean John Jago's ghost?' I asked.

'I have seen John Jago himself,' she answered.

'Where?'

'In the back yard, under my bedroom window!'

The emergency was far too serious to allow of any consideration for the small proprieties of everyday life.

'Let *me* see him!' I said.

'I am here to fetch you,' she replied, in her frank and fearless way. 'Come upstairs with me.'

Her room was on the first floor of the house, and was the only

bedroom which looked out on the back yard. On our way up the stairs she told me what had happened.

'I was in bed,' she said, 'but not asleep, when I heard a pebble strike against the window-pane. I waited, wondering what it meant. Another pebble was thrown against the glass. So far I was surprised, but not frightened. I got up, and ran to the window to look out. There was John Jago, looking up at me in the moonlight!'

'Did he see you?'

'Yes. He said, "Come down and speak to me! I have something serious to say to you!"'

'Did you answer him?'

'As soon as I could fetch my breath, I said, "Wait a little," and ran downstairs to you. What shall I do?'

'Let *me* see him, and I will tell you.'

We entered her room. Keeping cautiously behind the window-curtain, I looked out.

There he was! His beard and moustache were shaved off: his hair was cut close. But there was no disguising his wild brown eyes, or the peculiar movement of his spare wiry figure, as he walked slowly to and fro in the moonlight, waiting for Naomi. For the moment, my own agitation almost overpowered me: I had so firmly disbelieved that John Jago was a living man!

'What shall I do?' Naomi repeated.

'Is the door of the dairy open?' I asked.

'No; but the door of the tool-house, round the corner, is not locked.'

'Very good. Show yourself at the window, and say to him, "I am coming directly".'

The brave girl obeyed me without a moment's hesitation.

There had been no doubt about his eyes and his gait; there was no doubt now about his voice as he answered softly from below—

'All right!'

'Keep him talking to you where he is now,' I said to Naomi, 'until I have time to get round by the other way to the tool-house. Then pretend to be fearful of discovery at the dairy; and bring him round the corner, so that I can hear him behind the door.'

We left the house together, and separated silently. Naomi followed my instructions with a woman's quick intelligence where stratagems are concerned. I had hardly been a minute in the tool-house before I heard him speaking to Naomi on the other side of the door.

The first words which I caught distinctly related to his motive for secretly leaving the farm. Mortified pride—doubly mortified by Naomi's contemptuous refusal, and by the personal indignity offered to him by Ambrose—was at the bottom of his conduct in absenting himself from

Morwick. He owned that he had seen the advertisement, and that it had actually encouraged him to keep in hiding!

'After being laughed at and insulted and denied, I was glad,' said the miserable wretch, 'to see that some of you had serious reason to wish me back again. It rests with you, Miss Naomi, to keep me here, and to persuade me to save Ambrose by showing myself, and owning to my name.'

'What do you mean?' I heard Naomi ask, sternly.

He lowered his voice; but I could still hear him.

'Promise you will marry me,' he said, 'and I will go before the magistrate tomorrow, and show him that I am a living man.'

'Suppose I refuse?'

'In that case you will lose me again, and none of you will find me till Ambrose is hanged.'

'Are you villain enough, John Jago, to mean what you say?' asked the girl, raising her voice.

'If you attempt to give the alarm,' he answered, 'as true as God's above us, you will feel my hand on your throat! It's my turn, now, miss; and I am not to be trifled with. Will you have me for your husband—yes or no?'

'No!' she answered, loudly and firmly.

I threw open the door, and seized him as he lifted his hand on her. He had not suffered from the nervous derangement which had weakened me, and he was the stronger man of the two. Naomi saved my life. She struck up his pistol as he pulled it out of his pocket with his free hand and presented it at my head. The bullet was fired into the air. I tripped up his heels at the same moment. The report of the pistol had alarmed the house. We two together kept him on the ground until help arrived.

XII

John Jago was brought before the magistrate, and John Jago was identified the next day.

The lives of Ambrose and Silas were, of course, no longer in peril, so far as human justice was concerned. But there were legal delays to be encountered, and legal formalities to be observed, before the brothers could be released from prison in the characters of innocent men.

During the interval which thus elapsed, certain events happened which may be briefly mentioned here before I close my narrative.

Mr Meadowcroft the elder, broken by the suffering which he had gone through, died suddenly of a rheumatic affection of the heart. A

codicil attached to his will abundantly justified what Naomi had told me of Miss Meadowcroft's influence over her father, and of the end she had in view in exercising it. A life-income only was left to Mr Meadowcroft's sons. The freehold of the farm was bequeathed to his daughter, with the testator's recommendation added, that she should marry his 'best and dearest friend, Mr John Jago'.

Armed with the power of the will, the heiress of Morwick sent an insolent message to Naomi requesting her no longer to consider herself one of the inmates at the farm. Miss Meadowcroft, it should be here added, positively refused to believe that John Jago had ever asked Naomi to be his wife, or had ever threatened her, as I had heard him threaten her, if she refused. She accused me, as she accused Naomi, of trying meanly to injure John Jago in her estimation, out of hatred towards 'that much injured man'; and she sent to me, as she had sent to Naomi, a formal notice to leave the house.

We two banished ones met the same day in the hall, with out travelling bags in our hands.

'We are turned out together, friend Lefrank,' said Naomi, with her quaintly comical smile. 'You will go back to England, I guess; and I must make my own living in my own country. Women can get employment in the States if they have a friend to speak for them. Where shall I find somebody who can give me a place?'

I saw my way to saying the right word at the right moment.

'I have got a place to offer you,' I replied, 'if you see no objection to accepting it.'

She suspected nothing, so far.

'That's lucky, sir,' was all she said. 'Is it in a telegraph-office or in a dry-goods store?'

I astonished my little American friend by taking her then and there in my arms, and giving her my first kiss.

'The office is by my fireside,' I said. 'The salary is anything in reason you like to ask me for. And the place, Naomi, if you have no objection to it, is the place of my wife.'

I have no more to say, except that years have passed since I spoke those words, and that I am as fond of Naomi as ever.

Some months after our marriage, Mrs Lefrank wrote to a friend at Narrabee for news of what was going on at the farm. The answer informed us that Ambrose and Silas had emigrated to New Zealand, and that Miss Meadowcroft was alone at Morwick Farm. John Jago had refused to marry her. John Jago had disappeared again, nobody knew where.

11

Who Killed Zebedee?

A First Word for Myself

Before the doctor left me one evening, I asked him how much longer I was likely to live. He answered: 'It's not easy to say; you may die before I can get back to you in the morning, or you may live to the end of the month.'

I was alive enough on the next morning to think of the needs of my soul, and (being a member of the Roman Catholic Church) to send for the priest.

The history of my sins, related in confession, included blameworthy neglect of a duty which I owed to the laws of my country. In the priest's opinion—and I agreed with him—I was bound to make public acknowledgment of my fault, as an act of penance becoming to a Catholic Englishman. We concluded, thereupon, to try a division of labour. I related the circumstances, while his reverence took the pen, and put the matter into shape.

Here follows what came of it:

I

When I was a young man of five-and-twenty, I became a member of the London police force. After nearly two year's ordinary experience of the responsible and ill-paid duties of that vocation, I found myself employed on my first serious and terrible case of official inquiry—relating to nothing less than the crime of murder.

The circumstances were these:

I was then attached to a station in the northern district of London—which I beg permission not to mention more particularly. On a certain Monday in the week, I took my turn of night duty. Up to four in the morning nothing occurred at the station-house out of the ordinary way. It was then springtime, and, between the gas and the fire, the room became rather hot. I went to the door to get a breath of fresh

air—much to the surprise of our Inspector on duty, who was constitutionally a chilly man. There was a fine rain falling; and a nasty damp in the air sent me back to the fireside. I don't suppose I had sat down for more than a minute when the swinging-door was violently pushed open. A frantic woman ran in with a scream, and said: 'Is this the station-house?'

Our Inspector (otherwise an excellent officer) had, by some perversity of nature, a hot temper in his chilly constitution. 'Why, bless the woman, can't you *see* it is?' he says. 'What's the matter now?'

'Murder's the matter!' she burst out. 'For God's sake come back with me. It's at Mrs Crosscapel's lodging-house, number 14, Lehigh Street. A young woman has murdered her husband in the night! With a knife, sir. She says she thinks she did it in her sleep.'

I confess I was startled by this; and the third man on duty (a sergeant) seemed to feel it too. She was a nice-looking young woman, even in her terrified condition, just out of bed, with her clothes huddled on anyhow. I was partial in those days to a tall figure—and she was, as they say, my style. I put a chair for her; and the sergeant poked the fire. As for the Inspector, nothing ever upset him. He questioned her as coolly as if it had been a case of petty larceny.

'Have you seen the murdered man?' he asked.

'No, sir.'

'Or the wife?'

'No, sir. I didn't dare go into the room; I only heard about it!'

'Oh? And who are you? One of the lodgers?'

'No, sir. I'm the cook.'

'Isn't there a master in the house?'

'Yes, sir. He's frightened out of his wits. And the housemaid's gone for the doctor. It all falls on the poor servants, of course. Oh, why did I ever set foot in that horrible house?'

The poor soul burst out crying, and shivered from head to foot. The Inspector made a note of her statement, and then asked her to read it, and sign it with her name. The object of this proceeding was to get her to come near enough to give him the opportunity of smelling her breath. 'When people make extraordinary statements,' he afterwards said to me, 'it sometimes saves trouble to satisfy yourself that they are not drunk. I've known them to be mad—but not often. You will generally find *that* in their eyes.'

She roused herself, and signed her name—'Priscilla Thurlby'. The Inspector's own test proved her to be sober; and her eyes—a nice light blue colour, mild and pleasant, no doubt, when they were not staring with fear, and red with crying—satisfied him (as I supposed) that she was not mad. He turned the case over to me, in the first instance. I saw

that he didn't believe in it, even yet.

'Go back with her to the house,' he says. 'This may be a stupid hoax, or a quarrel exaggerated. See to it yourself, and hear what the doctor says. If it is serious, send word back here directly, and let nobody enter the place or leave it till we come. Stop! You know the form if any statement is volunteered?'

'Yes, sir. I am to caution the persons that whatever they say will be taken down, and may be used in evidence.'

'Quite right. You'll be an Inspector yourself one of these days. Now, Miss!' With that he dismissed her, under my care.

Lehigh Street was not very far off—about twenty minutes' walk from the station. I confess I thought the Inspector had been rather hard on Priscilla. She was herself naturally angry with him. 'What does he mean,' she says, 'by talking of a hoax? I wish he was as frightened as I am. This is the first time I have been out at service, sir—and I did think I had found a respectable place.'

I said very little to her—feeling, if the truth must be told, rather anxious about the duty committed to me. On reaching the house the door was opened from within, before I could knock. A gentleman stepped out, who proved to be the doctor. He stopped the moment he saw me.

'You must be careful, policeman,' he says. 'I found the man lying on his back, in bed, dead—with the knife that had killed him sticking in the wound.'

Hearing this, I felt the necessity of sending at once to the station. Where could I find a trustworthy messenger? I took the liberty of asking the doctor if he would repeat to the police what he had already said to me. The station was not much out of his way home. He kindly granted my request.

The landlady (Mrs Crosscapel) joined us while we were talking. She was still a young woman; not easily frightened, as far as I could see, even by a murder in the house. Her husband was in the passage behind her. He looked old enough to be her father; and he so trembled with terror that some people might have taken him for the guilty person. I removed the key from the street door, after locking it; and I said to the landlady: 'Nobody must leave the house, or enter the house, till the Inspector comes. I must examine the premises to see if anyone has broken in.'

'There is the key of the area gate,' she said, in answer to me. 'It's always kept locked. Come downstairs, and see for yourself.'

Priscilla went with us. Her mistress set her to work to light the kitchen fire. 'Some of us,' says Mrs Crosscapel, 'may be the better for a cup of tea.' I remarked that she took things easy, under the

circumstances. She answered that the landlady of a London lodging-house could not afford to lose her wits, no matter what might happen.

I found the gate locked, and the shutters of the kitchen window fastened. The back-kitchen and back-door were secured in the same way. No person was concealed anywhere. Returning upstairs, I examined the front parlour window. There again, the barred shutters answered for the security of that room. A cracked voice spoke through the door of the back parlour. 'The policeman can come in,' it said, 'if he will promise not to look at me.' I turned to the landlady for information. 'It's my parlour lodger, Miss Mybus,' she said, 'a most respectable lady.' Going into the room, I saw something rolled up perpendicularly in the bed curtains. Miss Mybus had made herself modestly invisible in that way. Having now satisfied my mind about the security of the lower part of the house, and having the keys safe in my pocket, I was ready to go upstairs.

On our way to the upper regions I asked if there had been any visitors on the previous day. There had been only two visitors, friends of the lodgers—and Mrs Crosscapel herself had let them both out. My next inquiry related to the lodgers themselves. On the ground floor there was Miss Mybus. On the first floor (occupying both rooms) Mr Barfield, an old bachelor, employed in a merchant's office. On the second floor, in the front room, Mr John Zebedee, the murdered man, and his wife. In the back room, Mr Deluc; described as a cigar agent, and supposed to be a Creole gentleman from Martinique. In the front garret, Mr and Mrs Crosscapel. In the back garret, the cook and the housemaid. These were the inhabitants, regularly accounted for. I asked about the servants. 'Both excellent characters,' says the landlady, 'or they would not be in my service.'

We reached the second floor, and found the housemaid on the watch outside the door of the front room. Not as nice a woman, personally, as the cook, and sadly frightened of course. Her mistress had posted her, to give the alarm in the case of an outbreak on the part of Mrs Zebedee, kept locked up in the room. My arrival relieved the housemaid of further responsibility. She ran downstairs to her fellow-servant in the kitchen.

I asked Mrs Crosscapel how and when the alarm of the murder had been given.

'Soon after three this morning,' says she, 'I was woke by the screams of Mrs Zebedee. I found her out here on the landing, and Mr Deluc, in great alarm, trying to quiet her. Sleeping in the next room, he had only to open his door, when her screams woke him. "My dear John's murdered! I am the miserable wretch—I did it in my sleep!" She repeated those frantic words over and over again, until she dropped

in a swoon. Mr Deluc and I carried her back into the bedroom. We both thought the poor creature had been driven distracted by some dreadful dream. But when we got to the bedside—don't ask me what we saw; the doctor has told you about it already. I was once a nurse in a hospital, and accustomed, as such, to horrid sights. It turned me cold and giddy, notwithstanding. As for Mr Deluc, I thought *he* would have had a fainting fit next.'

Hearing this, I inquired if Mrs Zebedee had said or done any strange things since she had been Mrs Crosscapel's lodger.

'You think she's mad?' says the landlady. 'And anybody would be of your mind, when a woman accuses herself of murdering her husband in her sleep. All I can say is that, up to this morning, a more quiet, sensible, well-behaved little person than Mrs Zebedee I never met with. Only just married, mind, and as fond of her unfortunate husband as a woman could be. I should have called them a pattern couple, in their own line of life.'

There was no more to be said on the landing. We unlocked the door and went into the room.

II

He lay in bed on his back as the doctor has described him. On the left side of his nightgown, just over his heart, the blood on the linen told its terrible tale. As well as one could judge, looking unwillingly at a dead face, he must have been a handsome young man in his lifetime. It was a sight to sadden anybody—but I think the most painful sensation was when my eyes fell next on his miserable wife.

She was down on the floor, crouched up in a corner—a dark little woman, smartly dressed in gay colours. Her black hair and her big brown eyes made the horrid paleness of her face look even more deadly white than perhaps it really was. She stared straight at us without appearing to see us. We spoke to her, and she never answered a word. She might have been dead—like her husband—except that she perpetually picked at her fingers, and shuddered every now and then as if she was cold. I went to her and tried to lift her up. She shrank back with a cry that well-nigh frightened me—not because it was loud, but because it was more like the cry of some animal than of a human being. However quietly she might have behaved in the landlady's previous experience of her, she was beside herself now. I might have been moved by a natural pity for her, or I might have been completely upset in my mind—I only know this, I could not persuade myself that she was guilty. I even said to Mrs Crosscapel, 'I don't believe she did it.'

While I spoke, there was a knock at the door. I went downstairs at

once, and admitted (to my great relief) the Inspector, accompanied by one of our men.

He waited downstairs to hear my report, and he approved of what I had done. 'It looks as if the murder had been committed by somebody in the house.' Saying this, he left the man below, and went up with me to the second floor.

Before he had been a minute in the room, he discovered an object which had escaped my observation.

It was the knife that had done the deed.

The doctor had found it left in the body—had withdrawn it to probe the wound—and had laid it on the bedside table. It was one of those useful knives which contain a saw, a corkscrew, and other like implements. The big blade fastened back, when open, with a spring. Except where the blood was on it, it was as bright as when it had been purchased. A small metal plate was fastened to the horn handle, containing an inscription, only partly engraved, which ran thus: '*To John Zebedee, from—*' There it stopped, strangely enough.

Who or what had interrupted the engraver's work? It was impossible even to guess. Nevertheless, the Inspector was encouraged.

'This ought to help us,' he said—and then he gave an attentive ear (looking all the while at the poor creature in the corner) to what Mrs Crosscapel had to tell him.

The landlady having done, he said he must now see the lodger who slept in the next bedchamber.

Mr Deluc made his appearance, standing at the door of the room, and turning away his head with horror from the sight inside.

He was wrapped in a splendid blue dressing-gown, with a golden girdle and trimmings. His scanty brownish hair curled (whether artificially or not, I am unable to say) in little ringlets. His complexion was yellow; his greenish-brown eyes were of the sort called 'goggle'—they looked as if they might drop out of his face, if you held a spoon under them. His moustache and goat's beard were beautifully oiled; and, to complete his equipment, he had at long black cigar in his mouth.

'It isn't insensibility to this terrible tragedy,' he explained. 'My nerves have been shattered, Mr Policeman, and I can only repair the mischief in this way. Be pleased to excuse and feel for me.'

The Inspector questioned this witness sharply and closely. He was not a man to be misled by appearances; but I could see that he was far from liking, or even trusting, Mr Deluc. Nothing came of the examination, except what Mrs Crosscapel had in substance already mentioned to me. Mr Deluc returned to his room.

'How long has he been lodging with you?' the Inspector asked, as

soon as his back was turned.

'Nearly a year,' the landlady answered.

'Did he give you a reference?'

'As good a reference as I could wish for.' Thereupon, she mentioned the names of a well-known firm of cigar merchants in the City. The Inspector noted the information in his pocket-book.

I would rather not relate in detail what happened next: it is too distressing to be dwelt on. Let me only say that the poor demented woman was taken away in a cab to the station-house. The Inspector possessed himself of the knife, and of a book found on the floor, called 'The World of Sleep'. The portmanteau containing the luggage was locked—and then the door of the room was secured, the keys in both cases being left in my charge. My instructions were to remain in the house, and allow nobody to leave it, until I heard again shortly from the Inspector.

III

The coroner's inquest was adjourned; and the examination before the magistrate ended in a remand—Mrs Zebedee being in no condition to understand the proceedings in either case. The surgeon reported her to be completely prostrated by a terrible nervous shock. When he was asked if he considered her to have been a sane woman before the murder took place, he refused to answer positively at that time.

A week passed. The murdered man was buried; his old father attending the funeral. I occasionally saw Mrs Crosscapel, and the two servants, for the purpose of getting such further information as was thought desirable. Both the cook and the housemaid had given their month's notice to quit; declining, in the interest of their characters, to remain in a house which had been the scene of a murder. Mr Deluc's nerves led also to his removal; his rest was now disturbed by frightful dreams. He paid the necessary forfeit-money, and left without notice. The first-floor lodger, Mr Barfield, kept his rooms, but obtained leave of absence from his employers, and took refuge with some friends in the country. Miss Mybus alone remained in the parlours. 'When I am comfortable,' the old lady said, 'nothing moves me, at my age. A murder up two pairs of stairs is nearly the same thing as a murder in the next house. Distance, you see, makes all the difference.'

It mattered little to the police what the lodgers did. We had men in plain clothes watching the house night and day. Everybody who went away was privately followed; and the police in the district to which they retired were warned to keep an eye on them, after that. As long as we failed to put Mrs Zebedee's extraordinary statement to any sort

of test—to say nothing of having proved unsuccessful, thus far, in tracing the knife to its purchaser—we were bound to let no person living under Mr Crosscapel's roof, on the night of the murder, slip through our fingers.

IV

In a fortnight more, Mrs Zebedee had sufficiently recovered to make the necessary statement—after the preliminary caution addressed to persons in such cases. The surgeon had no hesitation, now, in reporting her to be a sane woman.

Her station in life had been domestic service. She had lived for four years in her last place as lady's-maid, with a family residing in Dorsetshire. The one objection to her had been the occasional infirmity of sleep-walking, which made it necessary that one of the other female servants should sleep in the same room, with the door locked and the key under her pillow. In all other respects the lady's-maid was described by her mistress as 'a perfect treasure'.

In the last six months of her service, a young man named John Zebedee entered the house (with a written character) as a footman. He soon fell in love with the nice little lady's-maid, and she heartily returned the feeling. They might have waited for years before they were in a pecuniary position to marry, but for the death of Zebedee's uncle, who left him a little fortune of two thousand pounds. They were now, for persons in their station, rich enough to please themselves; and they were married from the house in which they had served together, the little daughters of the family showing their affection for Mrs Zebedee by acting as her bridesmaids.

The young husband was a careful man. He decided to employ his small capital to the best advantage, by sheep-farming in Australia. His wife made no objection; she was ready to go wherever John went.

Accordingly they spent their short honeymoon in London, so as to see for themselves the vessel in which their passage was to be taken. They went to Mrs Crosscapel's lodging-house because Zebedee's uncle had always stayed there when in London. Ten days were to pass before the day of embarkation arrived. This gave the young couple a welcome holiday, and a prospect of amusing themselves to their hearts' content among the sights and shows of the great city.

On their first evening in London they went to the theatre. They were both accustomed to the fresh air of the country, and they felt half stifled by the heat and the gas. However, they were so pleased with an amusement which was new to them that they went to another theatre on the next evening. On this second occasion, John Zebedee found the

heat unendurable. They left the theatre, and got back to their lodgings towards ten o'clock.

Let the rest be told in the words used by Mrs Zebedee herself. She said:

'We sat talking for a little while in our room, and John's headache got worse and worse. I persuaded him to go to bed, and I put out the candle (the fire giving sufficient light to undress by), so that he might the sooner fall asleep. But he was too restless to sleep. He asked me to read him something. Books always made him drowsy at the best of times.

'I had not myself begun to undress. So I lit the candle again, and I opened the only book I had. John had noticed it at the railway bookstall by the name of "The World of Sleep". He used to joke with me about my being a sleep-walker; and he said, "Here's something that's sure to interest you"—and he made me a present of the book.

'Before I had read to him for more than half an hour he was fast asleep. Not feeling that way inclined, I went on reading to myself.

'The book did indeed interest me. There was one terrible story which took a hold on my mind—the story of a man who stabbed his own wife in a sleep-walking dream. I thought of putting down my book after that, and then changed my mind again and went on. The next chapters were not so interesting; they were full of learned accounts of why we fall asleep, and what our brains do in that state, and such like. It ended in my falling asleep, too, in my armchair by the fireside.

'I don't know what o'clock it was when I went to sleep. I don't know how long I slept, or whether I dreamed or not. The candle and the fire had both burned out, and it was pitch dark when I woke. I can't even say why I woke—unless it was the coldness of the room.

'There was a spare candle on the chimney-piece. I found the matchbox, and got a light. Then for the first time, I turned round towards the bed; and I saw——'

She had seen the dead body of her husband, murdered while she was unconsciously at his side—and she fainted, poor creature, at the bare remembrance of it.

The proceedings were adjourned. She received every possible care and attention; the chaplain looking after her welfare as well as the surgeon.

I have said nothing of the evidence of the landlady and servants. It was taken as a mere formality. What little they knew proved nothing against Mrs Zebedee. The police made no discoveries that supported her first frantic accusation of herself. Her master and mistress, where she had been last in service, spoke of her in the highest terms. We were at a complete deadlock.

It had been thought best not to surprise Mr Deluc, as yet, by citing him as a witness. The action of the law was, however, hurried in this case by a private communication received from the chaplain.

After twice seeing, and speaking with, Mrs Zebedee, the reverend gentleman was persuaded that she had no more to do than himself with the murder of her husband. He did not consider that he was justified in repeating a confidential communication—he would only recommend that Mr Deluc should be summoned to appear at the next examination. This advice was followed.

The police had no evidence against Mrs Zebedee when the inquiry was resumed. To assist the ends of justice she was now put into the witness-box. The discovery of her murdered husband, when she woke in the small hours of the morning was passed over as rapidly as possible. Only three questions of importance were put to her.

First, the knife was produced. Had she ever seen it in her husband's possession? Never. Did she know anything about it? Nothing whatever.

Secondly: Did she, or did her husband lock the bedroom door when they returned from the theatre? No. Did she afterwards lock the door herself? No.

Thirdly: Had she any sort of reason to give for supposing that she had murdered her husband in a sleep-walking dream? No reason, except that she was beside herself at the time, and the book put the thought into her head.

After this the other witnesses were sent out of court. The motive for the chaplain's communication now appeared. Mrs Zebedee was asked if anything unpleasant had occurred between Mr Deluc and herself.

Yes. He had caught her alone on the stairs at the lodging-house; had presumed to make love to her; and had carried the insult still further by attempting to kiss her. She had slapped his face, and had declared that her husband should know of it, if his misconduct was repeated. He was in a furious rage at having his face slapped; and he said to her: 'Madam, you may live to regret this.'

After consultation, and at the request of our Inspector, it was decided to keep Mr Deluc in ignorance of Mrs Zebedee's statement for the present. When the witnesses were recalled, he gave the same evidence which he had already given to the Inspector—and he was then asked if he knew anything of the knife. He looked at it without any guilty signs in his face, and swore that he had never seen it until that moment. The resumed inquiry ended, and still nothing had been discovered.

But we kept an eye on Mr Deluc. Our next effort was to try if we

could associate him with the purchase of the knife.

Here again (there really did seem to be a sort of fatality in this case) we reached no useful result. It was easy enough to find out the wholesale cutlers, who had manufactured the knife at Sheffield, by the mark on the blade. But they made tens of thousands of such knives, and disposed of them to retail dealers all over Great Britain—to say nothing of foreign parts. As to finding out the person who had engraved the imperfect inscription (without knowing where, or by whom, the knife had been purchased) we might as well have looked for the proverbial needle in the bundle of hay. Our last resource was to have the knife photographed, with the inscribed side uppermost, and to send copies to every police-station in the kingdom.

At the same time we reckoned up Mr Deluc—I mean that we made investigations into his past life—on the chance that he and the murdered man might have known each other, and might have had a quarrel, or a rivalry about a woman, on some former occasion. No such discovery rewarded us.

We found Deluc to have led a dissipated life, and to have mixed with very bad company. But he had kept out of reach of the law. A man may be a profligate vagabond; may insult a lady; may say threatening things to her, in the first stinging sensation of having his face slapped—but it doesn't follow from these blots on his character that he has murdered her husband in the dead of the night.

Once more, then, when we were called upon to report ourselves, we had no evidence to produce. The photographs failed to discover the owner of the knife, and to explain its interrupted inscription. Poor Mrs Zebedee was allowed to go back to her friends, on entering into her own recognizance to appear again if called upon. Articles in the newspapers began to inquire how many more murderers would succeed in baffling the police. The authorities at the Treasury offered a reward of a hundred pounds for the necessary information. And the weeks passed, and nobody claimed the reward.

Our Inspector was not a man to be easily beaten. More inquiries and examinations followed. It is needless to say anything about them. We were defeated—and there, so far as the police and the public were concerned, was an end of it.

The assassination of the poor young husband soon passed out of notice, like other undiscovered murders. One obscure person only was foolish enough, in his leisure hours, to persist in trying to solve the problem of 'Who Killed Zebedee?' He felt that he might rise to the highest position in the police-force if he succeeded where his elders and betters had failed—and he held to his own little ambition, though everybody laughed at him. In plain English, I was the man.

V

Without meaning it, I have told my story ungratefully.

There were two persons who saw nothing ridiculous in my resolution to continue the investigation single-handed. One of them was Miss Mybus; and the other was the cook, Priscilla Thurlby.

Mentioning the lady first, Miss Mybus was indignant at the resigned manner in which the police accepted their defeat. She was a little bright-eyed wiry woman; and she spoke her mind freely.

'This comes home to me,' she said. 'Just look back for a year or two. I can call to mind two cases of persons found murdered in London—and the assassins have never been traced. I am a person, too; and I ask myself if my turn is not coming next. You're a nice-looking fellow—and I like your pluck and perseverance. Come here as often as you think right; and say you are my visitor, if they make any difficulty about letting you in. One thing more! I have nothing particular to do, and I am no fool. Here, in the parlours, I see everybody who comes into the house or goes out of the house. Leave me your address—I may get some information for you yet.'

With the best intentions, Miss Mybus found no opportunity of helping me. Of the two, Priscilla Thurlby seemed more likely to be of use.

In the first place, she was sharp and active, and (not having succeeded in getting another situation as yet) was mistress of her own movements.

In the second place, she was a woman I could trust. Before she left home to try domestic service in London, the parson of her native parish gave her a written testimonial, of which I append a copy. Thus it ran:

'I gladly recommend Priscilla Thurlby for any respectable employment which she may be competent to undertake. Her father and mother are infirm old people, who have lately suffered a diminution of their income; and they have a younger daughter to maintain. Rather than be a burden on her parents, Priscilla goes to London to find domestic employment, and to devote her earnings to the assistance of her father and mother. This circumstance speaks for itself. I have known the family many years; and I only regret that I have no vacant place in my own household which I can offer to this good girl.

(Signed)

'HENRY DERRINGTON, Rector of Roth.'

After reading those words, I could safely ask Priscilla to help me in reopening the mysterious murder case to some good purpose.

My notion was that the proceedings of the persons in Mrs Crosscapel's house, had not been closely enough inquired into yet. By way of continuing the investigation, I asked Priscilla if she could tell me anything which associated the housemaid with Mr Deluc. She was unwilling to answer. 'I may be casting suspicion on an innocent person,' she said. 'Besides, I was for so short a time the housemaid's fellow servant——'

'You slept in the same room with her,' I remarked; 'and you had opportunities of observing her conduct towards the lodgers. If they had asked you, at the examination, what I now ask, you would have answered as an honest woman.'

To this argument she yielded. I heard from her certain particulars which threw a new light on Mr Deluc, and on the case generally. On that information I acted. It was slow work, owing to the claims on me of my regular duties; but with Priscilla's help, I steadily advanced towards the end I had in view.

Besides this, I owed another obligation to Mrs Crosscapel's nice-looking cook. The confession must be made sooner or later—and I may as well make it now. I first knew what love was, thanks to Priscilla. I had delicious kisses, thanks to Priscilla. And, when I asked if she would marry me, she didn't say No. She looked, I must own, a little sadly, and she said: 'How can two such poor people as we are ever hope to marry?' To this I answered: 'It won't be long before I lay my hand on the clue which my Inspector has failed to find. I shall be in a position to marry you, my dear, when that time comes.'

At our next meeting we spoke of her parents. I was now her promised husband. Judging by what I had heard of the proceedings of other people in my position, it seemed to be only right that I should be made known to her father and mother. She entirely agreed with me; and she wrote home that day to tell them to expect us at the end of the week.

I took my turn of night-duty, and so gained my liberty for the greater part of the next day. I dressed myself in plain clothes, and we took our tickets on the railway for Yateland, being the nearest station to the village in which Priscilla's parents lived.

VI

The train stopped, as usual, at the big town of Waterbank. Supporting herself by her needle, while she was still unprovided with a situation, Priscilla had been at work late in the night—she was tired and thirsty. I left the carriage to get her some soda-water. The stupid girl in the refreshment room failed to pull the cork out of the bottle, and refused

to let me help her. She took a corkscrew, and used it crookedly. I lost all patience, and snatched the bottle out of her hand. Just as I drew the cork, the bell rang on the platform. I only waited to pour the soda-water into a glass—but the train was moving as I left the refreshment-room. The porters stopped me when I tried to jump on to the step of the carriage. I was left behind.

As soon as I had recovered my temper, I looked at the timetable. We had reached Waterbank at five minutes past one. By good-luck, the next train was due at forty-four minutes past one, and arrived at Yateland (the next station) ten minutes afterwards. I could only hope that Priscilla would look at the timetable too, and wait for me. If I had attempted to walk the distance between the two places, I should have lost time instead of saving it. The interval before me was not very long; I occupied it in looking over the town.

Speaking with all due respect to the inhabitants, Waterbank (to other people) is a dull place. I went up one street and down another—and stopped to look at a shop which struck me; not from anything in itself, but because it was the only shop in the street with the shutters closed.

A bill was posted on the shutters, announcing that the place was to let. The out-going tradesman's name and business, announced in the customary painted letters, ran thus: *James Wycomb, Cutler, etc.*

For the first time, it occurred to me that we had forgotten an obstacle in our way when we distributed our photographs of the knife. We had none of us remembered that a certain proportion of cutlers might be placed, by circumstances, out of our reach—either by retiring from business or by becoming bankrupt. I always carried a copy of the photograph about me; and I thought to myself, 'Here is the ghost of a chance of tracing the knife to Mr Deluc!'

The shop door was opened, after I had twice rung the bell, by an old man, very dirty and very deaf. He said: 'You had better go upstairs, and speak to Mr Scorrier—top of the house.'

I put my lips to the old fellow's ear-trumpet, and asked who Mr Scorrier was.

'Brother-in-law to Mr Wycomb. Mr Wycomb's dead. If you want to buy the business apply to Mr Scorrier.'

Receiving that reply, I went upstairs, and found Mr Scorrier engaged in engraving a brass door-plate. He was a middle-aged man, with a cadaverous face and dim eyes. After the necessary apologies, I produced my photograph.

'My I ask, sir, if you know anything of the inscription on that knife?' I said.

He took his magnifying glass to look at it.

'This is curious,' he remarked quietly. 'I remember the queer name—Zebedee. Yes, sir; I did the engraving, as far as it goes. I wonder what prevented me from finishing it?'

The name of Zebedee, and the unfinished inscription on the knife, had appeared in every English newspaper. He took the matter so coolly, that I was doubtful how to interpret his answer. Was it possible that he had not seen the account of the murder? Or was he an accomplice with prodigious powers of self-control?

'Excuse me,' I said, 'do you read the newspapers?'

'Never! My eyesight is failing me. I abstain from reading, in the interests of my occupation.'

'Have you not heard the name of Zebedee mentioned—particularly by people who do read the newspapers?'

'Very likely; but I didn't attend to it. When the day's work is done, I take my walk. Then I have my supper, my drop of grog, and my pipe. Then I go to bed: a dull existence you think, I dare say! I had a miserable life, sir, when I was young. A bare subsistence, and a little rest, before the last perfect rest in the grave—that is all I want. The world has gone by me long ago. So much the better.'

The poor man spoke honestly. I was ashamed of having doubted him. I returned to the subject of the knife.

'Do you know where it was purchased, and by whom?' I asked.

'My memory is not so good as it was,' he said; 'but I have got something by me that helps it.'

He took from a cupboard a dirty old scrapbook. Strips of paper, with writing on them, were pasted on the pages, as well as I could see. He turned to an index, or table of contents, and opened a page. Something like a flash of life showed itself on his dismal face.

'Ha! now I remember,' he said. 'The knife was bought off my late brother-in-law, in the shop downstairs. It all comes back to me, sir. A person in a state of frenzy burst into this very room, and snatched the knife away from me, when I was only half way through the inscription!'

I felt that I was now close on discovery. 'May I see what it is that has assisted your memory?' I asked.

'Oh yes. You must know, sir, I live by engraving inscriptions and addresses, and I paste in this book the manuscript instructions which I receive, with marks of my own on the margin. For one thing, they serve as a reference to new customers. And for another thing, they do certainly help my memory.'

He turned the book towards me, and pointed to a slip of paper which occupied the lower half of a page.

I read the complete inscription, intended for the knife that killed

Zebedee, and written as follows:

'To John Zebedee. From Priscilla Thurlby.'

VII

I declare that it is impossible for me to describe what I felt when Priscilla's name confronted me like a written confession of guilt. How long it was before I recovered myself in some degree, I cannot say. The only thing I can clearly call to mind is, that I frightened the poor engraver.

My first desire was to get possession of the manuscript inscription. I told him I was a policeman, and summoned him to assist me in the discovery of a crime. I even offered him money. He drew back from my hand. 'You shall have it for nothing,' he said, 'if you will only go away and never come here again.' He tried to cut it out of the page—but his trembling hands were helpless. I cut it out myself, and attempted to thank him. He wouldn't hear me. 'Go away!' he said, 'I don't like the look of you.'

It may be here objected that I ought not to have felt so sure as I did of the woman's guilt, until I had got more evidence against her. The knife might have been stolen from her, supposing she was the person who had snatched it out of the engraver's hands, and might have been afterwards used by the thief to commit the murder. All very true. But I never had a moment's doubt in my own mind, from the time when I read the damnable line in the engraver's book.

I went back to the railway without any plan in my head. The train by which I had proposed to follow her had left Waterbank. The next train that arrived was for London. I took my place in it—still without any plan in my head.

At Charing Cross a friend met me. He said, 'You're looking miserably ill. Come and have a drink.'

I went with him. The liquor was what I really wanted; it strung me up, and cleared my head. He went his way, and I went mine. In a little while more, I determined what I would do.

In the first place, I decided to resign my situation in the police, from a motive which will presently appear. In the second place, I took a bed at a public-house. She would no doubt return to London, and she would go to my lodgings to find out why I had broken my appointment. To bring to justice the one woman whom I had dearly loved was too cruel a duty for a poor creature like me. I preferred leaving the police-force. On the other hand, if she and I met before time had helped me to control myself, I had a horrid fear that I might turn murderer next, and kill her then and there. The wretch had not

only all but misled me into marrying her, but also into charging the innocent housemaid with being concerned in the murder.

The same night I hit on a way of clearing up such doubts as still harassed my mind. I wrote to the rector of Roth, informing him that I was engaged to marry her, and asking if he would tell me (in consideration of my position) what her former relations might have been with the person named John Zebedee.

By return of post I got this reply:

‘SIR,—Under the circumstances, I think I am bound to tell you confidentially what the friends and well-wishers of Priscilla have kept secret, for her sake.

‘Zebedee was in service in this neighbourhood. I am sorry to say it, of a man who has come to such a miserable end—but his behaviour to Priscilla proves him to have been a vicious and heartless wretch. They were engaged—and, I add with indignation, he tried to seduce her under a promise of marriage. Her virtue resisted him, and he pretended to be ashamed of himself. The banns were published in my church. On the next day Zebedee disappeared, and cruelly deserted her. He was a capable servant; and I believe he got another place. I leave you to imagine what the poor girl suffered under the outrage inflicted on her. Going to London, with my recommendation, she answered the first advertisement that she saw, and was unfortunate enough to begin her career in domestic service in the very lodging-house, to which (as I gather from the newspaper report of the murder) the man Zebedee took the person whom he married, after deserting Priscilla. Be assured that you are about to unite yourself to an excellent girl, and accept my best wishes for your happiness.’

It was plain from this that neither the rector nor the parents and friends knew anything of the purchase of the knife. The one miserable man who knew the truth, was the man who had asked her to be his wife.

I owed it to myself—at least so it seemed to me—not to let it be supposed that I, too, had meanly deserted her. Dreadful as the prospect was, I felt that I must see her once more, and for the last time.

She was at work when I went into her room. As I opened the door she started to her feet. Her cheeks reddened, and her eyes flashed with anger. I stepped forward—and she saw my face. My face silenced her.

I spoke in the fewest words I could find.

‘I have been to the cutler’s shop at Waterbank,’ I said. ‘There is the unfinished inscription on the knife, completed in your handwriting. I could hang you by a word. God forgive me—I can’t say the word.’

Her bright complexion turned to a dreadful clay-colour. Her eyes were fixed and staring, like the eyes of a person in a fit. She stood

before me, still and silent. Without saying more, I dropped the inscription into the fire. Without saying more, I left her.

I never saw her again.

VIII

But I heard from her a few days later.

The letter has long since burnt. I wish I could have forgotten it as well. It sticks to my memory. If I die with my senses about me, Priscilla's letter will be my last recollection on earth.

In substance it repeated what the rector had already told me. Further, it informed me that she had bought the knife as a keepsake for Zebedee, in place of a similar knife which he had lost. On the Saturday, she made the purchase, and left it to be engraved. On the Sunday, the banns were put up. On the Monday, she was deserted; and she snatched the knife from the table while the engraver was at work.

She only knew that Zebedee had added a new sting to the insult inflicted on her, when he arrived at the lodgings with his wife. Her duties as cook kept her in the kitchen—and Zebedee never discovered that she was in the house. I still remember the last lines of her confession:

‘The devil entered into me when I tried their door, on my way up to bed, and found it unlocked, and listened awhile, and peeped in. I saw them by the dying light of the candle—one asleep on the bed, the other asleep by the fireside. I had the knife in my hand, and the thought came to me to do it, so that they might hang *her* for the murder. I couldn't take the knife out again, when I had done it. Mind this! I did really like you—I didn't say Yes, because you could hardly hang your own wife, if you found out who killed Zebedee.’

Since the past time I have never heard again of Priscilla Thurlby; I don't know whether she is living or dead. Many people may think I deserve to be hanged myself for not having given her up to the gallows. They may, perhaps, be disappointed when they see this confession, and hear that I have died recently in my bed. I don't blame them. I am a penitent sinner. I wish all merciful Christians good-bye for ever.

12

The Ghost's Touch

I

The course of this narrative describes the return of a disembodied spirit to earth, and leads the reader on new and strange ground.

Not in the obscurity of midnight, but in the searching light of day, did the supernatural influence assert itself. Neither revealed by a vision, nor announced by a voice, it reached mortal knowledge through the sense which is least easily self-deceived: the sense that feels.

The record of this event will of necessity produce conflicting impressions. It will raise, in some minds, the doubt which reason asserts; it will invigorate, in other minds, the hope which faith justifies; and it will leave the terrible question of the destinies of man, where centuries of vain investigation have left it—in the dark.

Having only undertaken in the present narrative to lead the way along a succession of events, the writer declines to follow modern examples by thrusting himself and his opinions on the public view. He returns to the shadow from which he has emerged, and leaves the opposing forces of incredulity and belief to fight the old battle over again, on the old ground.

II

The events happened soon after the first thirty years of the present century had come to an end.

On a fine morning, early in the month of April, a gentleman of middle age (named Rayburn) took his little daughter Lucy out for a walk in the woodland pleasure-ground of western London, called Kensington Gardens.

The few friends whom he possessed reported of Mr Rayburn (not unkindly) that he was a reserved and solitary man. He might have

been more accurately described as a widower devoted to his only surviving child. Although he was not more than forty years of age, the one pleasure which made life enjoyable to Lucy's father was offered by Lucy herself.

Playing with her ball, the child ran on to the southern limit of the Gardens, at that part of it which still remains nearest to the old Palace of Kensington. Observing close at hand one of those spacious covered seats, called in England 'alcoves', Mr Rayburn was reminded that he had the morning's newspaper in his pocket, and that he might do well to rest and read. At that early hour the place was a solitude.

'Go on playing, my dear,' he said; 'but take care to keep where I can see you.'

Lucy tossed up her ball; and Lucy's father opened his newspaper. He had not been reading for more than ten minutes, when he felt a familiar little hand laid on his knee.

'Tired of playing?' he inquired—with his eyes still on the newspaper.

'I'm frightened, papa.'

He looked up directly. The child's pale face startled him. He took her on his knee and kissed her.

'You oughtn't to be frightened, Lucy, when I am with you,' he said gently. 'What is it?' He looked out of the alcove as he spoke, and saw a little dog among the trees. 'Is it the dog?' he asked.

Lucy answered:

'It's not the dog—it's the lady.'

The lady was not visible from the alcove.

'Has she said anything to you?' Mr Rayburn inquired.

'No.'

'What has she done to frighten you?'

The child put her arms round her father's neck.

'Whisper, papa,' she said; 'I'm afraid of her hearing us. I think she's mad.'

'Why do you think so, Lucy?'

'She came near to me. I thought she was going to say something. She seemed to be ill.'

'Well? And what then?'

'She looked at me.'

There, Lucy found herself at a loss how to express what she had to say next—and took refuge in silence.

'Nothing very wonderful, so far,' her father suggested.

'Yes, papa—but she didn't seem to see me when she looked.'

'Well, and what happened then?'

'The lady was frightened—and that frightened me. I think,' the child

repeated positively, 'she's mad.'

It occurred to Mr Rayburn that the lady might be blind. He rose at once to set the doubt at rest.

'Wait here,' he said, 'and I'll come back to you.'

But Lucy clung to him with both hands; Lucy declared that she was afraid to be by herself. They left the alcove together.

The new point of view at once revealed the stranger, leaning against the trunk of a tree. She was dressed in the deep mourning of a widow. The pallor of her face, the glassy stare in her eyes, more than accounted for the child's terror—it excused the alarming conclusion at which she had arrived.

'Go nearer to her,' Lucy whispered.

They advanced a few steps. It was now easy to see that the lady was young, and wasted by illness—but (arriving at a doubtful conclusion perhaps under present circumstances) apparently possessed of rare personal attractions in happier days. As the father and daughter advanced a little, she discovered them. After some hesitation, she left the tree; approached with an evident intention of speaking; and suddenly paused. A change to astonishment and fear animated her vacant eyes. If it had not been plain before, it was now beyond all doubt that she was not a poor blind creature, deserted and helpless. At the same time, the expression of her face was not easy to understand. She could hardly have looked more amazed and bewildered, if the two strangers who were observing her had suddenly vanished from the place in which they stood.

Mr Rayburn spoke to her with the utmost kindness of voice and manner.

'I am afraid you are not well,' he said. 'Is there anything that I can do——'

The next words were suspended on his lips. It was impossible to realize such a state of things; but the strange impression that she had already produced on him was now confirmed. If he could believe his senses, her face did certainly tell him that he was invisible and inaudible to the woman whom he had just addressed! She moved slowly away with a heavy sigh, like a person disappointed and distressed. Following her with his eyes, he saw the dog once more—a little smooth-coated terrier of the ordinary English breed. The dog showed none of the restless activity of his race. With his head down and his tail depressed, he crouched like a creature paralysed by fear. His mistress roused him by a call. He followed her listlessly as she turned away.

After walking a few paces only, she suddenly stood still.

Mr Rayburn heard her talking to herself.

‘Did I feel it again?’ she said, as if perplexed by some doubt that awed or grieved her. After a while, her arms rose slowly, and opened with a gentle caressing action—an embrace strangely offered to the empty air! ‘No,’ she said to herself sadly, after waiting a moment. ‘More perhaps when tomorrow comes—more today.’ She looked up at the clear blue sky. ‘The beautiful sunlight! the merciful sunlight!’ she murmured. ‘I should have died if it had happened in the dark.’

Once more she called to the dog; and once more she walked slowly away.

‘Is she going home, papa?’ the child asked.

‘We will try and find out,’ the father answered.

He was by this time convinced that the poor creature was in no condition to be permitted to go out without someone to take care of her. From motives of humanity, he was resolved on making the attempt to communicate with her friends.

III

The lady left the Gardens by the nearest gate; stopping to lower her veil before she turned into the busy thoroughfare which leads to Kensington. Advancing a little way along the High Street, she entered a house of respectable appearance, with a card in one of the windows which announced that apartments were to let.

Mr Rayburn waited a minute—then knocked at the door, and asked if he could see the mistress of the house. The servant showed him into a room on the ground floor, neatly but scantily furnished. One little white object varied the grim brown monotony of the empty table. It was a visiting-card.

With a child’s unceremonious curiosity Lucy pounced on the card, and spelt the name, letter by letter:

‘Z, A, N, T,’ she repeated. ‘What does that mean?’

Her father looked at the card, as he took it away from her, and put it back on the table. The name was printed, and the address was added in pencil: ‘Mr John Zant, Purley’s Hotel’.

The mistress made her appearance. Mr Rayburn heartily wished himself out of the house again, the moment he saw her. The ways in which it is possible to cultivate the social virtues are more numerous and more varied than is generally supposed. This lady’s way had apparently accustomed her to meet her fellow-creatures on the hard ground of justice without mercy. Something in her eyes, when she looked at Lucy, said:

‘I wonder whether that child gets punished when she deserves it?’

‘Do you wish to see the rooms which I have to let?’ she began.

Mr Rayburn at once stated the object of his visit—as clearly, as civilly, and as concisely as a man could do it. He was conscious (he added) that he had been guilty perhaps of an act of intrusion.

The manner of the mistress of the house showed that she entirely agreed with him. He suggested, however, that his motive might excuse him. The mistress's manner changed, and asserted a difference of opinion.

'I only know the lady whom you mention,' she said, 'as a person of the highest respectability, in delicate health. She has taken my first-floor apartments, with excellent references; and she gives remarkably little trouble. I have no claim to interfere with her proceedings, and no reason to doubt that she is capable of taking care of herself.'

Mr Rayburn unwisely attempted to say a word in his own defence. 'Allow me to remind you——' he began.

'Of what, sir?'

'Of what I observed, when I happened to see the lady in Kensington Gardens.'

'I am not responsible for what you observed in Kensington Gardens. If your time is of any value, pray don't let me detain you.'

Dismissed in those terms, Mr Rayburn took Lucy's hand and withdrew. He had just reached the door, when it was opened from the other side. The Lady of Kensington Gardens stood before him. In the position which he and his daughter now occupied, their backs were towards the window. Would she remember having seen them for a moment in the Gardens?

'Excuse me for intruding on you,' she said to the landlady. 'Your servant tells me my brother-in-law called while I was out. He sometimes leaves a message on his card.'

She looked for the message, and appeared to be disappointed: there was nothing on the card.

Mr Rayburn lingered a little in the doorway, on the chance of hearing something more. The landlady's vigilant eye discovered him.

'Do you know this gentleman?' she said maliciously to her lodger.

'Not that I remember.'

Replying in those words, the lady looked at Mr Rayburn for the first time; and suddenly drew back from him.

'Yes,' she said, correcting herself; 'I think we met——'

Her embarrassment overpowered her; she could say no more.

Mr Rayburn compassionately finished the sentence for her.

'We met accidentally in Kensington Gardens,' he said.

She seemed to be incapable of appreciating the kindness of his motive. After hesitating a little she addressed a proposal to him, which seemed to show distrust of the landlady.

‘Will you let me speak to you upstairs in my own rooms?’ she asked.

Without waiting for a reply, she led the way to the stairs. Mr Rayburn and Lucy followed. They were just beginning the ascent to the first floor, when the spiteful landlady left the lower room, and called to her lodger over their heads:

‘Take care what you say to this man, Mrs Zant! He thinks you’re mad.’

Mrs Zant turned round on the landing, and looked at him. Not a word fell from her lips. She suffered, she feared, in silence. Something in the sad submission of her face touched the springs of innocent pity in Lucy’s heart. The child burst out crying.

That artless expression of sympathy drew Mrs Zant down the few stairs which separated her from Lucy.

‘May I kiss your dear little girl?’ she said to Mr Rayburn. The landlady, standing on the mat below, expressed her opinion of the value of caresses, as compared with a sounder method of treating young persons in tears: ‘If that child was mine,’ she remarked, ‘I would give her something to cry for.’

In the meantime, Mrs Zant led the way to her rooms.

The first words she spoke showed that the landlady had succeeded but too well in prejudicing her against Mr Rayburn.

‘Will you let me ask your child,’ she said to him, ‘why you think me mad?’

He met this strange request with a firm answer.

‘You don’t know yet what I really do think. Will you give me a minute’s attention?’

‘No,’ she said positively. ‘The child pities me, I want to speak to the child. What did you see me do in the Gardens, my dear, that surprised you?’ Lucy turned uneasily to her father; Mrs Zant persisted. ‘I first saw you by yourself, and then I saw you with your father,’ she went on. ‘When I came nearer to you, did I look very oddly—as if I didn’t see you at all?’

Lucy hesitated again; and Mr Rayburn interfered.

‘You are confusing my little girl,’ he said. ‘Allow me to answer your questions—or excuse me if I leave you.’

There was something in his look, or in his tone, that mastered her. She put her hand to her head.

‘I don’t think I’m fit for it,’ she answered vacantly. ‘My courage has been sorely tried already. If I can get a little rest and sleep, you may find me a different person. I am left a great deal by myself; and I have reasons for trying to compose my mind. Can I see you tomorrow? Or write to you? Where do you live?’

Mr Rayburn laid his card on the table in silence. She had strongly

excited his interest. He honestly desired to be of some service to this forlorn creature—abandoned so cruelly, as it seemed, to her own guidance. But he had no authority to exercise, no sort of claim to direct her actions, even if she consented to accept his advice. As a last resource he ventured on an allusion to the relative of whom she had spoken downstairs.

‘When do you expect to see your brother-in-law again?’ he said.

‘I don’t know,’ she answered. ‘I should like to see him—he is so kind to me.’

She turned aside to take leave of Lucy.

‘Goodbye, my little friend. If you live to grow up, I hope you will never be such a miserable woman as I am.’ She suddenly looked round at Mr Rayburn. ‘Have you got a wife at home?’ she asked.

‘My wife is dead.’

‘And *you* have a child to comfort you! Please leave me; you harden my heart. Oh, sir, don’t you understand? You make me envy you!’

Mr Rayburn was silent when he and his daughter were out in the street again. Lucy, as became a dutiful child, was silent, too. But there are limits to human endurance—and Lucy’s capacity for self-control gave way at last.

‘Are you thinking of the lady, papa?’ she said.

He only answered by nodding his head. His daughter had interrupted him at that critical moment in a man’s reflections, when he is on the point of making up his mind. Before they were at home again Mr Rayburn had arrived at a decision. Mrs Zant’s brother-in-law was evidently ignorant of any serious necessity for his interference—or he would have made arrangements for immediately repeating his visit. In this state of things, if any evil happened to Mrs Zant, silence on Mr Rayburn’s part might be indirectly to blame for a serious misfortune. Arriving at that conclusion, he decided upon running the risk of being rudely received, for the second time, by another stranger.

Leaving Lucy under the care of her governess, he went at once to the address that had been written on the visiting-card left at the lodging-house, and sent in his name. A courteous message was returned. Mr John Zant was at home, and would be happy to see him.

IV

Mr Rayburn was shown into one of the private sitting-rooms of the hotel.

He observed that the customary position of the furniture in a room had been, in some respects, altered. An armchair, a side-table, and a

footstool had all been removed to one of the windows, and had been placed as close as possible to the light. On the table lay a large open roll of morocco leather, containing rows of elegant little instruments in steel and ivory. Waiting by the table, stood Mr John Zant. He said 'Good-morning' in a bass voice, so profound and so melodious that those two commonplace words assumed a new importance, coming from his lips. His personal appearance was in harmony with his magnificent voice—he was a tall finely-made man of dark complexion; with big brilliant black eyes, and a noble curling beard, which hid the whole lower part of his face. Having bowed with a happy mingling of dignity and politeness, the conventional side of this gentleman's character suddenly vanished; and a crazy side, to all appearance, took its place. He dropped on his knees in front of the footstool. Had he forgotten to say his prayers that morning, and was he in such a hurry to remedy the fault that he had no time to spare for consulting appearances? The doubt had hardly suggested itself, before it was set at rest in a most unexpected manner. Mr Zant looked at his visitor with a bland smile, and said:

'Please let me see your feet.'

For the moment, Mr Rayburn lost his presence of mind. He looked at the instruments on the side-table.

'Are you a corn-cutter?' was all he could say.

'Excuse me, sir,' returned the polite operator, 'the term you use is quite obsolete in our profession.' He rose from his knees, and added modestly: 'I am a chiropodist.'

'I beg your pardon.'

'Don't mention it! You are not, I imagine, in want of my professional services. To what motive may I attribute the honour of your visit?'

By this time Mr Rayburn had recovered himself.

'I have come here,' he answered, 'under circumstances which require apology as well as explanation.'

Mr Zant's highly polished manner betrayed signs of alarm; his suspicions pointed to a formidable conclusion—a conclusion that shook him to the innermost recesses of the pocket in which he kept his money.

'The numerous demands on me——' he began.

Mr Rayburn smiled.

'Make your mind easy,' he replied. 'I don't want money. My object is to speak with you on the subject of a lady who is a relation of yours.'

'My sister-in-law!' Mr Zant exclaimed. 'Pray take a seat.'

Doubting if he had chosen a convenient time for his visit, Mr Rayburn hesitated.

‘Am I likely to be in the way of persons who wish to consult you?’ he asked.

‘Certainly not. My morning hours of attendance on my clients are from eleven to one.’ The clock on the mantelpiece struck the quarter-past one as he spoke. ‘I hope you don’t bring me bad news?’ he said, very earnestly. ‘When I called on Mrs Zant this morning, I heard that she had gone out for a walk. Is it indiscreet to ask how you became acquainted with her?’

Mr Rayburn at once mentioned what he had seen and heard in Kensington Gardens; not forgetting to add a few words, which described his interview afterwards with Mrs Zant.

The lady’s brother-in-law listened with an interest and sympathy, which offered the strongest possible contrast to the unprovoked rudeness of the mistress of the lodging-house. He declared that he could only do justice to his sense of obligation by following Mr Rayburn’s example, and expressing himself as frankly as if he had been speaking to an old friend.

‘The sad story of my sister-in-law’s life,’ he said, ‘will, I think, explain certain things which must have naturally perplexed you. My brother was introduced to her at the house of an Australian gentleman, on a visit to England. She was then employed as governess to his daughters. So sincere was the regard felt for her by the family that the parents had, at the entreaty of their children, asked her to accompany them when they returned to the Colony. The governess thankfully accepted the proposal.’

‘Had she no relations in England?’ Mr Rayburn asked.

‘She was literally alone in the world, sir. When I tell you that she had been brought up in the Foundling Hospital, you will understand what I mean. Oh, there is no romance in my sister-in-law’s story! She never has known, or will know, who her parents were or why they deserted her. The happiest moment in her life was the moment when she and my brother first met. It was an instance, on both sides, of love at first sight. Though not a rich man, my brother had earned a sufficient income in mercantile pursuits. His character spoke for itself. In a word, he altered all the poor girl’s prospects, as we then hoped and believed, for the better. Her employers deferred their return to Australia, so that she might be married from their house. After a happy life of a few weeks only—’

His voice failed him; he paused, and turned his face from the light.

‘Pardon me,’ he said; ‘I am not able, even yet, to speak composedly of my brother’s death. Let me only say that the poor young wife was a widow, before the happy days of the honeymoon were over. That dreadful calamity struck her down. Before my brother had been

committed to the grave, her life was in danger from brain-fever.'

Those words placed in a new light Mr Rayburn's first fear that her intellect might be deranged. Looking at him attentively, Mr Zant seemed to understand what was passing in the mind of his guest.

'No!' he said. 'If the opinions of the medical men are to be trusted, the result of the illness is injury to her physical strength—not injury to her mind. I have observed in her, no doubt, a certain waywardness of temper since her illness; but that is a trifle. As an example of what I mean, I may tell you that I invited her, on her recovery, to pay me a visit. My house is not in London—the air doesn't agree with me—my place of residence is at St Sallins-on-Sea. I am not myself a married man; but my excellent housekeeper would have received Mrs Zant with the utmost kindness. She was resolved—obstinately resolved, poor thing—to remain in London. It is needless to say that, in her melancholy position, I am attentive to her slightest wishes. I took a lodging for her; and, at her special request, I chose a house which was near Kensington Gardens.'

'Is there any association with the Gardens which led Mrs Zant to make that request?'

'Some association, I believe, with the memory of her husband. By the way, I wish to be sure of finding her at home, when I call tomorrow. Did you say (in the course of your interesting statement) that she intended—as you supposed—to return to Kensington Gardens tomorrow? Or has my memory deceived me?'

'Your memory is perfectly accurate.'

'Thank you. I confess I am not only distressed by what you have told me of Mrs Zant—I am at a loss to know how to act for the best. My only idea, at present is to try a change of air and scene. What do you think yourself?'

'I think you are right.'

Mr Zant still hesitated.

'It would not be easy for me, just now,' he said, 'to leave my patients and take her abroad.'

The obvious reply to this occurred to Mr Rayburn. A man of larger worldly experience might have felt certain suspicions, and might have remained silent. Mr Rayburn spoke.

'Why not renew your invitation and take her to your house at the seaside?' he said.

In the perplexed state of Mr Zant's mind, this plain course of action had apparently failed to present itself. His gloomy face brightened directly.

'The very thing!' he said. 'I will certainly take your advice. If the air of St Sallins does nothing else, it will improve her health and help her

to recover her good looks. Did she strike you as having been (in happier days) a pretty woman?’

This was a strangely familiar question to ask—almost an indelicate question, under the circumstances. A certain furtive expression in Mr Zant’s fine dark eyes seemed to imply that it had been put with a purpose. Was it possible that he suspected Mr Rayburn’s interest in his sister-in-law to be inspired by any motive which was not perfectly unselfish and perfectly pure? To arrive at such a conclusion as this, might be to judge hastily and cruelly of a man who was perhaps only guilty of a want of delicacy of feeling. Mr Rayburn honestly did his best to assume the charitable point of view. At the same time, it is not to be denied that his words, when he answered, were carefully guarded, and that he rose to take his leave.

Mr John Zant hospitably protested.

‘Why are you in such a hurry? Must you really go? I shall have the honour of returning your visit tomorrow, when I have made arrangements to profit by that excellent suggestion of yours. Goodbye. God bless you.’

He held out his hand: a hand with a smooth surface and a tawny colour, that fervently squeezed the fingers of a departing friend.

‘Is that man a scoundrel?’ was Mr Rayburn’s first thought, after he had left the hotel. His moral sense set all hesitation at rest—and answered: ‘You’re a fool if you doubt it.’

V

Disturbed by presentiments, Mr Rayburn returned to his house on foot, by way of trying what exercise would do towards composing his mind.

The experiment failed. He went upstairs and played with Lucy; he drank an extra glass of wine at dinner; he took the child and her governess to a circus in the evening; he ate a little supper, fortified by another glass of wine, before he went to bed—and still those vague forebodings of evil persisted in torturing him. Looking back through his past life, he asked himself if any woman (his late wife of course excepted!) had ever taken the predominant place in his thoughts which Mrs Zant had assumed—without any discernible reason to account for it? If he had ventured to answer his own question, the reply would have been: Never!

All the next day he waited at home, in expectation of Mr John Zant’s promised visit, and waited in vain.

Towards evening the parlour-maid appeared at the family tea-table, and presented to her master an unusually large envelope sealed with

black wax, and addressed in a strange handwriting. The absence of stamp and postmark showed that it had been left at the house by a messenger.

'Who brought this?' Mr Rayburn asked.

'A lady, sir—in deep mourning.'

'Did she leave any message?'

'No, sir.'

Having drawn the inevitable conclusion, Mr Rayburn shut himself up in his library. He was afraid of Lucy's curiosity and Lucy's questions, if he read Mrs Zant's letter in his daughter's presence.

Looking at the open envelope after he had taken out the leaves of writing which it contained, he noticed these lines traced inside the cover:

'My one excuse for troubling you, when I might have consulted my brother-in-law, will be found in the pages which I enclose. To speak plainly, you have been led to fear that I am not in my right senses. For this very reason, I now appeal to you. Your dreadful doubt of me, sir, is my doubt too. Read what I have written about myself—and then tell me, I entreat you, which I am: a person who has been the object of a supernatural revelation or an unfortunate creature who is only fit for imprisonment in a madhouse.'

VI

Mr Rayburn opened the manuscript. With steady attention, which soon quickened to breathless interest, he read what follows:

Yesterday morning the sun shone in a clear blue sky—after a succession of cloudy days, counting from the first of the month.

The radiant light had its animated effect on my poor spirits. I had passed the night more peacefully than usual; undisturbed by the dream, so cruelly familiar to me, that my lost husband is still living—the dream from which I always wake in tears. Never, since the dark days of my sorrow, have I been so little troubled by the self-tormenting fancies and fears which beset miserable women, as when I left the house, and turned my steps towards Kensington Gardens—for the first time since my husband's death.

Attended by my only companion, the little dog who had been his favourite as well as mine, I went to the quiet corner of the Gardens which is nearest to Kensington.

On that soft grass, under the shade of those grand trees, we had loitered together in the days of our betrothal. It was his favourite walk; and he had taken me to see it in the early days of our acquaintance. There, he had first asked me to be his wife. There, we had felt the

rapture of our first kiss. It was surely natural that I should wish to see once more a place sacred to such memories as these? I am only twenty-three years old; I have no child to comfort me, no companion of my own age, nothing to love but the dumb creature who is so faithfully fond of me.

I went to the tree under which we stood, when my dear one's eyes told his love before he could utter it in words. The sun of that vanished day shone on me again; it was the same noontide hour; the same solitude around me. I had feared the first effect of the dreadful contrast between past and present. No! I was quiet and resigned. My thoughts, rising higher than earth, dwelt on the better life beyond the grave. Some tears came into my eyes. But I was not unhappy. My memory of all that happened may be trusted, even in trifles which relate only to myself—I was not unhappy.

The first object that I saw, when my eyes were clear again, was the dog. He crouched a few paces away from me, trembling pitiably, but uttering no cry. What had caused the fear that overpowered him?

I was soon to know.

I called to the dog; he remained immovable—conscious of some mysterious coming thing that held him spellbound. I tried to go to the poor creature, and fondle and comfort him.

At the first step forward that I took, something stopped me.

It was not to be seen, and not to be heard. It stopped me.

The still figure of the dog disappeared from my view: the lonely scene round me disappeared—excepting the light from heaven, the tree that sheltered me, and the grass in front of me. A sense of unutterable expectation kept my eyes riveted on the grass. Suddenly, I saw its myriad blades rise erect and shivering. The fear came to me of something passing over them with the invisible swiftness of the wind. The shivering advanced. It was all round me. It crept into the leaves of the tree over my head; they shuddered, without a sound to tell of their agitation; their pleasant natural rustling was struck dumb. The song of the birds had ceased. The cries of the water-fowl on the pond were heard no more. There was a dreadful silence.

But the lovely sunshine poured down on me, as brightly as ever.

In that dazzling light, in that fearful silence, I felt an Invisible Presence near me.

It touched me gently.

At the touch, my heart throbbed with an overwhelming joy. Exquisite pleasure thrilled through every nerve in my body. I knew him! From the unseen world—himself unseen—he had returned to me. Oh, I knew him!

And yet, my helpless mortality longed for a sign that might give me

assurance of the truth. The yearning in me shaped itself into words. I tried to utter the words. I would have said, if I could have spoken: 'Oh, my angel, give me a token that it is You!' But I was like a person struck dumb—I could only think it.

The Invisible Presence read my thought. I felt my lips touched, as my husband's lips used to touch them when he kissed me. And that was my answer. A thought came to me again. I would have said, if I could have spoken: 'Are you hear to take me to the better world?'

I waited. Nothing that I could feel touched me.

I was conscious of thinking once more. I would have said, if I could have spoken: 'Are you here to protect me?'

I felt myself held in a gentle embrace, as my husband's arms used to hold me when he pressed me to his breast. And that was my answer.

The touch that was like the touch of his lips, lingered and was lost; the clasp that was like the clasp of his arms, pressed me and fell away. The garden-scene resumed its natural aspect. I saw a human creature near, a lovely little girl looking at me.

At that moment, when I was my own lonely self again, the sight of the child soothed and attracted me. I advanced, intending to speak to her. To my horror I suddenly ceased to see her. She disappeared as if I had been stricken blind.

And yet I could see the landscape round me; I could see the heaven above me. A time passed—only a few minutes, as I thought—and the child became visible to me again; walking hand-in-hand with her father. I approached them; I was close enough to see that they were looking at me with pity and surprise. My impulse was to ask if they saw anything strange in my face or my manner. Before I could speak, the horrible wonder happened again. They vanished from my view.

Was the Invisible Presence still near? Was it passing between me and my fellow-mortals; forbidding communication, in that place and at that time?

It must have been so. When I turned away in my ignorance, with a heavy heart, the dreadful blankness which had twice shut out from me the beings of my own race, was not between me and my dog. The poor little creature filled me with pity; I called him to me. He moved at the sound of my voice, and followed me languidly; not quite awakened yet from the trance of terror that had possessed him.

Before I had retired by more than a few steps, I thought I was conscious of the Presence again. I held out my longing arms to it. I waited in the hope of a touch to tell me that I might return. Perhaps I was answered by indirect means? I only know that a resolution to return to the same place, at the same hour, came to me, and quieted my mind.

The morning of the next day was dull and cloudy; but the rain held off. I set forth again to the Gardens.

My dog ran on before me into the street—and stopped: waiting to see in which direction I might lead the way. When I turned towards the Gardens, he dropped behind me. In a little while I looked back. He was following me no longer; he stood irresolute. I called to him. He advanced a few steps—hesitated—and ran back to the house.

I went on by myself. Shall I confess my superstition? I thought the dog's desertion of me a bad omen.

Arrived at the tree, I placed myself under it. The minutes followed each other uneventfully. The cloudy sky darkened. The dull surface of the grass showed no shuddering consciousness of an unearthly creature passing over it.

I still waited, with an obstinacy which was fast becoming the obstinacy of despair. How long an interval elapsed, while I kept watch on the ground before me, I am not able to say. I only know that a change came.

Under the dull grey light I saw the grass move—but not as it had moved, on the day before. It shrivelled as if a flame had scorched it. No flame appeared. The brown underlying earth showed itself winding onward in a thin strip—which might have been a footpath traced in fire. It frightened me. I longed for the protection of the Invisible presence; I prayed for a warning of it, if danger was near.

A touch answered me. It was as if a hand unseen had taken my hand—had raised it, little by little—had left it, pointing to the thin brown path that wound towards me under the shrivelled blades of grass.

I looked to the far end of the path.

The unseen hand closed on my hand with a warning pressure: the revelation of the coming danger was near me—I waited for it; I saw it.

The figure of a man appeared, advancing towards me along the thin brown path. I looked in his face as he came nearer. It showed me dimly the face of my husband's brother—John Zant.

The consciousness of myself as a living creature left me. I knew nothing; I felt nothing; I was dead.

When the torture of revival made me open my eyes, I found myself on the grass. Gentle hands raised my head, at the moment when I recovered my senses. Who had brought me to life again? Who was taking care of me?

I looked upwards, and saw—bending over me—John Zant.

VII

There, the manuscript ended.

Some lines had been added on the last page; but they had been so carefully erased as to be illegible. These words of explanation appeared below the cancelled sentences:

'I had begun to write the little that remains to be told, when it struck me that I might, unintentionally, be exercising an unfair influence on your opinion. Let me only remind you that I believe absolutely in the supernatural revelation which I have endeavoured to describe. Remember this—and decide for me what I dare not decide for myself.'

There was no serious obstacle in the way of compliance with this request.

Judged from the point of view of the materialist, Mrs Zant might no doubt be the victim of illusions (produced by a diseased state of the nervous system), which have been known to exist—as in the celebrated case of the bookseller, Nicolai, of Berlin—without being accompanied by derangement of the intellectual powers. But Mr Rayburn was not asked to solve any such intricate problem as this. He had been merely instructed to read the manuscript, and to say what impression it had left on him of the mental condition of the writer; whose doubt of herself had been, in all probability, first suggested by remembrance of the illness from which she had suffered—brain-fever.

Under these circumstances, there could be little difficulty in forming an opinion. The memory which had recalled, and the judgment which had arranged the succession of events related in the narrative, revealed a mind in full possession of its resources.

Having satisfied himself so far, Mr Rayburn abstained from considering the more serious question suggested by what he had read.

At any time his habits of life and his ways of thinking would have rendered him unfit to weigh the arguments, which assert or deny supernatural revelation among the creatures of earth. But his mind was now so disturbed by the startling record of experience which he had just read, that he was only conscious of feeling certain impressions—without possessing the capacity to reflect on them. That his anxiety on Mrs Zant's account had been increased, and that his doubts of Mr John Zant had been encouraged, were the only practical results of the confidence placed in him of which he was thus far aware. In the ordinary exigencies of life a man of hesitating disposition, his interest in Mrs Zant's welfare, and his desire to discover what had passed between her brother-in-law and herself, after their meeting in the Gardens, urged him into instant action. In half an hour more, he had arrived at her lodgings. He was at once admitted.

VIII

Mrs Zant was alone, in an imperfectly lit room.

'I hope you will excuse the bad light,' she said; 'my head has been burning as if the fever had come back again. Oh, don't go away! After what I have suffered, you don't know how dreadful it is to be alone.'

The tone of her voice told him that she had been crying. He at once tried the best means of setting the poor lady at ease, by telling her of the conclusion at which he had arrived, after reading her manuscript. The happy result showed itself instantly: her face brightened, her manner changed; she was eager to hear more.

'Have I produced any other impression on you?' she asked.

He understood the allusion. Expressing sincere respect for her own convictions, he told her honestly that he was not prepared to enter on the obscure and terrible question of supernatural interposition. Grateful for the tone in which he had answered her, she wisely and delicately changed the subject.

'I must speak to you of my brother-in-law,' she said. 'He has told me of your visit; and I am anxious to know what you think of him. Do you like Mr John Zant?'

Mr Rayburn hesitated.

The care-worn look appeared again in her face. 'If you had felt as kindly towards him as he feels towards you,' she said, 'I might have gone to St Sallins with a lighter heart.'

Mr Rayburn thought of the supernatural appearances, described at the close of her narrative. 'You believe in that terrible warning,' he remonstrated; 'and yet, you go to your brother-in-law's house!'

'I believe,' she answered, 'in the spirit of the man who loved me in the days of his earthly bondage. I am under *his* protection. What have I to do but to cast away my fears, and to wait in faith and hope? It might have helped my resolution if a friend had been near to encourage me.' She paused and smiled sadly. 'I must remember,' she resumed, 'that your way of understanding my position is not my way. I ought to have told you that Mr John Zant feels needless anxiety about my health. He declares that he will not lose sight of me until his mind is at ease. It is useless to attempt to alter his opinion. He says my nerves are shattered—and who that sees me can doubt it? He tells me that my only chance of getting better is to try change of air and perfect repose—how can I contradict him? He reminds me that I have no relation but himself, and no house open to me but his own—and God knows he is right!'

She said those last words in accents of melancholy resignation, which grieved the good man whose one merciful purpose was to serve and console her. He spoke impulsively with the freedom of an old friend.

'I want to know more of you and Mr John Zant, than I know now,' he said. 'My motive is a better one than mere curiosity. Do you believe that I feel a sincere interest in you?'

'With my whole heart.'

That reply encouraged him to proceed with what he had to say. 'When you recovered from your fainting-fit,' he began, 'Mr John Zant asked questions, of course?'

'He asked what could possibly have happened, in such a quiet place as Kensington Gardens, to make me faint.'

'And how did you answer?'

'Answer? I couldn't even look at him!'

'You said nothing?'

'Nothing. I don't know what he thought of me; he might have been surprised, or he might have been offended.'

'Is he easily offended?' Mr Rayburn asked.

'Not in my experience of him.'

'Do you mean your experience of him before your illness?'

'Yes. Since my recovery, his engagements with country patients have kept him away from London. I have not seen him since he took these lodgings for me. But he is always considerate. He has written more than once to beg that I will not think him neglectful, and to tell me (what I knew already through my poor husband) that he has no money of his own, and must live by his profession.'

'In your husband's lifetime, were the two brothers on good terms?'

'Always. The one complaint I ever heard my husband make of John Zant was that he didn't come to see us often enough, after our marriage. Is there some wickedness in him which we have never suspected? It may be—but *how* can it be? I have every reason to be grateful to the man against whom I have been supernaturally warned! His conduct to me has been always perfect. I can't tell you what I owe to his influence in quieting my mind, when a dreadful doubt arose about my husband's death.'

'Do you mean doubt if he died a natural death?'

'Oh, no! no! He was dying of rapid consumption—but his sudden death took the doctors by surprise. One of them thought that he might have taken an overdose of his sleeping drops, by mistake. The other disputed this conclusion, or there might have been an inquest in the house. Oh, don't speak of it any more! Let us talk of something else. Tell me when I shall see you again.'

'I hardly know. When do you and your brother-in-law leave London?'

'Tomorrow.' She looked at Mr Rayburn with a piteous entreaty in her eyes; she said timidly: 'Do you ever go to the seaside, and take your

dear little girl with you?’

The request, at which she had only dared to hint, touched on the idea which was at that moment in Mr Rayburn’s mind.

Interpreted by his strong prejudice against John Zant, what she had said of her brother-in-law filled him with forebodings of peril to herself; all the more powerful in their influence, for this reason—that he shrank from distinctly realizing them. If another person had been present at the interview, and had said to him afterwards: ‘That man’s reluctance to visit his sister-in-law, while her husband was living, is associated with a secret sense of guilt which her innocence cannot even imagine: he, and he alone, knows the cause of her husband’s sudden death: his feigned anxiety about her health is adopted as the safest means of enticing her into his house,—if those formidable conclusions had been urged on Mr Rayburn, he would have felt it his duty to reject them, as unjustifiable aspersions on an absent man. And yet, when he took leave that evening of Mrs Zant, he had pledged himself to give Lucy a holiday at the seaside; and he had said, without blushing, that the child really deserved it, as a reward for general good conduct and attention to her lessons!’

IX

Three days later, the father and daughter arrived towards evening at St Sallins-on-Sea. They found Mrs Zant at the station.

The poor woman’s joy, on seeing them, expressed itself like the joy of a child. ‘Oh, I am so glad! so glad!’ was all she could say when they met. Lucy was half-smothered with kisses, and was made supremely happy by a present of the finest doll she had ever possessed. Mrs Zant accompanied her friends to the rooms which had been secured at the hotel. She was able to speak confidentially to Mr Rayburn, while Lucy was in the balcony hugging her doll, and looking at the sea.

The one event that had happened during Mrs Zant’s short residence at St Sallins, was the departure of her brother-in-law that morning, for London. He had been called away to operate on the feet of a wealthy patient who knew the value of his time: his housekeeper expected that he would return to dinner.

As to his conduct towards Mrs Zant, he was not only as attentive as ever—he was almost oppressively affectionate in his language and manner. There was no service that a man could render which he had not eagerly offered to her. He declared that he already perceived an improvement in her health; he congratulated her on having decided to stay in his house; and (as a proof, perhaps, of his sincerity) he had repeatedly pressed her hand. ‘Have you any idea what all this means?’ she said simply.

Mr Rayburn kept his idea to himself. He professed ignorance; and asked next what sort of person the housekeeper was.

Mrs Zant shook her head ominously.

'Such a strange creature,' she said, 'and in the habit of taking such liberties, that I begin to be afraid she is a little crazy.'

'Is she an old woman?'

'No—only middle-aged. This morning, after her master had left the house, she actually asked me what I thought of my brother-in-law! I told her, as coldly as possible, that I thought he was very kind. She was quite insensible to the tone in which I had spoken; she went on from bad to worse. "Do you call him the sort of man who would take the fancy of a young woman?" was her next question. She actually looked at me (I might have been wrong; and I hope I was) as if the "young woman" she had in her mind was myself! I said, "I don't think of such things, and I don't talk about them. Still, she was not in the least discouraged; she made a personal remark next: "Excuse me—but you do look wretchedly pale." I thought she seemed to enjoy the defect in my complexion; I really believe it raised me in her estimation. "We shall get on better in time," she said; "I am beginning to like you." She walked out humming a tune. Don't you agree with me? Don't you think she's crazy?'

'I can hardly give an opinion until I have seen her. Does she look as if she might have been a pretty woman at one time of her life?'

'Not the sort of pretty woman whom I admire!'

Mr Rayburn smiled. 'I was thinking,' he resumed, 'that this person's odd conduct may perhaps be accounted for. She is probably jealous of any young lady who is invited to her master's house—and (till she noticed your complexion) she began by being jealous of you.'

Innocently at a loss to understand how *she* could become an object of the housekeeper's jealousy, Mrs Zant looked at Mr Rayburn in astonishment. Before she could give expression to her feeling of surprise, there was an interruption—a welcome interruption. A waiter entered the room, and announced a visitor; described as 'a gentleman'.

Mrs Zant at once rose to retire.

'Who is the gentleman?' Mr Rayburn asked—detaining Mrs Zant as he spoke.

A voice which they both recognized answered gaily, from the outer side of the door:

'A friend from London.'

X

'Welcome to St Sallins!' cried Mr John Zant. 'I knew that you were expected, my dear sir, and I took my chance at finding you at the hotel.'

He turned to his sister-in-law, and kissed her hand with an elaborate gallantry worthy of Sir Charles Grandison himself. 'When I reached home, my dear, and heard that you had gone out, I guessed that your object was to receive our excellent friend. You have not felt lonely while I have been away? That's right! that's right!' He looked towards the balcony, and discovered Lucy at the open window, staring at the magnificent stranger. 'Your little daughter, Mr Rayburn? Dear child! Come, and kiss me.'

Lucy answered in one positive word: 'No.'

Mr John Zant was not easily discouraged. 'Show me your doll, darling,' he said. 'Sit on my knee.'

Lucy answered in two positive words—'I won't.'

Her father approached the window to administer the necessary reproof. Mr John Zant interfered in the cause of mercy with his best grace. He held up his hands in cordial entreaty. 'Dear Mr Rayburn! The fairies are sometimes shy; and *this* little fairy doesn't take to strangers at first sight. Dear child! All in good time. And what stay do you make at St Sallins? May we hope that our poor attractions will tempt you to prolong your visit?'

He put his flattering little question with an ease of manner which was rather too plainly assumed; and he looked at Mr Rayburn with a watchfulness which appeared to attach undue importance to the reply. When he said: 'What stay do you make at St Sallins?' did he really mean: 'How soon do you leave us?' Inclining to adopt this conclusion, Mr Rayburn answered cautiously, that his stay at the seaside would depend on circumstances. Mr John Zant looked at his sister-in-law, sitting silent in a corner with Lucy on her lap. 'Exert your attractions,' he said; 'make the circumstances agreeable to our good friend. Will you dine with us today, my dear sir, and bring your little fairy with you?'

Lucy was far from receiving this complimentary allusion in the spirit in which it had been offered. 'I'm not a fairy,' she declared. 'I'm a child.'

'And a naughty child,' her father added, with all the severity that he could assume.

'I can't help it, papa; the man with the big beard puts me out.'

The man with the big beard was amused—amiably, paternally amused—by Lucy's plain speaking. He repeated his invitation to dinner; and he did his best to look disappointed when Mr Rayburn made the necessary excuses.

'Another day,' he said (without, however, fixing the day). 'I think you will find my house comfortable. My housekeeper may perhaps be eccentric—but in all essentials a woman in a thousand. Do you feel the

change from London already? Our air at St Sallins is really worthy of its reputation. Invalids who come here are cured as if by magic. What do you think of Mrs Zant? How does she look?’

Mr Rayburn was evidently expected to say that she looked better. He said it. Mr John Zant seemed to have anticipated a stronger expression of opinion.

‘Surprisingly better!’ he pronounced. ‘Infinitely better! We ought both to be grateful. Pray believe that we *are* grateful.’

‘If you mean grateful to me,’ Mr Rayburn remarked, ‘I don’t quite understand——’

‘You don’t quite understand? Is it possible that you have forgotten our conversation when I first had the honour of receiving you? Look at Mrs Zant again.’

Mr Rayburn looked; and Mrs Zant’s brother-in-law explained himself.

‘You notice the return of her colour, the healthy brightness of her eyes. (No, my dear, I am not paying you idle compliments; I am stating plain facts.) For that happy result, Mr Rayburn, we are indebted to you.’

‘Surely not?’

‘Surely yes! It was at your valuable suggestion that I thought of inviting my sister-in-law to visit me at St Sallins. Ah, you remember it now. Forgive me if I look at my watch; the dinner hour is on my mind. Not, as your dear little daughter there seems to think, because I am greedy, but because I am always punctual, in justice to the cook. Shall we see you tomorrow? Call early, and you will find us at home.’

He gave Mrs Zant his arm, and bowed and smiled, and kissed his hand to Lucy, and left the room. Recalling their interview at the hotel in London, Mr Rayburn now understood John Zant’s object (on that occasion) in assuming the character of a helpless man in need of a sensible suggestion. If Mrs Zant’s residence under his roof became associated with evil consequences, he could declare that she would never have entered the house but for Mr Rayburn’s advice.

With the next day came the hateful necessity of returning this man’s visit.

Mr Rayburn was placed between two alternatives. In Mrs Zant’s interests he must remain, no matter at what sacrifice of his own inclinations, on good terms with her brother-in-law—or he must return to London, and leave the poor woman to her fate. His choice, it is needless to say, was never a matter of doubt. He called at the house, and did his innocent best—without in the least deceiving Mr John Zant—to make himself agreeable during the short duration of his visit. Descending the stairs on his way out, accompanied by Mrs Zant, he

was surprised to see a middle-aged woman in the hall, who looked as if she was waiting there expressly to attract notice.

'The housekeeper,' Mrs Zant whispered. 'She is impudent enough to try to make acquaintance with you.'

This was exactly what the housekeeper was waiting in the hall to do.

'I hope you like our watering-place, sir,' she began. 'If I can be of service to you, pray command me. Any friend of this lady's has a claim on me—and you are an old friend, no doubt. I am only the housekeeper; but I presume to take a sincere interest in Mrs Zant; and I am indeed glad to see you here. We none of us know—do we?—how soon we may want a friend. No offence, I hope? Thank you, sir. Good-morning.'

There was nothing in the woman's eyes which indicated an unsettled mind; nothing in the appearance of her lips which suggested habits of intoxication. That her strange outburst of familiarity proceeded from some strong motive seemed to be more than probable. Putting together what Mrs Zant had already told him, and what he had himself observed, Mr Rayburn suspected that the motive might be found in the housekeeper's jealousy of her master.

XI

Reflecting in the solitude of his own room, Mr Rayburn felt that the one prudent course to take would be to persuade Mrs Zant to leave St Sallins. He tried to prepare her for this strong proceeding, when she came the next day to take Lucy out for a walk.

'If you still regret having forced yourself to accept your brother-in-laws invitation,' was all he ventured to say, 'don't forget that you are perfect mistress of your own actions. You have only to come to me at the hotel, and I will take you back to London by the next train.'

She positively refused to entertain the idea.

'I should be a thankless creature indeed,' she said, 'if I accepted your proposal. Do you think I am ungrateful enough to involve you in a personal quarrel with John Zant? No! If I find myself forced to leave the house, I will go away alone.'

There was no moving her from this resolution. When she and Lucy had gone out together, Mr Rayburn remained at the hotel, with a mind ill at ease. A man of readier mental resources might have felt at a loss how to act for the best, in the emergency that now confronted him. While he was still as far as ever from arriving at a decision, some person knocked at the door.

Had Mrs Zant returned? He looked up as the door was opened, and saw to his astonishment—Mr John Zant's housekeeper.

'Don't let me alarm you, sir,' the woman said. 'Mrs Zant has been taken a little faint, at the door of our house. My master is attending to her.'

'Where is the child?' Mr Rayburn asked.

'I was bringing her back to you, sir, when we met a lady and her little girl at the door of the hotel. They were on their way to the beach—and Miss Lucy begged hard to be allowed to go with them. The lady said the two children were playfellows, and she was sure you would not object.'

'The lady is quite right. Mrs Zant's illness is not serious, I hope?'

'I think not, sir. But I should like to say something in her interests. May I? Thank you.' She advanced a step nearer to him, and spoke her next words in a whisper. 'Take Mrs Zant away from this place, and lose no time in doing it.'

Mr Rayburn was on his guard. He merely asked:

'Why?'

The housekeeper answered in a curiously indirect manner—partly in jest, as it seemed, and partly in earnest.

'When a man has lost his wife,' she said, 'there's some difference of opinion in Parliament, as I hear, whether he does right or wrong, if he marries his wife's sister. Wait a bit! I'm coming to the point. My master is one who has a long head on his shoulders; he sees consequences which escape the notice of people like me. In his way of thinking, if one man may marry his wife's sister, and no harm done, where's the objection if another man pays a compliment to the family, and marries his brother's widow? My master, if you please, is that other man. Take the widow away before she marries him.'

This was beyond endurance.

'You insult Mrs Zant,' Mr Rayburn answered, 'if you suppose that such a thing is possible!'

'Oh! I insult her, do I? Listen to me. One of three things will happen. She will be entrapped into consenting to it—or frightened into consenting to it—or drugged into consenting to it——'

Mr Rayburn was too indignant to let her go on.

'You are talking nonsense,' he said. 'There can be no marriage; the law forbids it.'

'Are you one of the people who see no farther than their noses?' she asked insolently. 'Won't the law take his money? Is he obliged to mention that he is related to her by marriage, when he buys the licence?' She paused; her humour changed; she stamped furiously on the floor. The true motive that animated her showed itself in her next words, and warned Mr Rayburn to grant a more favourable hearing than he had accorded to her yet. 'If you won't stop it,' she burst out,

'I will! If he marries anybody, he is bound to marry *me*. Will you take her away? I ask you, for the last time—*will* you take her away?'

The tone in which she made that final appeal to him had its effect.

'I will go back with you to John Zant's house,' he said, 'and judge for myself.'

She laid her hand on his arm:

'I must go first—or you may not be let in. Follow me in five minutes; and don't knock at the street-door.'

On the point of leaving him, she abruptly returned.

'We have forgotten something,' she said. 'Suppose my master refuses to see you. His temper might get the better of him; he might make it so unpleasant for you that you would be obliged to go.'

'My temper might get the better of *me*,' Mr Rayburn replied; 'and—if I thought it was in Mrs Zant's interests—I might refuse to leave the house unless she accompanied me.'

'That will never do, sir.'

'Why not?'

'Because I should be the person to suffer.'

'In what way?'

'In this way. If you picked a quarrel with my master, I should be blamed for it because I showed you upstairs. Besides, think of the lady. You might frighten her out of her senses, if it came to a struggle between you two men.'

The language was exaggerated; but there was a force in this last objection which Mr Rayburn was obliged to acknowledge.

'And, after all,' the housekeeper continued, 'he has more right over her than you have. He is related to her, and you are only her friend.'

Mr Rayburn declined to let himself be influenced by this consideration.

'Mr John Zant is only related to her by marriage,' he said. 'If she prefers trusting in me—come what may of it, I will be worthy of her confidence.'

The housekeeper shook her head.

'That only means another quarrel,' she answered. 'The wise way, with a man like my master, is the peaceable way. We must manage to deceive him.'

'I don't like deceit.'

'In that case, sir, I'll wish you goodbye. We will leave Mrs Zant to do the best she can for herself.'

Mr Rayburn was unreasonable. He positively refused to adopt this alternative.

'Will you hear what I have got to say?' the housekeeper asked.

'There can be no harm in that,' he admitted. 'Go on.'

She took him at his word.

'When you called at our house,' she began, 'did you notice the doors in the passage, on the first floor? Very well. One of them is the door of the drawing-room, and the other is the door of the library. Do you remember the drawing-room, sir?'

'I thought it a large well-lit room,' Mr Rayburn answered. 'And I noticed a doorway in the wall, with a handsome curtain hanging over it.'

'That's enough for our purpose,' the housekeeper resumed. 'On the other side of the curtain, if you had looked in, you would have found the library. Suppose my master is as polite as usual, and begs to be excused for not receiving you, because it is an inconvenient time. And suppose you are polite on your side, and take yourself off by the drawing-room door. You will find me waiting downstairs, on the first landing. Do you see it now?'

'I can't say I do.'

'You surprise me, sir. What is to prevent us from getting back softly into the library, by the door in the passage? And why shouldn't we use that second way into the library as a means of discovering what may be going on in the drawing-room? Safe behind the curtain, you will see him if he behaves uncivilly to Mrs Zant, or you will hear her if she calls for help. In either case, you may be as rough and ready with my master as you find needful; it will be he who has frightened her, and not you. And who can blame the poor housekeeper because Mr Rayburn did his duty, and protected a helpless woman? There is my plan, sir. Is it worth trying?'

He answered, sharply enough: 'I don't like it.'

The housekeeper opened the door again, and wished him goodbye.

If Mr Rayburn had felt no more than an ordinary interest in Mrs Zant, he would have let the woman go. As it was, he stopped her; and, after some further protest (which proved to be useless), he ended in giving way.

'You promise to follow my directions?' she stipulated.

He gave the promise. She smiled, nodded, and left him. True to his instructions, Mr Rayburn reckoned five minutes by his watch, before he followed her.

XII

The housekeeper was waiting for him, with the street-door ajar.

'They are both in the drawing-room,' she whispered, leading the way upstairs. 'Step softly, and take him by surprise.'

A table of oblong shape stood midway between the drawing-room

walls. At the end of it which was nearest to the window, Mrs Zant was pacing to and fro across the breadth of the room. At the opposite end of the table, John Zant was seated. Taken completely by surprise, he showed himself in his true character. He started to his feet, and protested with an oath against the intrusion which had been committed on him.

Heedless of his action and his language, Mr Rayburn could look at nothing, could think of nothing, but Mrs Zant. She was still walking slowly to and fro, unconscious of the words of sympathy which he addressed to her, insensible even as it seemed to the presence of other persons in the room.

John Zant's voice broke the silence. His temper was under control again: he had his reasons for still remaining on friendly terms with Mr Rayburn.

'I am sorry I forgot myself just now,' he said.

Mr Rayburn's interest was concentrated on Mrs Zant; he took no notice of the apology.

'When did this happen?' he asked.

'About a quarter of an hour ago. I was fortunately at home. Without speaking to me, without noticing me, she walked upstairs like a person in a dream.'

Mr Rayburn suddenly pointed to Mrs Zant.

'Look at her!' he said. 'There's a change!'

All restlessness in her movements had come to an end. She was standing at the farther end of the table which was nearest to the window, in the full flow of sunlight pouring at that moment over her face. Her eyes looked out straight before her—void of all expression. Her lips were a little parted: her head drooped slightly towards her shoulder, in an attitude which suggested listening for something or waiting for something. In the warm brilliant light, she stood before the two men, a living creature self-isolated in a stillness like the stillness of death.

John Zant was ready with the expression of his opinion.

'A nervous seizure,' he said. 'Something resembling catalepsy, as you see.'

'Have you sent for a doctor?'

'A doctor is not wanted.'

'I beg your pardon. It seems to me that medical help is absolutely necessary.'

'Be so good as to remember,' Mr John Zant answered, 'that the decision rests with me, as the lady's relative. I am sensible of the honour which your visit confers on me. But the time has been unhappily chosen. Forgive me if I suggest that you will do well to retire.'

Mr Rayburn had not forgotten the housekeeper's advice, or the promise which she had exacted from him. But the expression in John Zant's face was a serious trial to his self-control. He hesitated, and looked back at Mrs Zant.

If he provoked a quarrel by remaining in the room, the one alternative would be the removal of her by force. Fear of the consequences to herself, if she was suddenly and roughly roused from her trance, was the one consideration which reconciled him to submission. He withdrew.

The housekeeper was waiting for him below, on the first landing. When the door of the drawing-room had been closed again, she signed to him to follow her, and returned up the stairs. After another struggle with himself, he obeyed. They entered the library from the corridor—and placed themselves behind the closed curtain which hung over the doorway. It was easy so to arrange the edge of the drapery as to observe, without exciting suspicion, whatever was going on in the next room.

Mrs Zant's brother-in-law was approaching her at the time when Mr Rayburn saw him again.

In the instant afterwards, she moved—before he had completely passed over the space between them. Her still figure began to tremble. She lifted her drooping head. For a moment there was a shrinking in her—as if she had been touched by something. She seemed to recognize the touch: she was still again.

John Zant watched the change. It suggested to him that she was beginning to recover her senses. He tried the experiment of speaking to her.

'My love, my sweet angel, come to the heart that adores you!'

He advanced again; he passed into the flood of sunlight pouring over her.

'Rouse yourself!' he said.

She still remained in the same position; apparently at his mercy, neither hearing him nor seeing him.

'Rouse yourself!' he repeated. 'My darling, come to me!'

At the instant when he attempted to embrace her—at the instant when Mr Rayburn rushed into the room—John Zant's arms, suddenly turning rigid, remained outstretched. With a shriek of horror, he struggled to draw them back—struggled, in the empty brightness of the sunshine, as if some invisible grip had seized him.

'What has got me?' the wretch screamed. 'Who is holding my hands? Oh, the cold of it! the cold of it!'

His features became convulsed; his eyes turned upwards until only the white eyeballs were visible. He fell prostrate with a crash that

shook the room.

The housekeeper ran in. She knelt by her master's body. With one hand she loosened his cravat. With the other she pointed to the end of the table.

Mrs Zant still kept her place; but there was another change. Little by little, her eyes recovered their natural living expression—then slowly closed. She tottered backwards from the table, and lifted her hands wildly, as if to grasp at something which might support her. Mr Rayburn hurried to her before she fell—lifted her in his arms—and carried her out of the room.

One of the servants met them in the hall. He sent her for a carriage. In a quarter of an hour more, Mrs Zant was safe under his care at the hotel.

XIII

That night a note, written by the housekeeper, was delivered to Mrs Zant.

'The doctors give little hope. The paralytic stroke is spreading upwards to his face. If death spares him, he will live a helpless man. I shall take care of him to the last. As for you—forget him.'

Mrs Zant gave the note to Mr Rayburn.

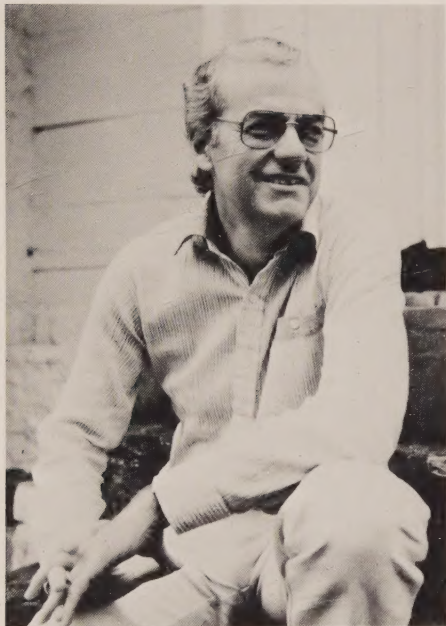
'Read it, and destroy it,' she said. 'It is written in ignorance of the terrible truth.'

He obeyed—and looked at her in silence, waiting to hear more. She hid her face. The few words she had addressed to him, after a struggle with herself, fell slowly and reluctantly from her lips.

She said, 'No mortal hand held the hands of John Zant. The guardian spirit was with me. The promised protection was with me. I know it. I wish to know no more.'

Having spoken, she rose to retire. He opened the door for her, seeing that she needed rest in her own room.

Left by himself, he began to consider the prospect that was before him in the future. How was he to regard the woman who had just left him? As a poor creature weakened by disease, the victim of her own nervous delusion? or as the chosen object of a supernatural revelation—unparalleled by any similar revelation that he had heard of, or had found recorded in books? His first discovery of the place that she really held in his estimation dawned on his mind, when he felt himself recoiling from the conclusion which presented her to his pity, and yielding to the nobler conviction which felt with her faith, and raised her to a place apart among other women.



About the author

Peter Haining is a full-time writer whose books have been published in England, America and throughout much of the rest of the world.

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