The Haunted House at Latchford

By Mrs. J. H. Riddell

CHAPTER I

MR. H. STAFFORD TREVOR, BARRISTER-AT-LAW, INTRODUCED BY HIMSELF

No one who has met me in society will be in the least degree astonished when he, or haply she, hears I have at length decided to appear before the British, American, Foreign, and Colonial public, as a writer of tales.

I am one of those people concerning whom partial friends remark: "He can do anything he likes."

Considering the number of people about whom the same observation is made, it is painful to reflect how few must like to do anything.

It is late in life, no doubt, for me to take to a new profession, but having been most courteously asked to contribute to the literature of my country, I feel it impossible to refuse.

Besides, at the present time, literature is the fashion, and I have always tried to be in the fashion. I am perpetually meeting young men, and (more especially) young women, who are the precocious parents of books more or less absurd, inane, objectionable, recondite, who have new views about morals, religion, Moses, and Catherine of Russia, and am expected to derive pleasure from their acquaintance.

For the future when people meet me, they can go home and mention that amongst the company at Mr. So and So's, was Mr. Stafford Trevor, the author.

At how cheap a rate can we confer pleasure! It gives quite a zest to the idea of writing this story to reflect the amount of gratification friends and enemies (supposing I have any of the latter) will extract from the narrative and the author.

As I have already remarked, the fact of my turning author will surprise no one. Often after I have repeated some of my best stories for the benefit of a single listener, he has inquired:

"Why, Mr. Trevor, do you not reproduce all these good things in a book?"

Had I been quite frank, I should have informed him I refrained from doing so because, in fact, the good things were not mine to reproduce; but as he would have disbelieved my statement, I never thought it worth while to enlighten him on the subject.

Now, however, it so happens I have a little story all my own to relate, I consent to appearing in print.

Besides other people, places, and things, the story concerns a place called Fairy Water, and a lady of whom I was and am very fond, a cousin of mine by marriage—that is to say, she married my cousin Geoffrey Trevor, and he left her a widow, whereon hangs a tale—that I am about to tell.

Naturally, however, before I say much about Mr. Geoffrey Trevor, I wish to state, and the reader wishes to hear, some facts relating to myself.

The world nowadays is extremely curious concerning genius. Whether this curiosity arises from any abstract interest in genius, or a belief that genius is to be caught like small-pox, fever, whooping-cough, or the measles, it would be presumptuous in me to decide.

Certain, however, it is, that the smallest details of the domestic life, habits, manners, modes of thought of eminent people are listened to with a rapt attention wonderful to contemplate; and many of my own later successes in life I can trace to the fact of being able to tell enthusiastic ladies that Mr. A—'s novel, which drew tears from so many eyes, was absolutely a photograph from life—his own; that in spite of the Bohemianism of her plots, Mrs. B— is a devoted wife and affectionate mother; that Mr. C—, whose style is neat and epigrammatic, suggestive of a quiet study, can write anywhere, under any circumstances.

"Give him a waiting room at the Paddington Station full of people, an express train; the wilds of Connemara, or the snowy peaks of Switzerland; it is immaterial; his sentences will be as finished, his sentences as complete," I say, in my best manner.

Concerning Mr. D—, I am only able to state, with a reserve which elicits the remark that I am such a dear satirical creature, whenever he brings out a new book he flies to the Continent for fear of seeing a bad review, which is, indeed, a simple impossibility, unless a new race of reviewers should spring up ignorant of the traditions of the elders.

Mrs. F—, I tell my neighbour in strict confidence, draws her ideas of life from going disguised as a sister of mercy through St. Giles' in the morning, and finishing the day, not disguised, at a supper-house near the theatres. As for Miss F—, I state, when she girds up her loins to write a book, she clothes herself in white, drinks *eau sucrée,* and refuses to eat her meals like an ordinary mortal.

Thus I go through the alphabet, and each hearer in succession tries, I believe, the white dress, and the *eau sucrée,* and the sister of mercy business, in hopes that by such eccentricities she too may be able to make some fabulous sum per volume, per page, per line.

And why, then, if the limited public I meet at dinners, at lawn-parties, at kettledrums, at crowded evenings, delight to listen to such weak details of the minor doings of great people; why, I ask, should the general public not care to hear of the great doings of a small man like myself?

If there is one thing about me which ought to win praise, it is this—I am non-assuming.

I never put down a man nor condescend to a woman; I am not clever, or sarcastic, or energetic, or anything except useful.

There you have me in a nutshell. If I have been anything in my life I have been useful. If I have not been useful I have been nothing.

Permit me to explain. I have not been a drudge, not useful in the cart-horse and maid-of-all-work sense, but useful as flowers, as music, as perfume, as colour, as sunshine, as painting, as trees in the distance, as water in the foreground. I have been ornamentally useful; I have filled up corners in the world's economy which must, otherwise, have remained hideously bare of bud and blossom, and the world has evidenced extreme gratitude for my trouble.

When I am gone to swell the ranks of that "great majority," of which a daily paper, more funny than any comic periodical, speaks in terms of intimate familiarity, the world will perhaps forget me—indeed, I think it extremely probable the world may then have something else to do than remember me; but whilst I am still "in the lobby," to quote our comic friend once more, few of my acquaintances forget the fact of my existence; and to those I have not lately had the pleasure of meeting, the advertisement of this Annual will be an agreeable reminder that H. Stafford Trevor is up to the present hour in the minority.

Naturally, those persons whom I have not already the happiness of knowing will wish me to divide my personal explanation into two heads—viz. Who am I? Whence am I?

Truth compels me at this juncture to confess I have heard those two questions propounded ere now from the pulpit, but the reader may rest tranquil; I have no intention of analysing my own position, as an individual: I am about considering it in common with that society for which I live, and move, and have my being.

At the head of this chapter you have my profession. I am H. Stafford Trevor, barrister-at-law.

As a barrister-at-law I have done very little. Law is one of those things in which I might have achieved success had I liked, but then I did not like.

Once I overheard a man ask: "What does Trevor do?" to which his friend replied: "He dines out."

The creature who said this *is* a barrister-at-law, and his friends have decided he can do nothing; nevertheless, I am bound to confess he summed up the case neatly.

I do dine out. If I have a profession it is dining out; if upon any settled system I do anything, it is accepting invitations. That is how I am useful. Perhaps, reader, you are inclined to sneer at this; but before you sneer, pause, and let me ask—

'Do you ever dine out?"

"No," you answer, for two reasons. I may say one, expressed, "You would not if you could"; the second, and more cogent, non-expressed, "You could not if you would."

Now I can: that is one of the things I have liked to do; and it is an accomplished fact, more dinners have been graced by my presence than you could well count; but as the lesser is included in the greater, there are many things included in the art of dining out.

First, you wish to know how I managed to get invited to so many houses, that my face is as well known to butlers, footmen, and—yes—why should I hesitate?—hired waiters, as that of Mr. D'Israeli is to the readers of *Punch.*

Ah, friend, Rome was not built in a day, and many a year of my life has gone in making myself free of London society.

There is a fate in these things. By all rules, known and unknown, I ought to have been a doctor jingling guineas, or a barrister making his way to the Woolsack, or a professor discovering all sorts of unpleasant natural facts, or solving an equal number of useless scientific problems; but genius knows no law. As Turner was born a painter, Beethoven a composer, Grisi a singer, and Palmer a poisoner, so I was born a diner out.

It is not given to everyone to find out his especial talent in early youth, and there was a period of my life when I not merely studied law, but frequented evening parties.

As we see the needle oscillating violently when its equilibrium is disturbed, so I went from reading to dancing, and dancing to reading, with a distracted mind.

I felt unhappy, restless, dissatisfied; I had not found my vocation. Even when I was first inducted into its mysteries, I failed—such is the occasional modesty of genius—to perceive that success lay that way. I had doubts, qualms, throes. I questioned my own fitness for the career—I overrated the gifts possessed by others—I underrated my own; but that is all gone and passed.

Many men can write, paint, sing, talk, conduct business affairs, shine as orators, rise to eminence at the bar, lead armies to victory or death, command vessels, grow fat oxen and fatter sheep, but there are few, indeed, who can dine out. I can; that inane barrister was right: I dine out. I have dined out since I was twenty-five years of age. I shall go on dining out till Death knocks loudly, and tells me to make haste and come with him; or till I grow old and feeble, and one I wot of brings me gruel and other like abominations, which, however, her gentle voice and my growing infirmities may then make bearable.

But bah! why should I look forward? Has she not but just left me saying I grow younger with the years? Is not her kiss—it seems so strange for a woman's lips to touch my face, that I feel as if she must have left a mark, still visible on my cheek. It is all about her and somebody else this story has to be told; so I must hasten onward; and to hasten on, as is the way of those who are—well—who are not so young as they were at twenty. five, I must go back.

My father was a wonderfully clever man! He was one of those people whom the world thinks so much of, and his family consider as only a degree better than an idiot. Amongst his fellow-professors he was an authority; at home his second wife treated him like a child. There was not a secret in the heavens above, the earth below, and the waters under the earth, with which he did not believe himself to be *au courant;* but he never knew where his spectacles were—no, not when they were elevated on his—forehead; he did not detect the fraud when I took him a branch of gorse, decked with laurustine blossoms, and introduced it to his notice as a new and curious wild flower I had discovered on Hampstead Heath; he could not imagine why his flute—on which it was his mild pleasure to accompany the pianoforte and harp performances of two limp old maids of our acquaintance—on one occasion refused to give forth any sound save a gurgling groan, till my stepmother found the end of it was plugged up with a cork; in short, a theoretical man who, never having had any business to marry at all, found himself at forty a widower with one son, and then married for the second time a woman utterly dowerless, who bore him various children, who have no connection whatsoever with this narrative.

There are various ways in which a parent may be useful to one. In my capacity the professor has been infinitely useful to me, and has made by his memory many a dinner-party more agreeable than he ever made the social board at home.

His first wife, my mother, had a modest fortune. Happily it was secured to her children. She had no children, only a child, a son; and at twenty-one father totally indifferent as to what I did or left undone, so long as I did I found myself a man easy as regarded money matters, and possessed of a not trouble him with my affairs, or contradict him when any of his pet theories chanced to be on the carpet.

I was a model son. He spent his last breath in blessing me.

"You have never contradicted me, Hercules," he whispered, pressing my hand. Dear, simple old man. If he only would come back and sit with me in the twilight I would not contradict him, supposing he pleased to tell me fire was not hot or ice cold.

Negative qualities are often accounted great virtues. In the later years of my father's lifetime, silence and consent seemed grateful where many words usually broke the stillness, and acquiescence was a thing almost unknown.

"I ought never to have married," he said to me once, piteously.

The result of his first mistake in that line, I profited by his experience. I have never married.

The feminine reader has already decided this point. Had I married I could not have dined out.

But you wish to know how I gained the power of dining out. I tell you it was my speciality; once the opportunity occurred for me to distinguish myself, my genius, not my other self, achieved success.

"What a nice, modest young man Mr. Stafford Trevor is," said my hostess. She has told me all this since.

That is a long time ago. I have been nice, modest, self-possessed, well-bred, handsome, clever, sarcastic, good-natured in the interim; now I am useful. The world, my world, could little spare a better man. Old friends welcome me for the sake of Auld Lang Syne, to speak in the hideous idiom of a people whose accent I detest, and whose ways are abhorrent to me—one degree less

abhorrent only than their primitive ballads, always suggestive of the screech of a bagpipe. Young couples welcome me for the sake of the dead and gone; people whose position is assured, because, like dear Lady Mary, who plays a little part in this story, it is quite safe to whisper secret scandals, and the latest and most wicked *bon mot* in my ear; and the *nouveau riche,* because, poor wretches, they believe I must be somebody.

They see me apparently on equal terms with those who dine off silver and gold, and call all the upper ten thousand friends, and some of them relations, and they rush to conclusions.

If I cared much for their heavy repasts, or their insufferable time-serving, I should fear for my future; but both are growing wearisome.

Give me rather impertinent, ugly, vulgar Lady Mary, who calling me, as is her pleasant habit, by my christian-name, will say:

"I always knew you meant to have it out of us, Stafford, but it is of no use. Till *we* can produce an author—not an outsider—not one like you, introduced by accident and tolerated on sufferance—the English public will not understand the demerits of the nobility. And that will be never. *We* never have produced a novelist, and, mark my words, Stafford, *we never will."*

In which opinion that I shall certainly hear announced I quite agree with her ladyship.

Though, upon the whole, I am disposed to doubt whether the lower ten millions have so much the advantage as Lady Mary sometimes seems to imply.

The capacity for producing fools is not, I fear, confined to any class. That, I am convinced, can scarcely, seeing what one sees, be considered a monopoly. Would to heaven it were!

CHAPTER II

I ASSIST AT A WEDDING

It is curious how the traditions of one's youth influence the actions of our later years.

When I was an extremely small child I heard some person remark that strawberries preserved the whiteness of the teeth. Sedulously each season since I attained my majority I have eaten strawberries. When people left London earlier than they do now, I partook of them in the gardens of my father's cousin, Admiral Trevor; subsequently, when his son succeeded to the small property which gives a title to this story, I went down each summer, and eat strawberries as I might join in some religious rite; and now that Parliament unhappily sits later and later, and that pleasant dinner-parties obtain to the very end of the season, far past Midsummer-day, the fruit—small, sweet, fresh, utterly unlike anything one can buy at Covent Garden—comes to me in dainty baskets, embowered in cool green leaves, from Fairy Water.

"And where is Fairy Water?" you ask.

Dear reader, every person has his secret, and the *locale* of Fairy Water is mine. About this time in each year I begin to dream of it, but I am not bound to tell my dreams to all the world.

I will describe it to you as I saw it first in the reign of Admiral Trevor, a quaint building seen from the avenue: a long, low cottage, overgrown with wistaria and ivy, with climbing roses, and Virginian creepers, and jasmine, and honeysuckle, all tangled together.

"A poor place, though picturesque," you say.

Wait a little—wait till having entered the large, though low, square hail, and passed through the drawing-room and conservatory, you emerge on the western front, where all delicious plants climb along the verandah; where myrtles shed their blossoms on grass which slopes down to the loveliest sheet of water ever contrived by human skill; where the ash and the willow droop over

lawns smooth and soft as velvet; where great trees shade the winding walks; and within and without peace reigns—such peace as is to be found in very few homes on the face of this quarrelsome earth.

That is where I used to eat my strawberries, that is the place whence they are sent to me now. There was a time when even at Fairy Water they lost their relish, and I will tell you why. It happened in this wise: one day, in an abrupt note, my second cousin, Captain Trevor, son of the admiral formerly alluded to and deceased, informed me he was about to get married.

To most men this announcement would have been disagreeable. If he died unmarried, Fairy Water must come to me; and to the generality of persons, no doubt, Fairy Water would have seemed a desirable inheritance, but to me certainly not. What should I have done with the place? It would have cost money to keep up; the expense must have proved a source of eternal worry to me. I know within a trifle what I shall have to pay my landlady, at the end of each month, for breakfast, washing, and lodging; but how should I ever know, without employing a professional accountant, or going through the Bankruptcy Court, whether a place in the country, with lawns, flower-gardens—stables, and homes in them—pigstyes, and pigs in them—poultry-houses, and fowls in them—a sheet of water, and swans on it—to say nothing of Aylesbury ducks, were producing a profit or loss?

I want no secluded dwelling before I repair to one quiet enough in all conscience, where the landlord and the collectors may knock till they break their knuckles, without injuring the peace of my repose. Let others have what suits them; for me a first floor in a vague western district is sufficient. I should say a second, but from my youth climbing many stairs has been distasteful to me.

Further, to revert to the Fairy Water question, I fear I should prove but a poor host if heaven ever gave me the means to enact the part. Some persons can dine out, and others can give dinners; but, as a rule, I do not think the best giver of dinners is the best diner out; a different set of qualities is required in each. An admirable host is often a poor guest; an admirable guest often proves a wretched, incompetent host.

Unless, indeed, in Bohemian society, where the two qualities, like others equally incongruous, are sometimes, though not always, united. But, then, of what use is it referring to that vague, beautiful land, which is as a fairy country to one not free of it by nature or inheritance?

For myself I have visited the place, and am bound to confess I found it exceedingly beautiful, spite of the spectacle of duns, debts, and writs; but I do not know how the inhabitants manage to sustain life. Dining out may seem a mere matter of chance, but I could not dine out if I once proclaimed myself so total a creature of circumstances as the dear delightful inhabitants of the London city of Prague.

Some try to reduce Bohemianism to a science, but they fail, and they will fail. To be liked, Bohemianism must be pure and simple. The Bohemian must have no *arrière pensée* when he hobnobs with my lord; and his wife, if her husband is to prove successful, had better leave the mutual and to-be-provided-for olive branches hanging to the parent tree if the nobility and others are to be favourably impressed.

I have dined so often at houses in which everything has been solid from the furniture to the plate, that, when I find myself at the table of a man who has to get everything he sets before his guests on credit, and whose chance of ever being able to pay for the repast is extremely remote, an odd sense of wonder is perpetually cropping up in my mind as I watch that man and his friends making merry over a banquet which has for an unbidden guest the skeleton—Debt.

I cannot understand the nature of a host able to eat, drink, make jests, laugh at the jests of others to-day, when all the time he must feel tolerably certain of being arrested at some not very remote to-morrow; and yet I am bound to say that never, even when gold and silver dishes have lent an unpleasant flavour to food, can I remember such dinners as I have seen served on stone-china, with wit for *sauce piquante*.

Only in that vague region the meats are secondary to the wine, and the few morning headaches which I ever experienced have always followed excursions into Bohemia.

Perhaps, as one of the race suggested, these may be induced by too much laughter; such exercise being strange to me and unwonted. This remark contained a sneer, no doubt, for at the houses where I dine out ebullitions of merriment would be considered bad form.

As Eastern grandees do not dance for themselves, so people in the upper walks of society in England do not laugh for themselves. It may be all very well for persons who have to earn their livings by laughter and jesting, as it may be well for an acrobat to stand on his head; but the possessor of ten thousand a year and upwards should maintain a gravity of manner and stateliness of deportment commensurate to the dignity fate has conferred upon him, and as a rule he does this.

To add that occasionally he overdoes it is but to say that he is human.

But I am wandering away from Fairy Water. Let me return to the swans of that enchanted lake—to the Aylesbury ducks, which turn up such plump breasts on the hospitable board, and, with a rare generosity, fatten themselves in readiness for that season of the year when green peas are most tender and succulent.

Much as I loved the place I never longed to possess it. I was in the position of the Frenchman, who, having lost his wife, was asked if he intended to marry a lady he had been in the constant habit of visiting.

"Ma foi!" he said, "where should I then spend my evenings?"

And, in faith, had Fairy Water come down, where should I have spent my holidays?

As a guest I delighted in Fairy Water; as a host I should have grown to loathe the place.

It was well I thought so—for I had always expected to step into Captain Trevor's shoes.

He was that rare phenomenon, a sea-monster—an ugly, ill-tempered, cross-grained brute, who bawled at the servants as if a perpetual hurricane were blowing through the house; and who was as much disliked by all his inferiors in station, as his father, the admiral, had been beloved by those below him in rank.

Further, he was fifteen years older than myself, and had lived fast and drank hard so long as gout, the only thing which ever obtained a mastery over him, would permit.

It would not have astonished me any morning to hear he was dead; but to hear he was about to be married certainly proved a surprise.

He had always been civil to me. So far as he was capable of the feeling, I think he had a liking for Staff—so he persisted in abbreviating my name; and therefore, though his news appeared astounding, his request that I would be the best man on the occasion seemed nothing extraordinary.

I consented; ordered a new suit of clothes, bought a wedding present—the expense of which I secretly grudged; and on the day before that fixed for the wedding went down to Winchelsea, near which cheerful town the lady, as he gave me to understand, resided.

There is a funny little inn at Winchelsea, the windows of which overlook the principal, and I think only, square of the town, which happens to be the churchyard likewise, and here Geoffrey and I took up our quarters for the night.

Naturally I wished to know something about the bride elect, and asked her name.

"Mary Ashwell," he answered. "Her people, however, call her Polly, and I daresay I shall do the same."

I thought this over for a moment. There was a friskiness about the *sobriquet* which gave me an idea of an elderly young lady with a red nose, a flat chest, a long neck, light eyes, and ringlets.

"She has a pot of money, no doubt?" I suggested.

"Not a shilling. Her father was once comfortably off, I believe, but he is as poor now as a church mouse."

"Oh, then she has a father—"

"And a mother," he condescended to add.

"Is she young?" I inquired, finding he did not seem inclined to volunteer further information.

"Well, you couldn't call her old," he said, wincing, as it seemed to me.

"Is she pretty?"

"I daresay you would not think her so—I do," was his reply; and this time I distinctly saw a dull red colour appear through the brown of his weather-beaten face, of which sign of emotion he seemed to be conscious, for he put his hand to his forehead so as to hide the flush.

I confess I was puzzled. Evidently he was ashamed of his choice; and yet what could have induced him to make it?

He was no longer young, it is true—indeed, he was growing elderly; but "surely," I thought, "he might have found somebody willing to marry him more suitable than a plain old maid, possessed of kitten-like proclivities and not possessed of sixpence."

I was not one half so much surprised to hear of the proposed marriage as I was at his evident dislike to speak of the bride. Of all the men I ever met, Geoffrey was the last I should have supposed likely to be taken in by a woman; but that he had been taken in was impossible to doubt, and I was confirmed in this impression when, in answer to some leading question, he said:

"You will see her to-morrow, and can then judge for yourself what she is like. I am tired now, so do not torment me with questions, Staff."

No pleasant dreams of Fairy Water visited my pillow that night. I had visions of a mistress not unlike a cruet bottle as to shape, and with mind and temper an even mixture of cayenne and vinegar.

"Stafford Trevor," I said, addressing myself as I stood next morning brushing my hair, "you will have to look out a new place at which to spend your holidays. No more cakes and ale at Fairy Water; black looks and scant courtesy are all you need expect when the new mistress comes to her own"; and having arrived at this conclusion, I walked into the sitting-room, feeling like a man who knows the worst and is prepared for it.

Geoffrey himself was nervous and uneasy, I could see that. He ate little breakfast, a sure sign with him of uneasiness of mind or sickness of body; and when he pushed away his cup he rose and paced the room, his hands buried deep in his pockets.

It was quite a relief when at last he said we ought to be going.

I looked at my watch, and saw it was twenty-five minutes past eleven, Greenwich time.

'They have a long way to drive, I suppose?" I remarked.

'Two miles," he answered.

'Madame's get-up requires both leisure and thought," was my mental comment as we took our hats and walked from the inn door to the church porch.

I should not care to pass the fifteen minutes which followed over again.

The clergyman was waiting, the clerk in readiness, the sextoness all impatience, Geoffrey working himself up into such a state of mind that although it was not a warm morning, and a pleasant breeze stirred the ivy, the perspiration stood on his forehead, and he grew white and red by turns.

"What time were they to be here?" I asked.

"Half-past eleven; her own hour," he answered.

We waited a little longer; then I looked at my watch again.

"Quarter to twelve," I said. "If they do not come soon—"

He put his hand—a great strong hand it was too—over my mouth with such force he actually drove me back against the wall.

"Don't say that," he entreated, and his tone was so agitated I should scarcely have recognised his voice. "Ah! here they are!" he cried out next minute, as the hired carriages turned into the square.

The first contained the bride, closely veiled, and her father and mother; the other two elderly spinsters, one of whom officiated as bridesmaid.

I could not catch even a glimpse of the bride's face as she passed up the aisle, holding down her head, and keeping her veil drawn in folds, as if she wished to remain hidden.

There was a mystery, and I could not penetrate it. She was not old; the walk was that of a young person, and the hand from which her bridesmaid drew the glove belonged most certainly to no lady of a doubtful age. Her answers were almost inaudible, and she trembled so violently when it came to the ring ceremony that Geoffrey could scarcely slip it on her finger.

"She is not old," I decided, watching her as she knelt; "I am afraid she must be very ugly."

It was all over; they were man and wife. Still keeping her veil folded over her face, she went with Geoffrey into the vestry, we following.

About this time it occurred to me we had somehow made a mistake, and that instead of witnessing a marriage we had been assisting at a funeral.

As a rule I know how to say the right thing in the right place, but I did not then feel in the right place, and consequently I could not say the right thing.

The churchyard, with a couple of gravediggers hard at work, would have seemed to me a much more fitting locality at that moment than the vestry, with its limp curate, elderly bridesmaid, silent bride, and sulky though triumphant bridegroom.

Still without lifting her veil, the bride, who had to ask, and did ask in an almost inaudible whisper what name she must sign, wrote "Mary Ashwell," in a shaky, tremulous hand.

When she finished, her father, who had not conducted himself through the ceremony with the same resolute fortitude as his wife, said, with tears in his weak eyes and a suspicious twitching about his mouth:

"Polly darling, kiss me: kiss your poor old father." Then before she could prevent it he threw back her veil and held her to his heart.

Shall I ever forget the sight of that face?—ever forget the eyes, heavy and swollen with weeping; the cheeks white as death, worn and grief-stained; the expression of utter misery, such as I had never seen in the countenance of a living being before—never anywhere save on the canvas of some old master?

But it was not the heavy eyes, or the white face, or the look of a>n~uish it bore, which caused me to forget where I was; I forgot all sense of propriety, all idea of fitness and decorum—in a word, I forgot myself, and exclaimed out loud—just as if I had been alone and not in a church:

"Good God! why, she is a child!"

In a moment, as though I had uttered some form of incantation, a change took place amongst the company.

With a look at me, which, to say the least of it, was not pleasant, Geoffrey drew his wife's hand in his arm, and marched out of the vestry with her, leaving us all to follow or not, as we liked.

The curate turned his eyes up to the ceiling, as if he expected it to fall in and crush one at least of the party. Out of his prayers I believe he had never heard such an expression before; the two ladies, spinsters, were gazing fixedly on the floor; Mrs. Ashwell was transfixing me with looks like daggers; Mr. Ashwell was in the aisle, sobbing into a white handkerchief.

As for me, I was so stunned that I failed even to apologise for my misdemeanour. I knew of course all these people were standing round and about, but I could see nothing, think of nothing, except my elderly cousin and his child-wife.

Old enough to be her father!—why, he might have been her grandfather!

To this hour I do not know how we got out of the church, and in what form of words I took leave of the curate. I have no distinct memory of anything after I saw the bride's face, till I found myself sitting on the box beside the coachman, driving along a country road, and feeling like one who, having beheld a vision, is gradually and painfully struggling back to consciousness and recollection.

CHAPTER III

MY COUSIN'S WILL

After all, I had not to find another place in which to spend my holidays, for Geoffrey condoned the offence of which I had been guilty, and, together with his wife, welcomed me to Fairy Water cordially as ever.

But Fairy Water was not now what it had once been. I could not endure the place, yet I was perpetually going there. I always felt thankful to leave it, and yet when I was away, a pleading face, a pair of soft brown eyes, a meek beseeching voice, seemed always dragging first my thoughts and then myself thither.

She was such a mere child, and he such an uncultivated savage, frantically in love with, and equally frantically jealous of her. It was the old story, not an uncommon one, in which the characters are a ruined father, a rich and generous suitor, a worldly mother, a loving, yielding child, willing to sacrifice her young life on the altar of duty.

She had never cared for anyone; that was the solitary consolation I could find in the transaction. She had never seen a man to care for, I fancy, so utterly secluded and nun-like had been her previous experience. She was innocent as an infant; pure as one of the angels; sweet-natured, docile, truthful, loyal; and I believe, after a time, when a child was born, and she had something all her own to pet and care for, and concentrate all her affections upon, the match—unequal and unsuitable, horribly unsuitable as it was—might not have proved altogether miserable, had anyone been clever enough to lay the devil of jealousy with which Geoffrey was possessed.

He could not bear her to have a look or a thought excepting for himself. His affection for his children was weak in comparison to the vehement and unreasoning attachment he bore his wife. She had loved her father with a clinging devotion beautiful to behold, and so he separated them—would not bid the old man to Fairy Water, or suffer her to visit her former home. When

Mr. Ashwell died, he was jealous of her very grief. When she had a new baby, he grudged the caresses she lavished upon it.

Poor Polly! poor little girl! poor child-wife! poor baby-mother! How often has my heart ached for you with a sympathy I feared to show!

But you knew I felt it, my dear! You could tell I was your true friend, and would have stood by you through good and evil, had any advocacy of mine been likely to serve your cause.

Often and often I felt it hard to stand by silent and see the spirit, and the hope, and the joy crushed out of your young life by slow degrees—to see you growing old almost before you had done growing tall; but what could I do?

He was your husband, you his wife; and you have told me since my very silence gave you strength to bear the inevitable—taught you how hopeless it was to struggle against that which was irrevocable.

I shall never forget one day in the earlier part of her married life, when Mrs. Geoffrey Trevor came to me as I was sauntering along a path through the strawberry-beds.

She was a pretty, dainty creature, I thought, as I watched her tripping along; dress a little uplifted above her small feet; head held erect, as if filled and balanced with a new idea.

"Mr. Stafford," she began—she was shy, at first, of calling me by my christian-name; and no wonder, for I must have been baptised some five-and-twenty years before she was thought of, and had been knocking about the world, and learning its wickedness, long ere she crossed life's threshold—"Mr. Stafford, I want to ask you something so much. You have known my husband longer, of course, than I have. Tell me what I can do to make him trust me more."

She said it all in a breath, like a child who has learned a lesson—conning it over and over till she knows it off by heart.

What a child she was! what an unsuspecting, guileless creature! Thank God, I never, not even for a moment, held a thought in my soul about her I might not have held for a daughter of my own; and, in his blind and stupid way, I believe Geoffrey knew this.

Certainly, however, this appeal—for which I was wholly unprepared—staggered me. It took me, indeed, so much by surprise, that I stared at her till she coloured to her temples. After a moment, her eyes drooped, her cheeks paled, and she stood before me abashed and silent, as though she had done something wrong.

Then I spoke.

"I do not know that you can do anything, Mrs. Trevor," I answered, "unless you discover some way to make him less fond of you."

Then the blood flew up again into her face, and she lifted her eyes to mine.

"Do you think he is very fond of me?" she asked, touching unconsciously the strawberry-leaves with her foot, as she moved it restlessly to and fro.

"Yes," I said. "His love for you is *the* love of his life."

She did not say another word. She walked back—not briskly, as she came, but slowly and thoughtfully.

A daughter of whom any man might have been proud—a sweet, tender girl, already developing a woman's soul.

She never tried to make him less fond. With all her strength, I believe, she tried to please him more, and do her duty better.

I watched her efforts. I saw how futile they were. The more tender, gentle, and patient she strove to be—the more lovable he learned her nature really was—so in precise proportion did his jealousy wax greater. He knew, as well as I knew, that while the sun rose and set she never could

love him. What he had hoped or expected when he married her, Heaven alone knows; but it is possible—since men in love are unreasoning animals—he trusted eventually to win from her something besides obedience and sweetness; and, as time passed by, and found her unchanged, save that she grew more still, more tranquil, more submissive, I think his heart must occasionally have stopped beating at the thought that someone might yet win her affection when he was dead and forgotten.

After a couple of children had been born, he asked me if I would object to my name being inserted as one of the executors of his will?

"Mr. Henderson will act with you," he added.

Mr. Henderson was a very respectable solicitor; and, having no objection to being associated with him, I said so.

"I hope, however," I went on, "you have done all that is right by your wife."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that I hope you have made ample provision for her."

"I have left everything to her," he replied, and I must say I felt surprise, though I did not evince any; "everything except Fairy Water, which, as you know, I cannot will; unless she should marry again."

"And in that case?" I suggested.

"She has nothing. I suppose you do not expect me to leave my money for the benefit of another man?"

"Well, no," I replied; "I do not think I should be so philanthropic myself; although I might, for the sake of memory, just as a mere matter of sentiment, leave a woman some trifle a year, settled on herself, of course strictly."

"I will not do that," he answered, and the subject dropped.

Time went on; they had been married eight years. Mrs. Trevor called me Stafford and I called her Mary. Somehow, Polly had dropped out of our recollections as it assuredly had out of her face, and there were five children at Fairy Water and one in the churchyard, all boys, all except the very last corner, to whom I stood godfather—to whom, for her mother's sake, I presented the handsomest conventional mug, knife, fork, and spoon I could possibly afford, and which was called—a graceful piece of thoughtfulness on the part of Mrs. Trevor—Isobel, after my own dear mother.

How this young wife went through those eight years is to me a puzzle even now. How she preserved her amiability, how she kept her temper from souring, how she retained her timid, trembling, and yet certain faith in all things holy, could have been only by reason of God's great mercy to his weakest and most helpless children.

But there was a slow, gradual change in her which made my heart ache to behold. She was as staid as a matron of forty. The sweet laughter of a happy wife and mother never echoed through the rooms at Fairy Water. She was grave even with her children. Young as she was, she had lost the ability to play with them. Geoffrey had gained his desire, and wedded a young wife whom he loved, pretty, faithful, true, and yet he found no happiness in the years, whilst she—I have told how she was affected by their passage, and can only guess the anguish of soul each day they contained had brought with its dawn.

But a change was very near at hand. One night Geoffrey, always a bad, reckless whip, managed to upset his dogcart, and in doing so contrived, besides breaking his leg, to inflict serious internal injuries on himself.

That was the beginning of the end. The leg knitted, the injuries were patched up, but he could never hope to be the same man again. He grew thin and worn, and month after month wasted away visibly.

At times also he suffered cruelly; whatever was the matter with him, and the doctors could only vaguely diagnose his disease, there were hours when it seemed to fasten upon him tooth and nail, almost gnawing the life out of that once robust, loud-voiced, strong-limbed boor.

Under this discipline he grew, wonderful to relate, gentle.

In health one of the most discontented, restless, impatient mortals that ever existed, in sickness and in pain he became a different being.

"Spite of his sufferings," said his wife, tears in her eyes at the thought of them, "we have never been so happy. Oh, Stafford, if he had only been like this always."

Two years after the accident a letter from Fairy Water told me the end had come. It was the dead of the winter time, and I do not like travelling in winter, or going into residence with a corpse, but I started for the old place at once. The little woman, with her five young children, all alone in the world but for me, would have need of my presence.

I can see her now as she crossed the hall to meet and thank me for coming. Her face was very pale, and thin, and sad, but peaceful.

"He had no pain at the last," she told me, as we passed into the library together; and then, holding her hand, I sat silent for a minute, thinking—as we all must at some period or another—of the last change, of the awful mystery.

All it was possible to do for her at this juncture I did; and when the short days drew to a close, and we talked quietly by the firelight, she always led the conversation to her late husband—she liked to speak of him, I perceived—liked to tell me how, by almost imperceptible degrees, he had been softened and altered.

"At last," she said, on the evening before the funeral, and her voice dropped and trembled a little as she spoke, "at last he told me how much he regretted that we had not been so happy as we might have been. He said, poor dear, it was all his fault; he said he had distrusted me once, and made his own life miserable in consequence; and then he would, spite of my entreaties, go on to talk about his will. It would 'show how I trust you,' those were his words, 'what full confidence I place in Stafford and you.' "

At that point she broke down. I had not mixed with my species for a considerable number of years without having had many such utterances confided to me. For a week after his death a man is generally well spoken of, and I ought to have remembered this, and been on my guard as to consequences accordingly; but I was off guard, and, I confess, Mrs. Trevor's grief for the departed, and her account of Geoffrey's supposed repentance, touched me exceedingly.

As a rule, I wait to form my opinion of the regret of the survivors and the real character of the deceased until the day after the funeral; but in this case, as has been stated, I was weak and premature, and went to bed with a newly-developed liking and pity for the poor gentleman who lay stiff and stark in unpleasant proximity to my own bedchamber.

"I wonder what his will is?" I marvelled, as I put out my candle; and then a dreadful idea, a most shocking and horrible notion struck me.

"If he has expressed a wish for me to marry his widow, what shall I do?"

What should I do, indeed? I could not sleep for hours, so fearful did I feel that in some mood of maudlin repentance, when his mind was weakened with illness, he might have committed such a desire to paper; and when at last I sank off into slumber it was only to dream I was standing once again in Winchelsea Church, this time as an unwilling bridegroom, with Geoffrey Trevor in his

shroud officiating as clergyman, and one of the elderly spinsters vowing as fast and hard as she knew how she would cling to me till death did us part.

I awoke in a cold perspiration, and though day had not yet broken, got up, dressed myself, went out for a walk, and on my return finished my nap, rolled up in a rug on a sofa in the dining-room.

Funerals, like weddings, take place at too early an hour. Though it was an immense relief to me to think Geoffrey was out of his own house, I confess, as we drove back to Fairy Water, I wished his departure had been arranged for at a later period of the day.

I wondered what I could find to do until it was time to retire to rest. I marvelled how long Mrs. Trevor would wish me to remain in the house of mourning; I speculated on the number of invitations which must be by this time lying on my table in town, and through all there was a curious under-current of thought as to what my own end would be like, where I should die, what I should die of, where I should be buried, and who would follow me to the grave.

"Mr. Stafford"—it was Mr. Henderson who thus broke into my reverie—"do you know whether your cousin left any other will than that made some years since?"

"He told Mrs. Trevor," I answered, "he had made a will which would show how fully he trusted her."

"Has she got that will?"

"No; at least I should think not."

"Has she looked for it?"

"Decidedly not, I should say."

"Have you?"

"No; if I ever thought about the matter, I concluded you had the will in your possession."

"I have not," he replied; "and, what is more, I never drew out any but the one which, against my most earnest advice, he executed. I often urged upon him to reconsider the matter, but he always either turned the subject or refused to do so."

'Then you think my cousin did not make a second will?" I suggested.

"I am afraid he did not."

"Is that you hold so very bad?" I inquired.

"I think it so," he replied.

"What is to be done?" I asked.

"His papers had better be examined, to ascertain if he has left a later will before that I hold is produced."

"There can be no objection to such a course," I said; "will you examine them?"

"I am in the hands of yourself, and Mrs. Trevor," he answered, and we drove on in silence.

It was lucky for us that the widow had not the faintest idea the usual course of procedure ordered a will to be read as soon as possible after the man who made it had been got safely into the churchyard.

Though twenty-six, she remained to that hour as ignorant of worldly affairs as she was when she had to ask what name she should sign in the register at Winchelsea, and she accepted in simple good faith my suggestion that she should give the keys of her late husband's desks, drawers, boxes, and so forth to Mr. Henderson, on whom the duty of looking over his papers now devolved.

"I fancy he wanted something out of that old oak cabinet, which stood near his bedside," she said, as she handed me the keys. "He pointed and nodded to it several times just before—before

he died, and tried to speak, but he was not able. Perhaps Mr. Henderson may find out what it was."

"We must look there for the will," I said, as the lawyer and I ascended the staircase together.

He bowed gravely. He had formed his opinion, which the result of our search justified. Geoffrey had made no second will. There was no such document to be found.

All the letters and papers in the oak cabinet related to matters stale as the deluge, with the exception, indeed, of some few notes from Geoffrey's young wife, and a lock of her hair tied with a thread of silver twist. We found also a knot of ribbon and a few flowers pressed in tissue paper. When we showed these to Mrs. Trevor she burst into tears.

"He wanted them buried with him," said Mr. Henderson to me, *sotto voce.* "The desire is not uncommon. I assure you, Mr. Stafford, elderly men are often more romantic than young ones.~~

"No doubt you speak truly," I replied; "nevertheless I wish, sentiment notwithstanding, he had forgotten those relics, and executed his will."

"He did not wish to make another," said the lawyer; "rely upon that."

The worst of lawyers is, they are always telling one something one is forced to believe, whether one likes to do so or not.

I was forced to believe, and, indeed, my long experience of his amiable nature made that belief unpleasantly easy, that my cousin Geoffrey had made no second will, and that the document which Mr. Henderson described as containing some curious and stringent clauses was the only keepsake he had left us.

"I will bring it over in a day or two," said Mr. Henderson, "and read it quietly to you and Mrs. Trevor."

"Bring it to-morrow," I suggested, "and let us have done with the matter. If medicine has to be swallowed, the sooner it is taken the better."

"True," he commented; but there was a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his lip as he took his leave, which seemed to say, "I understand you, Mr. H. Stafford Trevor. You find Fairy Water dull; you are longing for the fleshpots of Egypt—for the cucumbers of course—leeks are not esteemed luxurious now as they were some four thousand years back—which even in December grace the tables of those rich enough to pay for them."

There was a certain amount of truth in this unspoken sentence. I had eaten too long out of the fleshpots to care very much for anything they contain, but still I was tired of Fairy Water. The country in summer, as a change from town, is delightful; the country in winter is something not delightful, beginning with a d—also.

That night I slept with a quiet heart. I saw a prospect of returning to my beloved London. I had no fear of having to regard any last wishes chronicled by the late owner of Fairy Water.

Dreamily I wondered what Mr. Henderson meant by a bad will; but being too much tired to try to work out the problem, closed my eyes, and left it for him to solve next day.

When I awoke in the night I felt glad to remember I was not the owner of Fairy Water, but that an extremely delicate child, sleeping in a distant wing, would some day be master in it.

Unless, indeed, he died; in which case the other youngsters were ready step into and wait for the vacant shoes.

I never liked Fairy Water so little as on the night following the noon when we helped to lay Geoffrey Trevor under a great slab of granite, there to lie quiet till the Judgment-day.

Men of my temperament generally strive to eschew assisting at these unpleasant ceremonies, but I have always tried to do my duty, however disagreeable it may be; and really, excepting a christening, I know no ceremony so utterly distasteful to me as a funeral.

I have never shirked accompanying any dear brother who had a claim upon me, either of relationship or friendship, to the only home where men can do no more harm to anybody. Nevertheless it is one thing to perform a duty, and another to like performing it. There are persons who take a positive pleasure in the black business, who do not object to strolling through cemeteries and examining in ancient churchyards old tombs and inscriptions as false as those graven in our own day. To me, however, the whole thing is objectionable, and the idea of Geoffrey sleeping out in a damp piece of consecrated ground, with rank grass waving around his last bed, made me shiver.

Still, as the ceremony had to be gone through, I was glad it was over; and when I rose the next morning I felt sufficiently reconciled to my loss and composed in my mind, to consider how Mr. Geoffrey Trevor's death would in the future affect my previous relations with Fairy Water. Of course in my capacity as executor I should have to visit the place occasionally, but my knowledge of the world told me it would not do, even for a man old enough to be the widow's father, to continue free of the house now its master was dead.

True, he had told me she would lose her fortune if she married again. Nevertheless, the children were certain to be well provided for, and in the case of one, at all events, there would be a minority of between eighteen and nineteen years.

For myself, of course any remarks which might be made in a place so utterly remote from the centre of civilisation as Fairy Water, were of no consequence; but it behoved me to be very careful as to what might be said about Mary; and I decided, as I had decided nearly ten years previously, that I must find some other house in which to spend my holidays, recruit my health, and eat my strawberries.

I had never seen Fairy Water look so utterly dreary as it did during that forenoon when I stood watching the rain dripping into the lake, and making the already sodden ground more sodden.

The sky looked as if it had never done anything but rain since the second day of the world, and as if it never meant to do anything except rain till the last day. The leafless forest trees waved their long bare arms slowly to and fro, as though they were burdened with the weight of some speechless agony. The swans looked dirty and draggled, the ducks had collected together under the shelter of a clump of evergreens, and were suggestive of utter misery. Mrs. Trevor was making belief to execute some impossible piece of needlework; the children, as is the pleasing habit of children on wet days, were flattening their unformed noses against the window-panes; while their father, out in the weather, could not tell whether the rain were raining, or the sun shining.

After luncheon Mr. Henderson arrived, Out of consideration for my London habits, Geoffrey had always dined later on the occasion of my visits to Fairy Water.

Ordinarily, I believe, the family partook of that meal with the children at one o'clock.

In honour of the solicitor's visit, a fire had been lighted in the drawing-room, and thither we three repaired, leaving the heir, his two brothers, and his sister to amuse themselves as they could.

Mrs. Trevor seated herself on a sofa drawn up beside the fire; Mr. Henderson took a chair at a little distance from her, and unfolding the will, laid it solemnly on a table close to his hand.

I stood leaning against the mantelpiece; a long course of after-dinner drawing-room experience having rendered standing a more natural attitude to me than sitting.

"Shall I commence reading, Mrs. Trevor?" inquired Mr. Henderson.

"If you please," she said softly, and after the lawyer had cleared his throat he began.

It was a long document, copiously interlarded with legal phrases, which were plainly so much Greek to my unsophisticated cousin. There was first a long preamble, setting forth the particulars of the will under which Captain Trevor held Fairy Water, but which left him no power in the devising of it. Then were enumerated the different sources whence his income was derived; then a statement that in the year of grace 18— he married, at Winchelsea Church, Mary, only surviving child of Justin Ashwell, Esq., and Rebecca his wife.

"A will made as much by client as by lawyer," was my mental comment, while Mr. Henderson turned over folio after folio. "Ah! now we are coming to the gist of the matter."

His eldest son, Geoffrey Bertrand, being heir to Fairy Water and whatever moneys might accrue from that property during his minority, it was Captain Trevor's will that the moneys derived from such and such sources, or invested in such and such securities, should be equally divided between such other children as might be born to him, always excluding Geoffrey Bertrand or the son who, in the event of the death of Geoffrey Bertrand, might succeed to the estate called Fairy Water. Subject, however, to an annuity of three hundred pounds per annum to his wife Mary, after the youngest child attained the age of twenty-one, and to a yearly allowance to the said Mary of one hundred pounds per annum for each child of herself and the said Geoffrey Trevor, whom she might undertake to maintain and educate in a manner satisfactory to the before-named executors, viz., Hercules Stafford Trevor, of London, Barrister-at-Law, and Reuben Henderson, Attorney.

In the event of no child, except that son who might at any time be heir to Fairy Water, surviving, one-half the annuity mentioned was to be paid at once to the said Mary, and it was his will that she should continue to reside at Fairy Water, and that the furniture, not including, however, plate and pictures, was to be at her order and disposal.

At this juncture Mr. Henderson paused.

"Come," I thought, "considering the testator was Geoffrey, the will is not so bad a one."

"Providing always," continued the lawyer, and then I found that the sting of the document lay in its tail.

Mrs. Trevor was to be entitled to the sums of money of which mention has been made only in the event of her remaining unmarried. If she married, not merely was she to lose her annuity, and the hundreds per annum to which she was entitled during the minority of her children, but also her children. They were to be placed at such schools as the executors might decide, and all intercourse with their mother was to cease. Further, in the event of her second marriage, she must leave Fairy Water.

There were other clauses, but I forget them; other legacies, but unimportant, including fifty guineas to Mr. Henderson and myself. As I listened to that comprehensive sentence, which must prove, as I knew, a sentence to Mrs. Trevor of perpetual widowhood, I glanced at her for one moment stealthily, and saw the Parthian dart flung at her almost, as it seemed, from eternity, had done its work.

If she grasped no other part of her husband's will, she did that portion which, while contemplating the possibility of her meeting in the future with someone she might wish to marry, virtually placed an insuperable barrier in the way of her becoming his wife.

She did not utter a word, however. When, having finished the reading of the will, Mr. Henderson asked if she understood its purport, she said:

"I think so," in that grave, repressed tone which of late years had become habitual to her, but which I had heard less frequently than formerly since my last arrival at Fairy Water.

"If there is anything you do not quite understand, I can explain it to you hereafter."

"Thank you," she said. Then after an instant's pause, "I suppose you do not require me any longer."

Mr. Henderson at these words rose and bowed. As I opened the door for her to pass out she never once looked at me. She kept her head resolutely bent down, as I remembered seeing it drooped on that bright spring morning at Winchelsea.

Was that day present with her at the moment as it was with me, I wondered, as I watched her slowly move across the hall and enter a little room which she preferred to any other in the house.

"Mrs. Trevor takes it badly, I am afraid," said Mr. Henderson, when I returned to my position near the fire. "Ah! it is a cruel will."

"What a pity we cannot put it between the bars," I remarked, looking longingly at the blazing coals.

Mr. Henderson seized the document as if he imagined I really had some thoughts of disposing of it summarily.

"Geoffrey always was a brute," I went on, seeming not to notice his gesture, "and he appears to have been true to his character to the last."

"Mrs. Trevor takes it worse than I expected she would do," said my companion. "I should not have thought she was the sort of woman to entertain the idea of marrying again, not, at all events, in the first week of her widowhood."

"She never did entertain an idea of the kind," I answered resolutely.

"No doubt; how could she? Her husband never allowed her to exchange half-a-dozen words with any man, except myself."

There was something about this I did not like.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Henderson," I said, with a little stiffness of manner, "I have exchanged many half-dozen words with her."

"Of course! of course! I meant also excepting you."

Although I had, and have, a perfect horror of any woman imagining she has formed an attachment for me, I felt my anger rise at the tone in which Mr. Henderson put the very idea of my being anybody in such affairs aside.

I looked at the man, and a suspicion struck me that perhaps, had Geoffrey's will been different, Mr. Henderson might have aspired to marrying the widow. He was younger than I, and much better-looking. To Mrs. Trevor, his want of that *je ne sais quoi,* which produces a freemasonry amongst persons accustomed to mix in good society, would not be apparent.

Well, thank Heaven, there was no necessity to vex myself about the chance of such a *mésalliance* now. Some man there might be on earth willing to give up her money for the sake of calling her wife, but she would never give up her children.

I expressed this idea very openly to Mr. Henderson, who said, no doubt I was right. At the same time he once more hinted his surprise at the way in which Mrs. Trevor received the intelligence.

"Depend upon it," I said, "she is not vexed because she cannot marry again. There is some other cause at the bottom of her grief."

"Well, it has been a miserable business first and last," he remarked, as he drew on his gloves, and buttoned up his coat, and drank off a couple of glasses of Madeira preparatory to facing the weather. "I have seen so much unhappiness resulting from unsuitable marriages, Mr. Trevor, that, sooner than one of my girls should wed a man like your late lamented cousin, I would put her in a convent or her coffin."

"You mean a hypothetical girl, I suppose," was my reply. "You have not any of your own."

"Haven't I!" was his answer. "I have a round dozen of children, one sort and another, some of them as tall as Mrs. Trevor."

"Why, I had no idea you were a married man!" I exclaimed.

He looked at me for a minute, and then broke into a ringing laugh, which he instantly suppressed.

"I beg ten thousand pardons. I forgot, I quite forgot. If Mrs. Trevor unfortunately heard me, assure her I meant no disrespect," and he was so earnest in this matter that he kept me at least a minute hatless in a damp country air, begging me to believe he would not have done it for the world—he intended no offence.

When at last I got rid of Mr. Henderson, I went to the door of the room I had seen Mrs. Trevor enter, and asked if I might come in.

"Yes," she answered, and she took her hands away from her face, and greeted me with the same gentle smile which had been growing more gentle ever since I first knew her.

"I do not think I deserved this," she began. "I do not wish to speak ill of the dead, but I think this was a cruel insult to put upon me."

I ventured to suggest that probably her husband had looked upon it in the light of a precaution.

"As if I was likely to marry again—as if—but there, I will not speak of that—Captain Trevor used to tell me women were not fit to be trusted with anything. I am certain there is one thing with which men cannot ~ trusted."

"And that is—?"

"A woman's happiness."

Neither of us spoke for a few minutes; then she broke the silence.

"I shall be sorry to-morrow for what I have said to you to-day; but I was hurt—I was shocked. When my boys grow up and see their father's will, they cannot fail to wonder what manner of woman their mother was in her youth that it was necessary to have such restrictions in case she failed in her trust to them. And beyond all that," she went on, "it was a revulsion. We had seemed so much closer together—he had been so much kinder to me—I seemed to have won his confidence so completely—he appeared so thankful for and pleased with the little things I was able to do to lighten his pain—he had told me so certainly and truly, as I thought—not with a sneer as he might once have done—I should find in his will how thoroughly he trusted me, that I feel I cannot bear the reality of that cruel, cruel paper I heard read to-day. I feel I cannot understand at all what he meant."

It was not my place to tell her I believed the late Captain Trevor had, for purposes of his own, improvised the fiction she repeated to me on the evening before his funeral; so I said no doubt he considered he had showed his trust in her by leaving his children almost completely to her care.

"For, of course, Henderson and I will not consider it necessary to interfere with them," I finished.

"But what did he mean by showing the confidence he placed in you?" she inquired.

"It shows that one man places confidence in another when he asks him to become his executor," I replied.

"You are trying to make the best of this to me," she said, "and I shall be grateful to you hereafter for not making the worst, but I know what you think of it all in your heart. Now, we will never talk of it again."

We had, however, to talk of it again in years to come; but that was not her fault, poor girl, or mine by reason of any intention I had to bring more trouble upon her.

CHAPTER IV

I STRIKE A BARGAIN

For the second time I found I had made a mistake about those strawberries. The little world—heavens! what a diminutive world it was round and about Fairy Water—accepted with a unanimity rare in even smaller communities three facts—one, that Captain Trevor, having treated his wife infamously while living, had treated her still worse when dead; another, that she, being different from most people, would not feel the restrictions placed upon her as a woman of a different type might; the third, that it was a great comfort she had one male relation—myself to wit—who, in her difficult position, could visit and advise her.

The little world previously referred to took me into its confidence concerning these and many other subjects, and I accepted its opinions.

As for Mary, the idea that her husband's death should make any difference in my visits to Fairy Water clearly never occurred to her.

She called me Stafford, and the boys Uncle Stafford, and the little girl Godpa Stafford; and if I had suggested taking up my home with them all, I am confident she would have seen no impropriety in the arrangement.

Altogether, the visits I paid at Fairy Water after Geoffrey's death were not unhappy ones. They would have been happier, but that the eldest lad was developing symptoms which no one, not even the local doctor, understood, and which certainly no one could like.

"The boy will be lame for life, if we do not try some different treatment," I said to his mother, as we paced the lawn one day side by side. "I wonder what course we ought to pursue? I think we must have some first-rate doctor to see him."

"Do anything you consider best so long as my darling is cured," she said. "I never look at him without a feeling of self-reproach. My own sinful fretting after I was first married was the cause of this. I know that perfectly well."

And Mrs. Trevor spoke so decidedly on the matter that I doubt if the whole College of Physicians could have brought her to a different opinion.

Not being one of that body I never tried. Beyond all things, she was now a mother. Her whole soul, thoughts, interest, hopes were bound up in her children, and if she liked to accuse herself of having induced delicacy in the constitution of her first-born, why should I deprive her of the pleasure?

"Mary," said I, and I stopped in my walk suddenly, "I have a notion. I know a man. He is a very dear friend of mine—one of the few dear friends I have in the world. He is also a clever surgeon—wonderfully clever. Should you object to my asking him down to spend a fortnight here? He is ill himself, poor fellow, and wants a change to some quiet place like this, and he would tell us what to do about Geoff—"

Before I knew where I was she had led me in an ecstasy of excitement into the library, put pen, ink, and paper before me, and commanded that I should write to my friend.

"Make haste," she said. "You will have just time to catch the post," and she rang the bell. "Tell Robert," she added, while I scribbled my note, "to come here directly. I want him to take a letter to the office at once. Valentine Waldrum, Esq.," she proceeded, taking up my note and reading the address. "What a weak pair of names, Stafford. I am afraid he is not clever. I am indeed."

"He is one of the cleverest men I know," I said, with a little pleasant severity of manner, at which she put her finger to her lip and drew back a step or two, and said, "Hush-sh-sh!" to an imaginary audience.

Even at nine-and-twenty, or thereabouts, I could see now and then in such ways and actions as these a spectre of the Polly Ashwell, at whose death and burial I had assisted thirteen years before.

"I suppose he is very old as he is so clever?" she said after the note was despatched.

"He is not at all old," I answered, at which intelligence she made a *moue* of disappointment.

One of the oddest traits about her was a fancy for elderly gentlemen.

Considering what her life had been with one of them, I could not understand this, till in a moment of confidence she told me she felt *gauche* with young ones, never having associated with them.

"Is his wife nice?" she asked.

"He has no wife," I replied. "He never will have one."

"Why not?"

"His father died mad, and in consequence he considers it his duty to remain single."

"Does his mother live with him?"

"No, she is dead too. She did not long survive her husband."

"How sad. Did you know her?"

"Yes, very well indeed. I knew her when she was no taller than your little Isobel; but I knew her best when she was ten years older than you are now."

"Were you attached to her?" she asked, with that directness which is as often a proof of want of knowledge of the world as of intimate acquaintance with all its ways.

"If I ever loved a woman it was Val Waldrum's mother," I answered; "but make no mistake, Mary; that she married another man has caused no great disturbance in my life. When I began to love her I was at an age when sentiment is paramount. She was to me just what a favourite heroine might have appeared. She was my ideal-love, and for the sake of that romance in the first instance, and because afterwards I found her to be a woman, sweet, true, devoted, I liked her son first for his mother's sake, and then for his own. I hope you will be very amiable to him, my dear, for he is much to be pitied."

She took both my hands in hers and kissed first the right and then the left.

"Do you suppose I should not be amiable to any friend of yours?" she answered. "Am I a monster of ingratitude, that I should forget the kindness you have unceasingly showed to me?"

She had her ways and her words, which never permitted me to forget, no, not for a moment, what she might have been under happier auspices, what she might have developed had not Geoffrey decided to celebrate the obsequies of everything which was young, cheerful, light-hearted, about her on her bridal morning. We did two things that noon in Winchelsea, I decided. We buried the original Polly, and we dragged a resuscitated Mary to the altar, and married her to a man old enough to be her grandfather.

"My dear," I said, "you are not a monster of ingratitude, neither am I. Nevertheless, if you could find something else to kiss than my hands, I should feel obliged."

"You wretch," she said, and boxed my ears, or rather made belief to do so.

I tried to understand, but utterly failed to do so, why on that day, and for several days afterwards, Mrs. Trevor treated me like a person who had just sustained some great loss, or experienced some serious misfortune. Had my first love ascertained her real sentiments towards me in the same hour in which I made my confession, instead of—well it does not particularly

matter how many years before—it would have been impossible for Mary to evince a keener sympathy with my disappointment than she showed by a hundred little attentions, by a certain tone of her voice, by a pitying expression in her face.

I could have laughed at her intense simplicity, but that between me and laughter there stood, at the moment, the spectre of that which seems only beautiful to us when we can grasp it no more—youth.

I had been young and I was old, and yet a few words, spoken almost at random, raised a fair illusion from the grave of the past.

Around me were the flowers, and the waters, and the beauty of the long ago; above my head shone a sun, the glory of which had faded many and many a year before; in my ears sounded the voices of the dead and gone; and there is something about phantoms such as these which chills the merriment even of a man of the world.

Nevertheless, the form which Mary's sympathy took was not disagreeable to me in my last capacity.

Intuition teaches the sex many things wonderful to consider. Intuition taught her that after forty, and sometimes before, men find in creature comforts a marvellous solace for disappointed affections, and therefore when we sat down to dinner I found my tastes had been consulted even more scrupulously than was the case in general; and when dessert appeared, the wine she pressed me so much to try turned out to be taken from a bin that had been held so sacred in Geoffrey's time, that I never recollect but once his asking any person to share a bottle of the vintage.

That was on the day of his father's death. I happened to be in the house at the time, and perhaps in honour of his new authority he produced some of this wonderful wine, saying it would do us both good.

Afterwards thinking that what might be enough for one would not be for two, he treated himself on high festivals to a bottle in private. Those high festivals must have occurred frequently, judging from the small quantity left.

"I am so glad I thought of it," said Mrs. Trevor, when I remonstrated with her on the extravagance of decanting such wine for me. "I cannot imagine what is the use of having things unless they are used." Which article of faith she had learned, no doubt, from her father, who went on using everything he had till there was nothing left.

When I told her Valentine Waldrum was one of the few dear friends I had left in the world, I spoke the truth. One of the benefits attached to my profession is that it acts as an almost complete deterrent to personal dislikes; on the other hand, it places bars in the way of forming strong attachments. Dear friends being frequently a little *exigeant,* diners-out can scarcely run the risk of offending non-*exigeant* friends by making too *in* any of them. I could not at all events, and the few I did make I took care to keep, by letting none of my useful acquaintances know, if I could help it, of their existence. Each rule has, however, its exception, and Waldrum proved that to mine. From the time he first came to London, I tried to get him into society, but, unfortunately, I could not make him like society; then I tried to get society to recognise his professional merits.

Always graceful, society expressed itself certain Waldrum's abilities were of the highest order, but at this point it stopped. When it wanted an arm cut off, or any other remunerative operation performed, it sent for some well-known man, even if he were half blind, half deaf, half doting, instead of my *protégé.*

Do you think I quarrelled with society for this? On the contrary, I only set my wits to work to overcome its prejudices.

The only man whom I asked as a favour to put business in the way of my young friend was an old doctor who had grown gray in feeling pulses, in pocketing guineas, and doing as little for his money as even a fashionable physician was able to manage.

I took Valentine to call upon him, and the young fellow's good sense, cleverness, and modesty impressed the ancient humbug favourably.

As we rose to take our leave, the latter asked Valentine where he lived? to which he replied he was trying to work up a small practice in Islington.

"Where is Islington?" said the doctor, as though he had never heard of that suburb before.

When I explained its topography to him, and enlarged upon the fact that at one time London physicians sent their consumptive patients to die in its salubrious air, as they send them nowadays for the same purpose to Torquay, Madeira, and other such favourite resorts, he said he had no doubt it must be a charming neighbourhood, and that my anecdotes were most interesting. Further, he observed, if I happened to be passing in the course of a day or two, he should like to see me.

When I called he rushed to the point at once. "A fine young fellow," he remarked, "something in him, should not wonder if he makes his mark; but, my dear sir, get him away from his present quarters. How could I recommend a man who lives in a place of which no one who is anybody ever heard? He ought to rent a house in a good street, furnish it well, set up a carriage and pair, or at least a well-appointed brougham. If he follow my advice he may earn a handsome income ere long; if he do not, he may make up his mind to remain in 'Merrie Islington' an unknown surgeon to the end of his days."

"You are right, very probably," I replied.

"Right, to be sure I am right! and you, who have been mixing in society for a quarter of a century at least, know I am. It is all very well for those who do not want to live by their fellows to talk about worth, and talent, and genius, and industry, and other nice qualities of a similar description, but we who must get money out of the upper ten thousand, or else starve, comprehend that the aristocracy must be humoured. And quite correct, too," he added; "if I paid a man a guinea every time he looked at my tongue, I should expect him to find out my especial weakness, and respect it."

That same evening I went to Islington, and found my young friend domiciled in a house which presented a front of a window and a hall-door, adorned with a brass plate, to one street, while round the corner was another door, smaller than the first, adorned by a second and more diminutive plate, on which was engraved, "Surgery."

One does not grow less sensitive to the value of external appearances as one gets older, and I confess it shocked me very greatly to find Mrs. Waldrum's son making his professional *debut* in such a locality.

I found him reading the last handbook of surgery, and writing his own opinions on certain passages as he went on.

"Still on the mill, Val," I remarked.

"Yes," he said, laughing; "there are some people on whom sentence of 'hard labour for life' is passed the moment they enter the world, and I am one of them."

"Well, we must see that you get something in return for your labour," I answered; and then I repeated all the words of wisdom which had fallen from the lips of my friend, the ancient humbug, and watched the effect they produced upon Mr. Waldrum.

He took the matter in a different spirit to that I expected. I thought he would pooh-pooh the experience of his elders—break out into invectives against the rottenness of a state of society

which looked to what a man seemed, instead of first asking what he was. I imagined it quite possible he would tell me he preferred the poor to the rich, that he asked for o other emolument out of his profession than the power of alleviating pa' of benefiting the sufferings of his fellow-creatures, with much more to the same effect, uttered in the vehement language with which inexperienced persons clothe their crude notions until time has taught them both the fallacy of their ideas, and the folly of expressing them.

Mr. Waldrum, however, disappointed my expectations in the most agreeable manner. He waited quite patiently till I had finished, seemingly listening to and weighing every word; then he looked round his sitting-room with a most suggestive glance—a glance which took in the six secondhand chairs, covered with horsehair; the sofa, upholstered in a like cheerful and comfortable manner; the pembroke table, its deal top concealed by a tablecloth of washing damask, the washing capabilities of which had, however, apparently never yet been put to the test; curtains, ditto, ditto; carpet, neither bright nor new; ornaments on the chimney-piece to match.

When he had completed the survey, he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and commenced refilling it, with a smile.

"It is good advice," he said, "but, like all good advice, impossible to follow. I had trouble enough to gather sufficient money together to buy this excellent practice and superior house of furniture; how, therefore, shall I ever be able to move to the West End, and decorate my rooms as West End rooms should be decorated, and purchase a brougham and horse, and feed the latter, to say nothing of a man in livery to open the door, and another in livery also, to drive me to the dwellings of problematical patients who may require my services, or who may not—very possibly the latter."

For the time being I ignored the conclusion of his sentence, and inquired:

"Why, when you were short of money, did you not come to me?"

"Well, for one reason—because I am a queer fellow, and have a fancy to be independent."

"Independence is an excellent virtue, in moderation," I replied.

"I wonder if you mean, now, by that remark, to imply what I heard a lady say the other day, that people who begin with being extremely independent, usually end by making eminently ungrateful beggars."

"A sweeping assertion," was my answer; "but still no virtue ought to be pushed to extremities."

"You did not ask me what my second reason was," he remarked.

"I shall be most happy to hear it, nevertheless," I said, politely.

"Well, the fact is, if I ever thought about the matter, I thought you had no money to speak of. I knew you had a lot of friends, and influence likely to prove useful, say to a young lady whose relatives wanted her brought out and put in the way of making a good marriage, but I never supposed you had a hundred pounds lying at your bankers in your life."

"I do not suppose I ever had," I replied, humouring him.

"And that is the reason," he went on, "that I have liked to know you. I felt you could not imagine I had any ulterior object in visiting you. It was very good of you to get me invited to grand parties, and affairs of that kind, and I am glad to understand, thanks to you, what is going on inside one of the big houses in a fashionable quarter, when I see the windows lighted up, and the carpet laid across the pavement, and carriages driving up, and footmen lounging about; but society and I are not suited for each other and therefore you cannot now think, when I say I like to know and talk to you, it is for anything than for your own sake, and the sake of one who understood you better than I think you do yourself."

Really an extremely difficult sentence to answer, and as I dislike difficulties, I did not attempt to answer it.

He had refilled and lighted his pipe by this time, and began smoking vigorously. I walked to the window and made some observation about the quietness of the street.

"Yes, it is quiet enough," he agreed, "if that be an advantage; still even on that score I think I might have secured a more desirable residence at a lower figure."

We were on ground now where I felt I could meet him.

"Val," I observed, "I have a fancy that when you bought this excellent practice and superior house of furniture, you were deceived by someone."

"I was sold," he said, doggedly; whereupon I read him a small lecture. Slang might suit fast young ladies and vulgar young men, I informed my listener, but for anyone who wished to succeed in life it was inadmissible. I suggested that a perusal of Addison might improve his style; that a study of Dr. Johnson would teach him the capabilities of the English language; that Swift would show him the way to apply the axe of satire to everyday doings; and how do you suppose he met this. Really, I grieve to record his answer!

"Damn them all!" he said, "I have read and re-read till I wish no man had ever written, in which case I must have gone out and spent my strength in manual labour instead of vegetating in this cursed hole!"

As a narrator I am bound to be accurate as to conversation; as an individual I must apologise for the vehement language of my friend.

It is as useless to argue with a man who is miserable as one who is angry. Val Waldrum, I saw, was miserable. He had, or he imagined he had, which comes to very much the same thing, capabilities in him for rising to eminence, were a chance given; but no chance seemed likely to present itself.

He had hoped from a small beginning to make a great ending, but there some professions in which small beginnings mean a struggle from first last, with no end worth speaking about, let a man fight as long and as bravely as he will.

He had spent his small capital in buying a practice which was evidently perfectly valueless, and though he had ample leisure for thought and study, both seemed destined to produce but poor worldly fruits, unless by a miracle he could be translated to some different sphere.

I am not a person who, as a rule, jumps to conclusions very rapidly, and I felt almost startled at the swiftness with which I formed the foregoing opinion.

"I suppose," I began, "that if by any means it was practicable to follow the advice of our experienced friend, you would not object to do so?"

"Object!" he repeated, with a forced laugh, then went on, "I should not object—that is to say, if the thing could be done without borrowing money or running into debt. I think a man must be a fool who walks into—" the reader will excuse my merely indicating the place which this vehement young surgeon mentioned, "with his eyes open. Many a poor devil has, I daresay, done so in ignorance; but I! have I not seen the evils of debt all my life? Am I not, though through no fault of my own, eating its bitter fruits now? And for all these reasons, if anyone assured me I could earn five thousand a year by adopting such and such a course, I would not go into debt to secure it. At the same time I feel—do not think me vain—so certain that I have it in me to make a name, that if I had enough money to stand the racket for twelve months I would risk losing it in order to give myself a chance; but as I have not the money I must e'en content myself in this charming house, in this delightful locality, and try to work up a practice. I might sell the practice

now, I daresay, if I could make up my mind to take in some unhappy wretch as I was taken in myself."

"Is not the old place yours still?" I asked. "I do not, of course, mean the Grange, but the other property, where—"

He stopped me, wincing as if I had touched some unhealed wound.

"Yes; I get fifty pounds a year from the land. Of course, it is let far below its value; but we were glad to let it on any terms."

"Do you mean that the house is included in the fifty pounds?" I inquired.

"No one would take the house," he replied. "We had the greatest difficulty to get anyone to live in it, even as caretaker. The woman who does so has the reputation of being a witch."

"Oh!" I said, and we sat silent for a minute. Then I asked:

"Suppose the house and grounds and farm were let at a fair rental, how much ought the whole thing to produce?"

"A hundred a year at the least," he answered; "but then it would cost a lot of money to put the house and grounds in order. I wish I could afford to paint and repair it a little, for there is some talk of a railway cutting a corner off the garden, and I might then ask for handsome compensation."

"If a purchaser could be found, should you mind selling the place?"

"Not if I got anything like a price for it."

"What should you call a fair price?"

"If a man offered me fifteen hundred pounds he might have it to-night. But, there, what is the use of talking? No one would have it at any price. I did try to raise some money on it, and what do you think was the highest amount offered on mortgage?"

"Five hundred, perhaps," I suggested.

"Two," he replied, "and I can't wonder at it. The land is impoverished, the fences broken down, the gates gone, the barns going to wreck and ruin. If I only could forget," he went on passionately, "if the horror were ever likely to leave my mind, I should take the land into my own hands, and see if I could not make the property of some value once again. But I cannot—I cannot; the very thought of the place makes me feel not quite right myself. I shall not be able to sleep to-night after talking about it."

This was a view of the question on which I felt no desire to enlarge. Not from anyone had I ever been able to hear a succinct account of the circumstances which preceded the death of Mr. Waldrum, senior. For years before the Waldrums moved from the Grange to Crow Hall the latter place had the reputation of being haunted, and all I could elicit from Valentine on the subject of his father's mania was that he began to "see things" and to talk strangely.

"There was a garden at the back of the house," the young man told me, "and one day as he was sauntering along the side walk he suddenly stopped, and declared he saw a woman looking out of the window of a room where no living woman was. To all appearance, up to that time he was as sensible as you are," continued his son; "but after that he got worse and worse to the end."

There was something more in the affair than I had ever heard, I felt satisfied; but curiosity is not my besetting sin, and I consequently accepted his version as complete, without cross-questioning him about the matter.

The most singular thing to me in the whole business seemed that Mrs. Waldrum could not be induced to speak on the subject at all. If the place were ever mentioned in her presence, she was at once seized with a nervous shuddering that she appeared powerless to control. Valentine

accounted for this by stating it was she who had been instrumental in inducing his father to take up his residence at Crow Hall, and that she reproached herself for having done so.

"As if the disease would not have developed itself sooner or later wherever he had been," said the young man, taking a strictly medical view of the case.

Of course I could form no opinion about it; I could only believe that, from some cause or other, Mr. Waldrum had died raving mad, and that the subject was too painful a one for son or mother to discuss.

Crow Hall was the place of which I had been talking—to return to Islington and business.

"Val," said I, "suppose I could sell that delightful residence for you—might I reckon on a commission?"

"That you might," he replied. "I tell you what, if, amongst your friends, you know any eccentric gentleman who wants a haunted house, and is willing to give fifteen hundred pounds for it and the land attached—and to anybody with money the place is honestly worth every penny I have named—you shall have two hundred out of it."

"Is it a bargain?" I asked, holding out my hand.

"Yes," he replied, wringing it in a manner which caused me to remonstrate, and—well—to exclaim, "only, the man, whoever he may prove, must be told there is a story attached to the place."

"Of course," I agreed. "And now, you had better give me a letter to the witch, instructing her to allow me or any friend to view the premises. I must see the house before I can talk about it, you know."

"If you do not mind sleeping there for one night," he said, hesitating, "you could do so. I have always told her to keep a room ready for me, though I have never been able to sun~mon up sufficient courage to cross its threshold since the day we left."

"I will see about that," I answered, as I took the letter; "and now continue to work up this practice till you hear from me Crow Hall is—sold."

CHAPTER V

THE LEGEND OF CROW HALL

The intelligent reader, no doubt, clearly understands that I meant to buy Crow Hall myself. I calculated the cost mentally whilst I sat in the apartment, already—to quote the house-agency lists—"fully described on page 160."

I am one of those people who may be described as eminently non-speculative. To me promoters post their circulars in vain; for me the prospectuses of new companies have no charm; banks place their dividends before my eyes without dazzling those organs in the least; whilst in mines I have no faith at all.

Naturally, then, you will wish to know in what I have faith? A question easily answered. I believe in ground-rents; I respect the Three per Cents.; and, to a certain extent, I have a liking for land. Not to enlarge, however, on opinions which have little or nothing to do with the progress of this story, I did a little sum in mental arithmetic whilst Valentine Waldrum was talking. Given that fifteen hundred pounds in the Three per Cents, returned me forty-five pounds a year, I certainly could not lose much money supposing Crow Hall only produced forty.

But I intended, if I purchased the place, to make it produce a great deal more.

There are some persons who can make money, and there are others who can take care of it; but the two qualities are rarely combined. My speciality is taking care of money—getting full value for it in some shape or other. It is not easy to delude me into making a bad bargain, and I was certainly not likely to permit Crow Hall to depreciate in the market if I became its possessor.

Before, however, I moved further in the matter, I meant to see the place, so I wrote a letter to the woman in charge, informing her I was a friend of Mr. Waldrum's, who had kindly sanctioned my making use of his house for a few days; and that I should feel obliged by her having a bed in readiness for me by such a date.

When that date came, I started for Essex, in which county Crow Hall was situated.

From Valentine I had received minute directions as to its whereabouts.

I was to go a certain distance by rail, and then a stage by coach; and after that I might post six miles by road, or walk through lanes and across fields (of which he drew me an accurate plan), which lessened the distance by one-third, to Crow Hall.

I have always been a tolerable pedestrian. In one's own interest, as well as that of one's friends, it is desirable to follow such rules as conduce to the maintenance of health; and therefore, even when dining out most constantly, the heights of Hampstead, the lanes round Willesden, the banks of the Thames, the windings of the Brent, have found me a frequent visitor.

In the country I always walk, and therefore, of course, I elected to go by the lanes and fields to Crow Hall. It was late in the afternoon of an autumn day when I found myself standing at the entrance-pillars—gate there was none—of that ancient house; and I am bound to state that the eye of man never beheld a picture of more utter desolation than it presented.

A long, straight avenue, overgrown with weeds, led to a sort of semicircle enclosed with hedges of ivy, privet, and thorn, outside of which the drive bore away to the right, and terminated apparently in the farmyard.

To the left of the avenue lay a lawn, on which the grass had seeded and was now rotting; beyond this a belt of trees, chiefly pine; and beyond that the lake of the dismal swamp, which had furnished Crow Hall with no less than two tragedies. Not a place, certainly, to tempt a capitalist possessed of an imaginative mind; but then no one was ever less imaginative than myself.

I merely beheld so much ground which had for years been kept in extremely bad order; a rather good approach; and an old-fashioned two-storey red brick house, with a high pitched roof, and dormer windows projecting from it.

"There are capabilities about the place, certainly," I decided, as I looked at Valentine's inheritance with critical eyes; "but the first thing to do will be to alter its character. I shall cut down those fir-trees; drain the lake; fill it up; lay the whole front down in grass; and plant clumps of evergreens here and there to break the monotony—hollies and yews with their red berries for the winter; laurestinas for the spring; Portuguese laurels for the summer; gorse for the autumn; and variegated laurels, the evergreen oak, and *arbor vitae* for all the year."

Man proposes! I fully determined to perfect all the plans above enumerated, and many others beside. It pleases me now to remember I did not carry out one of them.

When I reached the enclosure previously mentioned I paused again, and decided to grub up the hedges surrounding it. What to do with the front—at that time ornamented by a garden wilder than any wilderness, which had been laid out originally in the Dutch style, and still presented sot~ie traces of the prim, curiously-shaped flower-beds, and rank box-edgings—I had not time to decide; for before I had quite compassed the design of this curious parterre, the front door grated

on its hinges, and a woman (who was certainly old enough and ugly enough to answer to Mr. Waldrum's description) inquired if I was Mr. Trevor.

For some unexplained reason, she called me "Mr. Treevor." It is a peculiarity of the lower classes in England that they either cannot or will not pronounce a surname properly.

Being, of course, entirely ignorant of the cause of my visit, and having her own reasons for wishing to propitiate her employer, the old creature had done, and did do, her best to make me comfortable.

She made me tea; she toasted bread for my benefit; she fried ham and poached eggs; and, I doubt not, did ample justice to the reversionary interest in the repast which fell to her share.

It had been a lowering afternoon, and the clouds now seemed drawing up for a wet evening and night; so I decided to defer my tour round the premises till the next day, and, drawing up a chair to the fire blazing on the hearth, drew out a book, and began to read.

Towards eight o'clock, the woman—who was, I afterwards discovered, in the habit of going to bed at most proper and most unwitch-like hours—namely, seven in summer and six in winter—tapped at the door to know if I should like to see my room.

"It is well aired, sir," she took care to assure me. "I always keep it aired in case Mr. Valentine, poor dear, should come back; and the sheets have had a good sight of the fire; and the bed was before it all day yesterday. I hope you will sleep sound, that I do, sir. You are sure there is nothing more I can bring you? Then I'll wish you 'Good-night,' sir." And she actually went out and shut the door, as if she never expected to see me open it and walk downstairs after her.

Great is the influence of earnest conviction. So satisfied was the woman that I meant to go to bed, that I actually did so; and lay watching the blazing fire, and the flickering shadows it threw on the wall, till the first died out, and the latter, missing their playfellow, fled away into the darkness.

At the same time in London I should probably have been saying, "Sherry," in answer to some liveried murderer of the English language who had just asked, " 'Ock or sherry, sir?" and yet at Crow Hall, only forty miles off, I was, notwithstanding the fact that I had partaken of no soup, no fish, no entrées, no joints, no pudding, no game, no gruyère, no fruit, and, most particularly, no wine—lying contentedly in bed, with the sheet drawn up under my chin, thinking what a very singular thing life is, and what very wonderful, though somewhat monotonous, patterns the kaleidoscope of existence presents for our inspection.

It is needless to say I did not fall asleep for hours. The fire had died out, and the shadows were all hidden away for the night ere slumber condescended to visit my pillow; and when at length I did close my eyes, and forgetting reality, wandered away into the silent dreamland, I found wakefulness perpetually calling me back to discuss with it some utterly unimportant event.

And now I am about to state a singular fact. *I never awoke that night, or any other night I spent in the house, with a feeling of being alone.*

I have no theory on the subject. I am quite unable to form any just opinion about it. I can only repeat that, sleeping—heavily sleeping, as I always seemed to be—when something dragged me back to consciousness, I always had the sensation of someone moving away from the side of my bed.

So strong did this conviction become at last, that, rising, I struck a light, examined the bolt of the door, looked in the cupboards, and in every conceivable place where any person or thing could be hidden.

"Pshaw!" I thought; "it is the tea and the strange room."

Shall we say it was the tea and the strange room? Yes—very well—then be it so. I have no wish to argue the point. I only desire to get on with my story, and back into daylight once more.

Next morning, the old woman hoped I rested well, with a look in her face which seemed to express she expected me to say, "No."

"Admirably," I told her; which reply she received with a look of mmgled disbelief and disappointment.

After breakfast—at which meal more tea, more toast, more ham, and more eggs made their appearance—I went out to view my future property, and found the account Valentine had given of its dilapidated condition by no means exaggerated.

His tenant, an individual of eccentric habits, I found loading manure into a cart, whilst his man stood by the horse's head.

When I had ingratiated myself with him by the offer of a trifle *pour boire,* which he was not above taking, he informed me, evidently imagining I was a spy sent down by Valentine, that the land was so poor he thought he couldn't hold it much longer; in fact, he had only paid rent so far out of regard to Mr. Wald rum.

"The garden," he added, "is running wild like; the seeds blow into the land, and fill it choke up with weeds." If Mr. Waldrum would throw the gardens in, he wouldn't mind trying it a bit longer, he wouldn't. Did I think I should see Mr. Waldrum soon? Yes; then perhaps I wouldn't mind telling him, with Mr. Dogset's dooty, that if the garden was throwed in, he would keep them clear of weeds for the fruit.

I replied that I should be most happy to deliver his message.

"And you can tell him how shocking poor the land is."

"Yes; that I certainly can."

"And you won't forget about the garden and the weeds?"

"No; I will tell him all. But don't you think, Mr. Dogset," I added, "you could make some use of the house as well?"

"No, sir; that I couldn't," replied Mr. Dogset; and he pulled down his shirt-sleeves, and slipped on his coat, and pulled an old straw hat low over his eyes, and gave one defiant glance ere saying "Mornin'," and turning on his heel.

Clearly, there was some very unpleasant story mixed up with Crow Hall; about *that* part of the business Mr. Dogset was genuine.

When I re-entered the house, I penetrated to Mrs. Paul's domain. Paul was the name of the witch, which struck me with a sense of unfitness.

She had selected for her own living apartment a front kitchen, the most comfortable room I had yet beheld in Crow Hall. It looked out on a little grass-plot, which Mrs. Paul informed me she kept clipped with a pair of garden-shears. Beyond this was a privet hedge, which likewise presented a good appearance; and in the broad window-seats the old lady had a goodly collection of geraniums, fuchsias, and musk. Apparently, also, she was not unskilled in the use of the whitewash brush, since the ceiling looked clean and newly done up; and the jambs of the fireplace had received a coat at some not remote period.

In a cage hung near one of the windows a bullfinch was singing away to its heart's content, whilst on the hearth a black cat with white paws and a very white shirt-front sat gravely watching the operations of his mistress, who was engaged in singeing a fowl I had seen sacrificed an hour before, and off which I dined two hours later.

A man in town selects what he shall eat; a man in the country has to be thankful for anything he can get.

“May I come in, Mrs. Paul?” I asked.

“And welcome, sir; but you must excuse the place being a bit through other.”

I replied, and truly, that I thought the place looked very clean and nice indeed. I could not have said as much for its occupant, but then happily she had not considered it necessary to apologise for her own dilapidated appearance.

“Do you not find it dull here, living all by yourself?” I inquired.

“No, sir; I did at first, but I have got used to it. A lone woman must content herself to be a bit dull at times, or else put up with all sorts of people. I have always tried to keep myself to myself, and folks hate a body that strives to do that. No; it is not particular lonesome here, unless indeed in the long winter nights and days, when the snow is on the ground. I do feel a bit bad then, sir; but, law! I think how much better it is than the work’us, and I thank God I was not afraid to come here when Mrs. Waldrum gave me the chance.”

“As a rule people were afraid, I suppose?”

“You may say that, sir. Before Mrs. Waldrum left, she could not get a servant for love or money to stay a night in the house. I did not know how she was situated, or I would have come to her sooner; for many a half-a-crown, and many a quarter of tea, and many a pound of sugar she has brought down with her own hands when I lived on the other side Latch-ford Common; and it would have been a wonderful ghost could have frightened me away from her when she was in need of help. At last I happened to hear, and walked over.

“ ‘Is there anything Betty can do?’ I asked, and then she broke out crying.

“ ‘Would you be afraid to stay in the house and take care of it after all that has happened?’ she sobbed. ‘I can find nobody to take care of it, and if I cannot get away soon I shall go mad myself.’

“Then I helped her pack up, and she sent for a fly and drove off, and I said to her:

‘Make your mind easy, missus; I will take care of everything till you come back.’

“But she never did come back. They took away a little of the furniture, and they sold the rest, except what you see is left; and Mr. Valentine, he seems to hate the place worse than his mother did, and what will be the end of it, God knows. I only hope I shan’t have to shift out from the place till I am carried out feet foremost.”

“The house has been haunted for a long time,” I suggested.

“So it is always said, sir,” she replied.

Meanwhile, I should observe, the fowl, in a limp and dejected attitude, was lying between us on the table. I was ensconced on the dresser, and Mrs. Paul, at my earnest entreaty, was seated on a rush-bottomed chair.

“Do you think it is haunted?” I asked.

“I know nothing about the matter, sir. I have lived in the new part ever since I came here.”

“This is the new part?”

“Yes, sir”; and she rose as if about to recommence her work.

“Mrs. Paul,” I began, “to be perfectly frank, it is a matter of importance to me .to know exactly what story is connected with this house. I do not want to take up your time without paying for it, but if you can spare me half-an-hour I shall be much obliged.”

I held out five shillings to her as I spoke, at which she looked wistfully.

“I do not think, sir” she said, “Mr. Valentine would like the thing talked about.”

“But, my good friend,” I remonstrated, “everyone has talked about it. Every person speaks of the house as a haunted house, and, even by your showing, shuns it like a pestilence.”

"Besides," she went on, ignoring my last remark, "I know nothing but at I have been told, just hearsay—a parcel of idle stories. I might have been frightened enough if I had believed one-half the neighbours say.

"If you do not believe what they say, why need you object to repeat those idle stories?"

"I did not say, sir, I exactly disbelieved. I know nothing about ghosts, and such like, and I want to know nothing. I have never seen worse than myself in the house since I came to it, nor heard anything except the whistling of the wind, or the creaking of a broken branch, or the hoot of an owl."

"But what happened in the first instance to give the place such a bad name?" I persisted. "When, for instance, was the man found dead, in that dismal-looking piece of water in the front?"

"I would rather say nothing about it, sir." And Mrs. Paul took up the fowl and a sharp knife, and looked as if she were going to disembowel the animal before my very eyes.

"As you please," I said, taking up my hat: "I suppose there is someone in the parish can tell me all I want to know."

"Oh, sir, if you must know it, I may as well speak as another." This remark had reference clearly to the crown-piece, and I recognised the fact by placing it on the table. "But I think you had better not ask me to say more as long as you are sleeping in the house."

For a moment there came over me a strange creeping feeling of chilliness. It was as if, on a warm summer's day, an icy hand had been passed suddenly, though slowly, down my spine. Never before had I quite understood to what an extent the force of imagination is capable of carrying one.

I did not hesitate, however, for one-half the time it has required to write the foregoing sentence. Before I ever entered the house I had formed a theory concerning its care-taker, and I felt quite satisfied that, notwithstanding her assumed reticence and apparent reluctance to speak about the phantom residents in Crow Hall, she desired to encourage the belief in their existence.

Of course it was to her interest that the place should remain unlet; and although she spoke as though she had, out of gratitude, conferred upon Mrs. Waldrum the obligation of taking up her abode in extremely comfortable quarters, still I could not be blind to the fact that having no rent to pay, having the run of the neglected gardens, having the use of an orchard where her fowls could almost pick up their own living, having likewise as much wood for the gathering and chopping as she could well burn, not to mention a gift at Christmas and Easter from Mr. Waldrum, was altogether a good thing for Mrs. Paul.

"Thank you," I said, in answer to her last remark, "but I should prefer to hear the story now. I am not at all afraid of its disturbing my rest."

The witch sighed—in justice I ought here perhaps to state that on one shelf of the dresser I had ere this time espied a Bible, a tattered hymn-book, and a few tracts—shook her head mournfully, turned up her eyes with an expression which seemed to mean:

"A wilful man must have his way, no matter how bad that way may be for him"; and said:

"I have never seen anything myself, sir, you must remember."

"My dear soul," I observed, "you have told me that several times already; and as I have no reason to suppose you are telling me a falsehood, there is not any necessity for you to repeat it again. Somebody, I suppose, must have seen something?"

"Well, yes, sir; the housekeeper who lived here with old Mr. Bragshaw told me herself that one day when he had gone to Chelmsford, and she was quite alone in the house, she was scrubbing the stairs, when all at once she heard a rustling above her, and looking up she saw a lady coming

down. She was so astonished she stood on one side to let her pass, and it was not till the figure vanished—'seeming to melt into air'—those were her very words, that she knew it must be 'the foreigner.' "

"What foreigner?" I asked.

"The story goes, sir, and is, I believe, quite true, that a couple of hundred years ago this was an old manor-house, where in the time of the troubles, Catholic gentry used to be hidden till they could get safe off to France and other faraway places; and they do say that when old Madam Waldrum lived here, this was like a dower dwelling for the widows of the family—priests and soldiers, and all sorts of people were concealed, one and two at once, and no one knew the secret of where they put them, except madam and her old butler.

"At her death she left him a good bit of money, and her son leased him the house and farm, and he turned the house into an inn, and called it 'The Black Crow,' and made a mint of gold; not out of tavern keeping, people said, but by smuggling.

"To this day it is thought there are passages underground that lead away to other houses accessible to the sea and the river, though the secret of them died with the man who was found drowned.

"Well, the old butler died, but his son and his grandson and his great-grandson held the place after him, and kept it still on as an inn. The road ran right up to and past it then, instead of turning off as it does now; and instead of a lawn there was a great strip of common land, and there were larger trees and thicker; almost a wood, indeed, growing round the water.

"Each landlord made money in the place, but all were not careful of it alike, and at last there came one who wasted his substance as fast as he made it by consorting with a lot of wild young men, by betting at races, laying guineas by the handful down at cockfights, and such like.

"About this time old Squire Waldrum, the old squire, lay a dying, and as he could leave the property just how he liked, and as the younger son had got an inkling of his eldest brother having a wife and child abroad, what does he do but post off to bring her to England, so as to get his father to leave the estate to him instead of to the son who had married a woman who was two things the old squire couldn't abear—a foreigner and a Papist.

"By some means he did induce her to come to England with him; the child, as I have heard is the fashion in those parts, was out at nurse away from his mother, and she came alone. They had such a frightful passage she was forced to leave her maid sick at the port where they landed, and it was such a night of wind and rain when they got so far as this on their road, that he was fain to seek shelter for the night for himself and the lady at 'The Black Crow.'

"They had supper together, and the landlord himself waited on them. His wife was dead, but he had a niece who looked after the house, and she often spoke afterwards of the wonderful beauty and value of the rings and other jewels the lady wore.

"They were all set with precious stones—diamonds, I think someone told me. 'She had more, too, with her,' she said to her brother-in-law. The niece heard her speak the words.

" 'My dear Filipe'—she had a queer foreign tongue, I am given to understand—'had usage of being often out of moneys. Since he last left me I have received much value from an aunt who had great jewels. He need have want no more.

"At which Mr. Francis laughed; perhaps because he was glad to think if his brother did lose The Grange, he would not be a beggar; perhaps for another reason; no one can know anything about it for certain till the judgment-day."

Here Mrs. Paul stopped short, as if she never meant to go on again.

"Waiving the day of judgment for the present, will you kindly proceed with your narrative?" I suggested.

Mrs. Paul looked at me. Though she bore the reputation of being a witch, I ascertained subsequently her proclivities were methodistical, and that she refrained from public worship, not merely because of her scanty wardrobe, but also because there was no church in the neighbourhood of the doctrines which she affected.

Whatever her thoughts about me may have been, and I feel satisfied they were not complimentary, she resumed her story.

"Next morning, when they went to call the lady, she was nowhere to be found, neither was the landlord. Mr. Francis behaved like a madman; he sent out people to scour the country, he went to the magistrates, he rode home to The Grange, and tried to make the squire understand his eldest son was married, and that to a foreigner and a Papist; but the old man was nearly gone and wandering, and only said, 'Good boy, good boy,' before he died.

"Three days after, the landlord's body was found floating on the piece of water. The men who rowed out to bring it to land struck the boat on a sunken root, and had some work to save themselves, but the body was after a time recovered.

"Of the lady from that hour to this nothing has been heard. She was Mr. Val's great-grandmother, and since her disappearance nothing has prospered with the family.

"Mr. Francis was arrested, but as nothing could be proved against him, he was set at liberty, and went to foreign parts, where he died, protesting to the last, as I have heard tell, that in Mrs. Philip Waldrum's disappearance be had neither act nor part.

"Mr. Philip shut himself up at The Grange, and led the life of a hermit till his death, when the child of the foreign lady—Louis, I think he was called—succeeded to the property.

"He lived much in London and abroad, married a lady of fashion with no money and little sense, and left The Grange in debt, as I have heard tell, to its very gates, to Val's father.

"While those things were going on at The Grange, someone took 'The Black Crow' and turned it back again to a private dwelling-house. But it often lay empty; people said it was haunted; people could not rest in the old rooms. It was not that they saw anything, or that they heard anything; but they felt as if *somebody was there.*

"I daresay you know what I mean, sir; I would not need to turn my head or hear a footfall, but still I should know if anybody came into this kitchen."

"I can quite understand that," I agreed, remembering my experience of the previous night.

"To people with plenty to do and think about," proceeded Mrs. Paul, sententiously, "that did not signify much, so long as they kept well; but after a while no one kept well in the place. Some laid it to the water, and some to the drainage, and some to the air, and some to the lake; but none spoke up, though everybody suspected, the place lost its tenants that were able to pay rent, because they found somebody who paid no rent at all had been in possession before they were thought of.

"The man that lived the longest here was a foreigner. He could scarcely speak any English when he came to the place, and he could speak little more when he went away, but he drank a great deal of sour stuff they make in his country, stronger than brandy it is said, smelling of herbs. He gave me a drop of it once, and I felt strange for a week after. He came over on account of something he had done against his own king, Mrs. Waldrum told me, but the people round about would have it he was some friend to the lady Mr. Philip had married, and the place was looked on worse than ever after that; my notion is, when he had taken some of his stuff he would

not have seen a dozen ghosts if they had been walking backwards and forwards through the room.

"And when he left, or died?" I suggested.

"The place stood empty again, till the trouble came at The Grange, and then nothing would content Mrs. Waldrum but to come here and see if they could not live off the farm. Ah! she was a good lady, she was, and clever, but she made a mistake about that. She had a high spirit of her own, and laughed at the idea of ghosts and such like.

" 'They rise out of the pond,' she said, 'and we will drain it.'

"They tried, but they could not drain it. More was the pity."

Suddenly Mrs. Paul discontinued the "Chronicles of Crow Hall."

"You must excuse my tongue, sir," she said; "it has run the last hour away, and the fowl for your dinner is not trussed yet."

"So I see," I answered, and walked discreetly out of the kitchen.

It was no use disguising the fact, I relished the bird. He had no adjuncts to speak of. There was no bread sauce, no tongue, no ham, no anything to recommend him to a man who was in the habit of dining well; further, he laboured under the disadvantage of having been seen in almost all steps of preparation, and yet I liked him.

There was not much on his bones, as he had been earning a precarious living in the orchard, but what I found was sweet.

How much the man who stated "Hunger is good sauce," would have contributed to the happiness of his fellow-creatures had he only given some receipt, stating how hunger was to be compassed short of travelling forty miles into the wilderness to find it.

CHAPTER VI

MAD! MY MASTERS

Dinner over, I went out into the garden, and sat ruminating in a ridiculous arbour, which someone had built evidently for the accommodation of spiders, daddy-long-legs, moths, snails with shells on their backs, and other such creatures.

I could not lie on the grass, because it was a couple of feet high, going to seed, and full of various insects and reptiles even worse than those enumerated above; the dingy, old-fashioned, only quarter-furnished room which had been appropriated to my living use, was not an inviting or exhilarating apartment, and, as has been said, I went out to the arbour, lit a cigar, and began to think.

The roof had disappeared, and, as I thought and smoked, I looked up into the bright green foliage of a chestnut-tree.

I was trying to solve two problems: one which concerned the present, and one which did not; the first, why such an impression of horror should have been left upon the mind of Mrs. Waldrum and her son regarding the manner of Mr. Waldrum's death; the other, what had really become of that lady. It seemed impossible to acquit Mr. Francis Waldrum of some guilty knowledge in the matter.

As to the landlord's disappearance, and the subsequent recovery of his body, I felt satisfied he had fallen accidentally in the water, more especially as I could in no way connect the fact of his death with that of the flight or abduction of the foreign lady.

Continuing the family history down to the time of Valentine's father, I failed to discover why the manner of his death should so powerfully have affected both Mrs. Waldrum and her son.

There seemed nothing very wonderful in the affair after all. A man, with mind no doubt already weakened by long and wearying pecuniary anxieties, came to reside in a house haunted by a ghost related by the closest ties to himself and his family. The loneliness of the life, the change even from excitement to mere vegetation, began in due course to tell. He got low-spirited, and, wandering about the place, began to recall the memCries connected with it.

From that point, the distance to dreaming dreams and seeing visions could not be considered remote.

He had fallen into a weak nervous state, and instead of removing from the scene of his delusions, those around tried to argue and reason him out of them, by which treatment the fancy remained impressed more indelibly on him.

All this I went over in my own mind, looking at the matter from various points of view, and dovetailing in the story told me by Mrs. Paul with the few facts furnished by Valentine.

"There is something more in the affair than I know," I decided; "and Mrs. Paul is not the person to tell it to me, neither is Valentine. To whom then should I apply?"

No answer presenting itself, I resolved to take a walk and think out this question.

Latchford was the nearest village; thither I bent my steps. Half an hour brought me to a small, old-fashioned church shaded by fir and elm trees. A great cypress grew half way between the church gate and the porch. Under the shade of that cypress, under the green billow of grass, all alone with the daisies and the dead, the birds, and God, Harold Waldrum lay dreamless, an unexplained mystery buried with him.

Who should expose it to me, I wondered, as I stood beside his grave; not the clergyman, no—his province was naturally with the wise and the responsible, not with the mad and the irresponsible. If not the clergyman, who then could repeat to me anything but vague gossip? Who? why, the doctor of course. How was it I had not thought of that before? I asked the first labourer I met where "The Doctor" lived, and was directed to a house overlooking the village-green, and standing back from the road—a house with a well-established garden surrounding, and creepers, which had evidently been growing for years, not a few almost covering it.

"Come," thought I, "this looks well"; and I rang the bell, and was answered by a neat maid-servant, who showed me into a sitting-room, where I was soon joined by an extremely limp-looking young man, tall, long-necked, light-haired, blue-eyed, large-mouthed, who evidently thought Heaven had sent him a patient from The Grange.

He looked unaffectedly disappointed when he heard the nature of my business, but bore the disappointment with greater courage than might have been supposed, and set himself to work to give me such assistance as he could, in a manner which, though it has certainly not added to his riches, has probably caused him to partake of more champagne than may, I fear, have been good for a person of habitually abstinent instincts.

"No; he was very sorry—very sorry indeed, but he could tell me nothing about Mr. Waldrum's last illness. Of course he had heard rumours—vague rumours, but they were not to be depended on. He bought the practice a year previously from Doctor Wickham. It was that gentleman who attended Mr. Waldrum."

"Could he give me Doctor Wickham's address?"

"Yes, certainly, with the greatest pleasure: 1, Waterloo Terrace, New North Road, London. He did not himself exactly know where the New North Road was, but most probably it might be on the way to—or beyond Highgate, but perhaps I knew London better than he."

This I thought extremely likely, but contented myself by saying I did know London tolerably well, and had little doubt but I should be able to find Waterloo Terrace.

Subsequently, under the impression evidently that he had not been able to do as much for me as could be desired, he took his hat, and volunteered to accompany me part of the way back.

When we reached the church he offered to procure the keys, as he thought it contained some monuments and brasses which might interest me. I saw both, and they had not the slightest interest in my eyes.

Once we were out of the churchyard he said he would walk a little way farther, and in fact he did walk so far that he accompanied me to the place where a gate should have been at the entrance to Crow Hall, and indeed left me no resource but to ask him if he would walk in and take a cup of tea.

He partook of several, and he smoked various cigars and several pipes; indeed, he only persuaded himself to leave me when Mrs. Paul, who, I could see, was indignant and uneasy at the turn affairs were taking, brought in my candle, and setting it down with a bang, inquired:

"Will you be pleased, sir, to want anything more?"

"Nothing, Mrs. Paul," I replied, in my most gracious manner; and when the woman disappeared I availed myself of the opportunity to inform him I had unfortunately forgotten wine, and such like commodities could not be purchased in the village, but upon the occasion of my next visit to that part of the world I hoped he would do me the pleasure of partaking of a friendly tumbler.

To do the young man justice, I believe it was no thought of either vinous or spirituous liquors which had induced him to prolong his stay, but he took the hint nevertheless, and made many apologies for having remained so late.

It was at this time about half-past eight o'clock.

I do not think I should have cared to invite that young man to pass an evening with me in town, but country life certainly produces a wonderful effect upon one, mentally as well as physically.

Like the simple fowl innocent of town artifices—deprived of all the advantages of skilful cookery and those adjuncts so necessary to his fellow, who makes his appearance in the busy haunts of men—I found the unsophisticated manners and habits of my new acquaintance pleasing rather than otherwise.

Musing about the sort of life he must lead in these remote wilds, I lighted my candle, and following the admirable example set by Mrs. Paul, at a much earlier hour of the evening, proceeded upstairs to bed.

As I did so, with nothing less in my mind, I can declare, at the moment than the ghost, I could have sworn that something brushed past me, and I was sensible of a sudden and chilling change of temperature.

"There is some trick in it," I mentally exclaimed. After bolting my door, I examined, as on the previous night, every corner and cupboard in my room. "No doubt in an old house like this there are secret panels and passages known only to the initiated. Mrs. Paul looks as if she might have defrauded the Queen a little herself in days gone by."

Thus I tried to reassure myself, but in vain. In whichever direction I turned it seemed to me there was someone behind me; some one or thing who moved as I moved, who with impalpable presence followed my steps.

Not that I heard a sound. Whatever the thing might be, it did not even breathe. I knew that, because I held my own breath over and over again in order to make certain.

"I am getting nervous," I thought; and putting out the light, I placed the candlestick and matches ready to hand, got into bed, drew the clothes over me, laid my head on the pillow, and my invisible friend having also apparently retired for the night, fell asleep.

I slept sound until morning—sounder than I ever did in my lodgings, with the familiar and delightful London noises to lull me into peace and oblivion; and when I awoke, as I did with a start, the sun was shining in the east window, having a mind, as it seemed, to make the most of that day.

There was a noise close beside me too. Yes; a noise had awakened me. Turning to the point whence it seemed to proceed, I was surprised, and I may add mortified, to find the disturbance was caused by a mouse, which, seated on the top of the candle, was partaking of an extremely hearty meal.

When he found I was looking at him, he paused for a moment, and returned my stare with interest, his long tail hanging within reach of my hand.

After this greeting he seemed to think the exigencies of politeness satisfied, for he set to work again at the candle.

I made a feint of catching him, and he scuttled off to his hole.

When I woke again I found he had returned during the interval, and eaten one side of the tallow candle off, leaving the wick bare.

"I wonder what may be his opinion on the subject of ghosts," I thought, as I sprang out of bed, and flinging open the window, looked forth over the country bathed in the morning glory of glittering dew and molten gold.

Perhaps it might have been more to the purpose had I marvelled what my own opinion was on the same matter; but I shrank from a strict mental examination at the time.

I would defer analysing my feelings and the conclusions I deduced from them until I returned to London.

All I could bring myself to confess was that I believed there was something the matter with Crow Hall; whether that something was the air, the water, the trees, the drainage, or the story connected with the place, I could not, like others who had preceded me, decide; on one point, however, I experienced no doubts or misgivings—Crow Hall agreed with Mrs. Paul. Let the climate of the place or its invisible inhabitants militate against the health of other people, the house and her company suited that worthy lady.

Clearly I was beginning to suspect Mrs. Paul of a complicity with spirits, not exactly indicated by the term "witch." On the other hand, there was this in her favour; unless she were really a witch it was impossible she could have been in existence in the time of Philip Waldrum, neither could she have had any hand in getting up the appearances, or non-appearances, which alarmed successive tenants. Neither did it appear she ever was employed about the house in any capacity during the time when Valentine's father resided at Crow Hall. So far she seemed guiltless in the matter.

But the idea occurred to me, that perhaps she might be a descendant of some of those daring smugglers to whom the runs under and surrounding "The Black Crow" had been familiar.

Supposing the grounds were honeycombed with underground passages, and that Mrs. Paul possessed a knowledge of secret doors and hiding-places in the house, unsuspected by any other living person, it became very clear that unless with her permission, no one would stand a very good chance of living either comfortably or peaceably in Crow Hall.

"I must propitiate her," I thought; and I did this without meaning to do so, when I stated my intention of returning to London that afternoon.

Her eyes glistened, and one especially ugly tooth, which was eminently distasteful to me, showed more distinctly than ever whilst she listened.

"I hope to return next week," I went on; hearing which Mrs. Paul evidently thought her exultation had been premature, for her face clouded over, and the tooth retired behind her lips, disappearing totally from view.

Back in London, dirty, delightful, home-like London.

"Dearer art thou to me," I said, apostrophising the streets, lanes, and houses of the metropolis, "with thy fogs, rain, dust, than the finest country to which man could take me."

"Better," I thought, unconsciously parodying the Laureate, but similar ideas do occur to extremely different orders of mind; "better an hour in London than a year in Essex." Spite of an aptitude for eating lean fowls and ham and eggs, and existing without wine, all acquired at Crow Hall, I should have become nervous had I remained there, I should indeed.

The very sight of the London pavements, the smell of the smoke, the well-remembered blacks settling on my handkerchief—all these things acted upon me like tonics, and I was myself once more. I pooh-poohed the ghosts; I decided Crow Hall might be rendered habitable, and money made of it. I felt certain Mrs. Paul had 'been only trying to frighten me; and, after all, what was there in her story? Nothing.

I went to my club and dined, and felt better satisfied still. Yes, I could help Val, and still not hurt myself; full of which idea I wrote to him as follows:

"DEAR VAL,—I think I know a man who will buy your place. I have been to see it; kindly let me know, at your convenience, if you will take sixteen hundred and fifty.

"Yours faithfully,

"STAFFORD TREVOR."

To which he sent this reply by the very next post. I was still in bed when it arrived:

"DEAR MR. TREVOR,—Yes; I will thankfully take sixteen hundred and fifty pounds, and our agreement can remain as it was, plus commission on the extra one hundred and fifty.

"Indeed, I know not how to express my obligations.

"Yours truly,

"V. WALDRUM."

"I am in for it, then," I considered; "it is said that the woman who deliberates is lost. Surely the converse holds good with men. I have not deliberated, and I am bound in honour, at all events, to buy the place. I will, however, hear Doctor Wickham's report this evening, though that can make little difference now one way or another."

At a remote period of my life I had been in the habit of thinking the New North Road one of the dreariest thoroughfares in London; but that was in far-distant days, when my knowledge of modem Babylon was by no means so extensive as is the case at present.

Several localities present themselves at this moment as even less inviting than the road which at St. John's Church, Hoxton, debouches into a singularly nondescript and undesirable neighbourhood.

Men cannot always choose where they shall reside, more especially men without a large private income and with a large personal family. Can a person ever feel sufficiently thankful for not having a large personal family, if he be not possessed of a large private income?

I, at all events, felt thankful for the fact when I was ushered into Doctor Wickham's consulting-room.

A creature extremely diminutive in stature and painfully lean in person, clad in tight trousers and a jacket covered with buttons, supposed to represent his rank as a page, answered the door, and informed me that the Doctor would be with me in a minute, ere he shut me into an ailment-inspiring apartment commanding a view over a back garden—the ordinary back garden, in fact, of middle-class London.

Next instant the Doctor himself appeared—a small man, with sandy hair, keen gray eyes, and resolute mouth, who would, I am positive, have made a name in the world, had he not possessed that fatal soft spot in his character which prompted him to marry a wife prematurely.

"I am grieved to disturb you at your dinner-hour," I said.

Having heard the clatter of cups and saucers, as well as smelt the odour of grilçd meat, I knew he must have been assisting at the purely feminine, moral, and domestic institution called a meat tea; but as people always like it to be supposed they dine late, I thought it as well to yield to the popular prejudice.

"A medical man—" he began.

"Is always ready to lend his time to a patient, I am aware," I added; "but I am not a patient. I have no malady, and yet I want to consult you on a matter which is important to me—the health of a dear friend deceased."

"Really, sir," said Doctor Wickham.

"I think my name will tell you I am not a person likely to intrude unnecessarily upon the time or patience of a busy man like yourself," I replied. "I am the son of Professor Trevor, with whose works you are, doubtless, well acquainted, and I am most anxious to learn a few particulars from you about the illness of Mr. Harold Waldrum, of Crow Hall."

"I make it a rule never to speak of the cases I attend," he said, stiffening up m a moment.

"A most admirable rule," I agreed. "Would that all medical men adhered to it. But, supposing Mr. Valentine Waldrum requested you to be confidential, should you then object to open your mind to me fully about the matter?"

"I apprehend, sir," he answered, "that Mr. Valentine Waldrum, being a professional man himself, could afford you all the information you desire."

"Possibly, but the subject is a painful one to him."

"No doubt, and I can well believe he would wish as little said about it in the future as may be."

Here was a dilemma. I could not offer this man a five-pound note to bribe him to speak, acceptable as I felt certain such a sum would prove. I could not force him to open his mouth, and so I rose to take my leave without further parley, merely remarking:

"You perhaps imagine you are doing Mr. Waldrum a service in this matter, but I can assure you the contrary is the case. It is my intention to purchase Crow Hall, but I am quite determined not to do so till I know all the particulars of the late owner's illness and death."

"Purchase Crow Hall!" repeated the little doctor.

"Yes; is there anything very wonderful about that?" I inquired.

"I should not like to purchase it," he remarked.

"Why not?" I asked. "Surely the fancies and utterances of a madman ought not to be allowed to prejudice one against so cheap and desirable a property."

"Perhaps not; but after my experiences at Crow Hall, I would rather you bought it than I," he persisted.

"Come," I remarked, "you have said as much against the place as you well can; you may as well tell me the story straightforwardly. I know all about the reputed ghost. I have slept in the house; I shall sleep there again next week."

"Don't," he said. "Take my advice. Buy Crow Hall if you like; pull it down, or let it stand empty, but do not sleep in it—do not."

"May I ask why?" I said. "You cannot surely expect any .sane man to allow his money to remain unproductive, merely because at some remote period a foreign lady disappeared from a strange house; no one knew why or how."

He motioned me to sit down again, and he took a chair himself, looking with a perplexed expression at the depressing garden, with its two straight bordered walks and its strip of grass, terminating in a dreary-looking summer-house not much larger than a dog-kennel, where, doubtless, he smoked his pipe, and ruminated on ways and means after the youngsters were safely packed away in the sheets.

"Mr. Waldrum is, of course, aware that you mean to buy Crow Hall?" he said, after a pause.

"He fancies I want it for a friend of mine," I replied; "in fact, there is a note referring to the subject," and I handed Val's epistle to the Doctor.

He read it over, folded the paper, and returned the note to me.

"You had heard, of course, there were stories afloat concerning the place?" he suggested.

"Yes, and Mr. Waldrum said he wished no one to purchase it who was ignorant of them."

"Precisely so, and then—"

"Then I went to the fountain-head and heard all about Philip Waldrum's wife, and the landlord of 'The Black Crow,' and the tenants who could not rest at night, or keep their health in the house."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing except what I had previously heard from Valentine Waldrum—namely, that his father died raving mad; that his disease first indicated itself by seeing visions and faces, and all that kind of thing. I never questioned either him or his mother much about the matter, as they always seemed to avoid it."

"May I inquire your object in wishing to purchase Crow Hall?"

"Yes; I wish to do the son of my old friend, Mrs. Waldrum, a good turn, if it be possible, without losing much by the transaction."

Once again he sat silent for a moment, looking out over his small domain, without, I am satisfied, seeing any single thing it contained; then he said:

"Sometimes, Mr. Trevor, I think there may be as much harm done by silence as by speech, and I am satisfied Mr. Waldrum would not wish you or anyone to buy that doomed house ignorant of what has happened in it. I attended Mr. Waldrum at The Grange in the latter days of his residence there; and, naturally, when he removed to Crow Hall, I used frequently to call there non-professionally, and oftener still to meet him and exchange a few words when I was walking about the parish or visiting patients who lived on the other side of Latchford Common. Before he had been in the place very long I was struck by a change in his appearance. It came on gradually, and I did not notice it till one day when he happened to be walking before me on the road; and something in his gait, in the droop of his head, in the slouch of his shoulders, struck me with that sort of uneasiness which a medical man's instinct feels at any physical alteration for which there is not, so far as he is aware, any actual cause.

" 'You walk as if you were tired,' I said to him. It was a bracing, frosty day—a day on which a healthy man had no business to feel tired. 'Are not you well?'

‘Yes, I am well,’ he answered; ‘but there is something the matter with me. I have always latterly felt weary. I sleep soundly, not to say heavily, and yet I wake in the morning more tired than when I lie down at night; and my head is heavy—it does not ache, you know, but there is a weight across my forehead. I have curious dreams too; and when I wake, as I often do suddenly, I have a feeling as if someone were standing beside my pillow. It is all nonsense of course,’ he finished.

‘There is something amiss with your liver,’ I observed.

“ ‘Very likely,’ he agreed; ‘you had better put it to rights for me.’

“We were close by my house at that moment, so I asked him in, and inquired more particularly as to his symptoms, but I could not find out what was the matter with him.

“His forehead was not hot, his tongue was in good order; he did not complain of cold feet, or ache or pain anywhere; his lungs were sound, I knew. I could not discover anything wrong with his liver.

“The only things about him I did not like were his appearance and his pulse. There was an indescribable grey look on his face, and there was a nervous flutter in his pulse that made me ask him:

“ ‘Have you anything on your mind?’

“ ‘I have had much on my mind for many a day past,’ he said evasively. “ ‘But anything extra—anything unconnected with worldly matters—with money?’

“ ‘I do not quite understand what you mean.’

“ ‘I mean, have you any fresh trouble; has anything occurred latterly to annoy you?’

“ ‘No,’ he said, ‘except that I do not like this feeling in my head.’

“I told him that feeling was a consequence, not a cause, and tried hard to get him to confide to me what he had on his mind. All in vain; he either had nothing at that time to tell, or he was determined not to tell it, so I sent him some medicine, and thought no more about the matter till one day when his son, who was at home at the time, came rushing up to my house to entreat me to go to his father immediately.

‘He has gone suddenly mad, I think,’ he said; ‘persists he saw a woman’s face at the window, and declares it is Philip Waldrum’s wife come back.’

“ ‘He must be delirious,’ I said.

“ ‘He is no more delirious than you are,’ said his son, almost rudely; ‘he is mad, and I have been afraid matters were tending to this for some time past.’

“When we reached Crow Hall, Mrs. Waldrum was sitting in the drawing-room crying, the servants were talking together in whispers, and Mr. Waldrum was standing in that bit of neglected garden lying under the oldest part of the house, staring up at a small window in one of the gables. He greeted me without the slightest evidence of insanity.

“ ‘Seeing is believing, Doctor,’ he said, laying his hand on my shoulder. ‘Now, you follow my eyes; you will not have long to wait; she has come to that window half-a-dozen times within the last half-hour.’

“I stood beside him for a few minutes, and then observed:

“ ‘Now, Mr. Waldrum, I cannot see anything, and what is more, I do not believe you can see anything either, and you must not try to frighten your household by talking such nonsense—you must not, really.’

“ ‘Well, perhaps I had better not talk of it,’ he answered; ‘but, Doctor, one word,’ and he lowered his voice, ‘it is true for all that. She has been haunting me for a long time, and I know

who she is at last—Philip Waldrum's lost wife; you remember her portrait at The Grange. Well, I saw her at that window, looking as if she had stepped out of the frame.'

"Of course it was no use arguing with a man in such a state of mind, so I merely advised Mrs. Waldrum and his son to try the effect of change of air.

"It is easy for a doctor to tell the friends of a patient to take him away, but it is not always so simple a matter for the friends to follow his advice.

"It was difficult for Mrs. Waldrum to adopt my suggestion, I knew; but somehow she managed to get her husband to Hastings.

"They stayed away for three months; at the end of that time they returned, he being, as she, poor soul, imagined, cured. One look was enough for me. I knew the man had come home to die; and I suppose I must have shown something of my dismay, for he said, when his wife left the room:

" 'Doctor, what I saw before I left here was a warning to me. I hope I have taken it to heart.'

"By the same night's post I wrote to his son, and, after a very short delay, he came and stayed to the end.

"It would have been almost impossible to trace how he sank. Week by week he grew weaker; until one morning a message arrived, asking me to step up to Crow Hall. Mr. Waldrum wanted to see me particularly. He was still in bed, and looked worn and exhausted.

" 'No, I am not so well to-day,' he said, in answer to my inquiry; 't am tired, tired, tired; but that is no matter. Doctor, I wanted to tell you a curious dream I had last night. I do not speak of any of these things to my wife or Valentine now. They do not like it, and they cannot understand; but I felt I must repeat it to someone. First, I dreamt I was awake; that it was a bright moonlight night; that I could see patches of light on the walls, the floor, the curtains. The door was open between this room and the next, and I could hear by Esther's light breathing that she was asleep, poor dear. I was lying looking at the moon, and thinking about the past and the future—about the world to which I am travelling so fast, Doctor, and wondering how my wife and boy will get on in this—when feeling that nameless something I have mentioned before, I turned my head, and saw Philip Waldrum's wife standing in the middle of a patch of moonlight that streamed against the wall. She was dressed all in black, her head was uncovered, round her neck she wore the traditional necklace, and on her hands she had the rings we have heard of so often. They gleamed in the moon's beams like stars. She beckoned me to follow her, and I could not choose but do so. She seemed to pass into the wall, and I did the same. Lighted by her diamonds we went down a narrow winding passage, the stairs rotted away with age, and the walls dirty and covered with mould, and wet with damp. She turned now and then to see if I was following, and at last we found ourselves in a square room that smelt like a charnel-house, and was close and suffocating as the grave. In a passage leading out of it something lay in a heap. She pointed to it; and, looking more closely, I saw these were bones on which jewels sparkled as on the hands and neck of my companion. As I stood, the face of Philip's wife changed—her cheeks dropped in, her eyes grew lustreless, her mouth fell, the skin tightened over her forehead. While I looked her countenance altered to that of a grinning death's-head; then the whole body collapsed, and I was alone with a heap of bones. How I got back I do not know. I have forgotten that part of the dream; but when I awoke it was broad day, and I felt weary enough to have been walking half the night.'

"It certainly did not occur to me then that he was describing this vision as a dream, merely because he was afraid to define it even to himself as anything else; so, instead of trying to lead

him from the subject, as Mrs. Waldrum and his son always tried to do, I let him talk on, and hark back to the subject as often as he liked.

"While he was, for the third or fourth time, describing to me the very spot in the wall which had seemed to open, and was pointing it out with his hand, I said:

" 'What have you got on your sleeve, Mr. Waldrum?'

" 'On my sleeve?' he repeated.

" 'Yes; it is one mass of dirt,' I-answered; and turning the folds round, I showed him the marks, as if it had been rubbed against some black, moist substance.

"He looked at it, and then at me. Next instant he fell back on his pillow in a dead faint.

"I thought we never should get him out of it. He lay like one dead, till I began to despair of his recovery; but he did recover.

"Of course, the one idea suggested to me by his story, and the black marks on his sleeve, was that he walked in his sleep; and after telling Valentine he had better be in the room at night instead of his mother, and keep the door locked, I went away, feeling all that could be done had been.

"But he grew more and more restless; as his physical strength decreased his mental irritability increased, and he was unable to control his speech, or to keep silence concerning the visions he saw, and the terrible sight which had been revealed to him.

"Ill though he was, I urged his being removed from Crow Hall. I offered the use of my own house, if none other were available; but he would not hear of it. If the subject were broached, he burst into a paroxysm of either grief or rage—sometimes weeping like a child—again, inveighing against the cruelty of those about him.

"They wanted to take away his last hope; wealth, wealth untold lay hidden away about the house, and he would find it for them. He should never enjoy it himself—that, of course, was a vain hope, a past expectation—but he might leave it for his wife and his son; he would have it if we could only be persuaded to let him alone.

"What were we to do? I put it to you, sir; what were we to do?"

"Humour him," I suggested.

"We did humour him. Mrs. Waldrum watched him by day, his son by night. The doors were kept locked; the keys removed. I saw him every day. I knew the end was a mere question of weeks; when about four o'clock one morning I was awakened by a tremendous knocking at the door.

'What is the matter?' I asked.

" 'It's Mr. Waldrum, sir, drownded in the pond!'

"I don't know how I got my clothes on. I don't know how I got to Crow Hall. He lay on his bed like one departed, but he was not dead. He spoke to me quite rationally once. I had cleared the room, and we were alone together.

"You remember what I told you about Philip's wife?' he said.

"I nodded.

" 'She has come often since, but particularly last night. We went down as before, but this time I could not get back. I went groping, groping on till I came to water. Then it caught me, and I shouted for help. It came. You know the rest.'

"After that he lapsed into delirium. He talked of hidden treasures; of a dark, beautiful woman; of bodies buried in subterranean chambers; of passages known to none but himself. And then he died. I was with him when he passed away.

"He stretched out his hands to the phantom which had cursed his later life, and said:

“ ‘Forgive me! I had not strength—’

“That was all.”

“And the moral you deduce from this,” I said, “is that Crow Hall is an ‘uncanny’ sort of place?”

“It is a weird place,” he answered. “Laugh if you like; it drove me from the neighbourhood.”

“I have no inclination to laugh,” I replied. “Nevertheless, I intend to buy.”

“Do not blame me, then, sir, for anything that may ensue,” he remarked.

“I am not one of the Waldrums,” I replied; “and if I were, I do not think Mrs. Philip could induce me to take nocturnal rambles with her.”

He looked at me, and shook his head gravely.

“I have a good digestion,” I observed.

“There can be no doubt of that, or you would never buy Crow Hall,” he replied.

After all we parted good friends. That is how, when the grand moment arrives, I should like to part with the world; but I think such a desirable exit improbable.

CHAPTER VII

MR. WALDRUM UNDERSTANDS

Crow Hall was mine, and with the purchase-money Valentine Waldrum furnished, not a house, but a waiting and consulting-room—to say nothing of a suite of private apartments—in a mansion once inhabited by nobility, but which had, in due course of time, come into the possession of a retired butler; who, with his wife, an ex-lady’s maid, were very glad indeed to make mutually satisfactory arrangements with so desirable a tenant.

If I may say so without the charge of vainglory being preferred against me, Valentine would never of himself have found any residence or person likely to meet his requirements; consequently, the credit of house, furniture, servants, and moderate charges, may fairly be given to me.

Yet it was not without a struggle I agreed to abandon my first scheme, and permit him to settle down into bachelor chambers.

I wanted him to marry. I wished him to look for a wife before a state of celibacy became chronic. I told him surgeons and doctors ought to be husbands and fathers; and that, if he wished to succeed in his profession, he ought to make it his business to find a lady—if an heiress, so much the better—but in any case a lady, amiable, educated, intelligent; who could order his household, sit at the head of his table, and help him to push his way in society as only a clever woman can.

In answer to these remarks, for some time he only fenced or laughed; but at last he said plainly he never intended to marry.

“If I ever felt myself attracted by a girl, and likely to fall in love with her,” he said, “I should flee away as swiftly as though I knew she were one of the Lorlei. The Waldrums have been a queer lot for many a long day, and I will not perpetuate the evil. Every man, I suppose, has a natural longing to hold his son on his knee—to think his name will be perpetuated through his children; but how should I look my son in the face without a shudder, remembering the legacy I must bequeath him? What delight should I feel thinking of one sprung from my loins ending his days a gibbering idiot, or a raving maniac in an asylum? No; marriage is not for me. I have taken

my profession to wife instead of a woman; and, no matter what my own latter years may have in store, I know I shall leave behind me brain-children that may yet do the world good service."

"Pooh!" I said. "Your father was no more mad than I am. He got into a low state of health; saw visions and dreamt dreams; walked in his sleep, and talked nonsense about hidden wealth and a woman who wrought much trouble in the Waldrum family—as foreigners, male and female, are apt to do in regular, well-conducted British households. That is the sensible, matter-of-fact way of looking at the business."

At this juncture, Mr. Valentine Waldrum rose from his chair, and, taking my arm in his, held me as if I were in a vice.

"My good fellow," I observed; "if you are strong, be merciful!" But he never heeded my remonstrance.

"Once for all," he said, "let this matter end between us. As a medical man, I might be inclined to adopt your view of the question, if what you have stated were all; but it is not all. There is mad blood in the Waldrums, I tell you. *I saw that woman too!* I never thought to speak of this to living being again; but I saw her. It was before the funeral, and I had gone into the room where he lay to look at him once more. At the foot of the coffin stood a lady. She was dressed all in black, and she was wringing her hands like one in some terrible agony. For a moment I stood still, looking at her. Then she turned her face towards me, and I recognised her as the original of the picture at The Grange—a woman with black hair, and great sorrowful black eyes. She wore the fatal necklace of precious stones, and had diamonds sparkling on her hands. I must have lost consciousness for the time. When I came to myself, I was alone with the dead!"

"And the next time?" I inquired.

"Was the night before we left Crow Hall. I had sat up late, smoking, and, as I went up the staircase to bed, I distinctly felt the skirt of a woman's dress brush against me. Nothing was visible then; but when I reached the landing, I saw, in the moonlight which streamed through the window, a dark figure standing with her back to me. As before, she slowly turned her head, and I beheld Philip Waldrum's wife again, with her fatal beauty, with her decking of gems.

"She beckoned me to follow her. I felt something I could not define drawing me into the room where my father died; but with a last effort I called back my reason and fled. I do not mind confessing to you that I spent the whole of the night in prayer; I entreated God to deliver me from the haunting of that terrible presence, and to enable me to keep to my solemn resolution of living single all my days, rather than that child of mine should inherit so fearful a doom."

I sat for a moment silent, ashamed to confess in that ghostly house I too had felt the something he described sweep past me, and yet I dared not altogether refrain from expressing my belief.

"Val," I said at last, "do you know I think there really is a ghost at Crow Hall, or else someone who considers it worth while to personate the foreign lady. It could be easily done, you know."

"No!" he interrupted; "do you suppose I did not exhaust every possible and impossible conjecture before deciding the place was accursed, and we all mad together? By-the-bye, wha~t is your friend going to do with it?"

He did not know till long afterwards I was the actual purchaser.

"He will put it in order, and charge the new railway company a fancy price for spoiling the seclusion of so charming a property."

"He does not intend to live there, then?"

"No; he buys as a mere speculation. He buys for a rise; if it proves a fall, he must put up with the loss and can afford to do so. By-the-way, I am going to Crow Hall next month. Can I deliver any message to the lady with the diamonds?"

"She will never appear to any but one of our doomed race," he answered gloomily.

"I fancy she is a lady of an extremely erratic and capricious turn of mind," was my reply; "and it would, therefore, be extremely difficult to say what she might or might not do."

Mr. Valentine Waldrum turned away offended: a pet ghost is like a cherished ailment—no man parts with either readily.

So far, however, he proved right. I never saw the lady with the diamonds. Philip Waldrum's dead wife did not care evidently to exhibit her charms to strangers; nevertheless, I could not sleep comfortably in the house. I always had that sense of a second presence after my door was locked, and I apparently alone, which, I may as well state at once, tried my courage as nothing before or since ever tried it.

Still, I was not going to be beaten. I had bought the place and meant to make money out of it. To make money it was absolutely necessary the popular belief in the idea of previous tenants should be shaken, and so I shook it. Once Mrs. Paul understood I was the owner of Crow Hall, all trouble in that quarter ceased. She waited upon me "hand and foot," to use her own vague phrase. When I suggested that I should like a room with a western aspect, a front apartment was scrubbed and prepared for my reception; and in it man nor woman, smuggler nor ghost, disturbed my repose.

Further, I at once gave Mr. Dogset notice, that on and after a certain date I should require him to relinquish his tenancy of the Crow Hall acres, which so astonished him, that he offered me a pound au acre more rental, which I accepted, and bound him to keep the fences in a state of proper repair.

For my own part, I had the out and inside of the house painted, the drive gravelled, the grass mown, the gates replaced, the gardens dug over and put in order. Mrs. Paul's fowls had to confine their scientific researches to their yard and the adjacent paddock, and it came to be rumoured throughout the parish that the Crow Hall ghost was laid.

I did not contradict the rumours, though I knew it was not true. When the railway surveyors came to inspect the property, they found a country-house in good repair, the grounds in order and well kept, the farm let at an increased rental, and better cropped and stocked than had been the case for years.

They were impressed, and offered me a very fair price for the slip of land they wanted.

At once, as an idle man who did not want to be troubled, I accepted their offer. After the purchase-money was paid I felt secure. I was not afraid of the future; I knew I should see my outlay back again, and doubled possibly. In which event I meant Valentine should share in my prosperity.

As has been already stated, I am eminently non-speculative. Perhaps it is for this reason that when I do speculate fortune favours me.

For example: no worse whist-player ever existed; and yet, when I consent to make a fourth, such cards are dealt to me that success is absolutely certain.

Again: suppose I see, as I sometimes do, a mine or a company in which I feel disposed to buy a few shares, those shares are sure to go up, and then I sell. I do not hold my poor purchase, no matter how promising things look, in the expectation of gaining two hundred per cent. No; I wait for a certain rise, and then find a customer.

Of course I sometimes see the shares of a company, in which I have no further interest, touch a fabulous price, but that does not fret me in the least. More frequently I see the grand programme collapse, and the final scene of the drama played out in the Vice-Chancellor's Court or else

patronised in person by the Chief Judge in Bankruptcy, to say nothing of a host of clamorous creditors.

As I have before remarked, I believe in nothing as a really secure investment except the Three per Cents, and a first mortgage on land.

Nevertheless, occasionally I coquette with the Money Market to the extent of a few hundreds. To please fair patronesses I buy a lottery-ticket now and then; and for the sake of times long past, I take a little trouble about such a place as Crow Hall, for instance.

To pick up, however, once more the thread of my story.

In a fashionable quarter, in well-furnished rooms, with an unexceptional gentleman in black to show gentlemen and ladies into the apartment, which may well, I think, to borrow a City phrase, be called a sweating-room, by reason of the feverish agony there undergone, Mr. Valentine Waldrum did fairly well. He did not succeed as my friend the medical humbug prophesied; perhaps because he lacked some of the elements of success—perhaps because my friend never sent him but three patients—one a governess, one an artist, and one an eccentric country squire, who screwed him down to perform an operation any old practitioner would have charged fifty guineas for, at, to quote the advertising agents, a nominal price of five.

Nevertheless he succeeded pretty well. He was paying his way and gaining a name, and seemed sufficiently happy. All his leisure moments he devoted to some abstruse studies connected with those parts of the human internal economy which are connected with the spleen, or the lights, or the liver, or the kidneys. I beg to assure the reader I have no feeling of favouritism as regards the internal mechanism of man, and it is quite immaterial to me to which organ Mr. Waldrum directed his attention. A copy of his book containing the author's autograph is on my bookshelves, but I never read it, and I can conscientiously say I never shall.

All this, however, has nothing to do with the fact that he did make some part of the human body his study; that he discovered something in it, or deduced something from it never previously deduced or discovered; that he wrote a book on the subject which was well reviewed in *The Lancet,* and which gave him a certain standing in the opinion of his professional brethren.

It is quite one thing, however, to stand well with brother-surgeons, and another to hit the fancy of the general public. Perhaps surgeons are like other men of the world, and like those in their own line best who have not the faculty of climbing very fast or very high. Anyhow, if Valentine Waldrum won favour, he did not make guineas so rapidly as I had hoped would prove the case. Further, by the time his book was finished, the reviews had appeared, and his brethren had begun to remark: "Waldrum is a clever fellow; he has something in him. He will make his mark yet—" Waldrum fell ill.

He had tried his sight by staring at unpleasant objects through the microscope. He had been examining and torturing all sorts of animals. He had been reading books, old and new, on the subject nearest his heart. He had been attending people who did not pay him, in the interests of science; and he had been sitting up at night, when he could have done his work just as well in the middle of the day.

All this and more I remarked to him, but he only smiled in answer, as though the production of a book never likely to be read out of his own profession, and by very few of the members composing it, were a more than sufficient off-set against impaired sight, low spirits, and a generally depressed state of health.

This was the position—pecuniary, sanitary, and moral—of Mr. Valentine Waldrum when I left town to pay my usual visit to Fairy Water, and this was how it came to pass I suggested the expediency of inviting him to stay there.

I and one of the boys, a riotous young imp, between whom and the pony there seemed a sort of *rapport* which carried us up hill, and down dale, and along the level, as fast as the creature could tear, went over to the station to meet our visitor, who mightily astonished Master Ralph by taking the reins from him.

"I have no doubt you are a capital whip," he remarked, "but for all that I cannot submit to be driven by a lad of your size."

"All right," said Master Ralph; "that is, if you can drive."

"You want your ears boxed, young gentleman," I observed.

"If I did want them boxed, I don't know who is to do it," retorted Ralph, whom I had heard on one occasion call me an old fogie.

"Very likely I shall," said Valentine, with a genial smile.

The boy looked him over, and then bursting into a hoarse laugh, exclaimed:

"Come, you ain't a muff, that is one comfort."

"What would your mamma say if she heard you use such expressions, Ralph?" I inquired.

"Oh! she'd cry; but we never let her hear. She's a woman, and she does not understand, so we don't vex mother—none of us."

"See you never do, my lad," said Mr. Waldrum. "Time may bring you many good gifts, but it will never bring you a second mother."

Ralph did not make any direct reply to this, but I saw the young rascal turn up his eyes and clasp his hands, and heard him mutter to himself:

"My! ain't it better than copy!"

Mrs. Trevor came to the door to meet us. She had seen so little of the world, she was such a child still in many respects, that she thought so distinguished a guest as Valentine ought to be received with all the honours.

She was a staid, quiet little matron; and as I watched her shyly holding out her hand to the new arrival, I felt irresistibly reminded of some plant grown in a cellar, of some creature kept long in confinement, of some bird in its earliest flight, utterly ignorant of the ways and manners of those of its fellows who have been accustomed to liberty from their youth upwards.

Of course she was not, even in her early youth, the sort of woman Valentine was likely to admire. I had not seen him in society without understanding precisely the lady fair to whom he would have inclined had he permitted himself to incline to anybody.

Juno-like beauties were his favourites. To them he directed his eyes, his attention, his discourse. Given a woman with well-developed and betterexposed shoulders, full face, decided features, large eyes, red-lipped mouth, filled with regular white teeth, and a fluent tongue, and round and about that shrine my *protégé* wandered.

Making, however, every due allowance for this proclivity, I felt disappointed at the expression which came over his face when he first saw my cousin.

I could not tell what it implied, whether contempt or derision, or simple astonishment.

At any rate, if I ever felt inclined to pick a quarrel with him it was then; but immediately I reproached myself for the feeling.

"He knows nothing of her past life," I considered. "He is judging her as he might a woman of society, and thinks her small, plain, *gauche*. He has no idea of her worth, nor suspicion of what she has suffered, poor darling"; and when she kissed me, as was her innocent mode of receiving her late husband's cousin, I returned the salute, which was not my innocent mode, as a rule, and glanced at Valentine after I had done so.

He was looking at me, I found, with a very queer twinkle in his eyes, and the desire to pick a quarrel grew almost irresistible.

After the first ten minutes, however, things went on smoothly. Once he saw the sick lad he was in his element. Having met with a human being more than ordinarily ill, whose case nevertheless was not beyond hope, his spirits rose at once. He forgot his own ailments; he forgot that so far he had won less money than fame; he forgot everything save his skill, and devoted it and himself to the heir of Fairy Water.

During the first part of his stay I was his constant companion. We walked, drove, smoked, sat together. Mrs. Trevor and the lads kept themselves to themselves with a pertinacity for which I am only able to account on the ground that they were all, mother and boys, afraid of the new-comer. Miss Isobel had her own views on the subject, however, and haunted my friend with a pertinacity which seemed to be troublesome; but he would not let me send her away.

"There are not many who care for me," he said with a pathetic break in his voice. "If this little one likes to say she will marry me, where is the harm to either of us?"

Where indeed! And yet there was something in the tiny maiden's repeated assertion: "I love you; I will marry you when I am a woman," which seemed to me to be a discord in the calm harmony of that almost monastic home.

I had assisted at the sacrifice of the mother, who might never now hope to love or marry; and yet here was the child, all unconscious of what marrying and giving in marriage had proved to one of the *dramatis personae* present that morning in Winchelsea church, inventing her own little domestic story, and assigning to herself and this man, whom I could remember running about in short frocks and red shoes before Mrs. Trevor was thought *of,* the parts of hero and heroine.

After a time there came a change, however, in our order of proceeding. As Valentine recovered his health and spirits, I found myself more alone with Mrs. Trevor and the invalid, whilst Mr. Waldrum and the boys took long rambles over the hills; or hired a boat, and rowed up and down the river; or went fishing or playing cricket.

In a few days after he began to make companions of them, the lads worshipped him, as lads do worship muscular men, whether Christians or sinners. They were never happy except in his presence; they followed him about like dogs; and wearied not in reciting his feats of strength, his acts of valour, and his performances with bat, rod, and oar, for the edification of their mother, Geoffrey, and myself.

Gradually I observed Mrs. Trevor seemed to weary of their ecstasies; the smile with which she listened to their narratives grew forced; and whilst they chatted on she would often look away, as if thinking of something foreign to their conversation.

I could not imagine what was the reason for this. It was natural enough I should feel tired to death both of Valentine and the lads, but with her the case was different. Hitherto, she had been in the habit of evincing the keenest sympathy with their few sports; and when they brought, to my intense disgust, a bottle filled with sticklebacks into the drawing-room, she actually attempted to count the victims.

Now, all this interest had died out. Like me, she seemed to loathe the name of trout, whilst cricket became as great a word of dread to her as to me.

Knowledge came one evening as we sat by the window, looking down on the water which gave its name to the place. The sun was shining through the trees, and threw long patches of shifting and glimmering light upon the lake, making it look a fitting haunt for the most fanciful fairy that ever danced on greensward, or hid herself in the cup of the floating lily. Under a great walnut-

tree Valentine sat on a bench, the sick boy lying on a couch near him, and the others grouped around, making the summer stillness hideous with peals of laughter.

People talk of the music of children's voices, but anything less resembling music than those shouts of merriment I never heard, save, perhaps, the braying of a German band when every instrument is out of tune.

I had been discoursing about the beauty of the landscape, and was pointing out to Mrs. Trevor the perpetual changes that flitted over the face of the water as the sunlight fell now here, now there upon it.

"I do not think I ever saw Fairy Water look so worthy of its name," I remarked at last, as a stately swan came slowly sailing across a patch of light, which made it seem as though he were floating through a sea of molten gold.

"Yes," she answered, and there was something in her tone which caused me to turn from my contemplation of the external prospect.

She was not looking at the lake, or the flickering sunbeams, or the heavy foliage of the solemn trees; her eyes were fastened on the group gathered on the lawn, and they were full of unbidden, perhaps unconscious, tears.

"Why, Mary," I exclaimed, "what is the matter?"

She covered her face with her hands, and wept softly.

"I am very foolish—very wicked, perhaps; but I can't help it. My children are all I have, and till he came I was first in their hearts. Now they leave me for a total stranger."

"Don't be a baby, Mary," I expostulated; "your boys love you just as much as ever; but it is natural that a man like Mr. Waldrum, who in many ways," I added, loftily, "seems little more than a lad himself, should attract their fancy. It is far better they should openly show their attachment for a person in their own rank of life, than be sneaking secretly after grooms, rat-catchers, and poachers."

"I never felt afraid of my boys doing anything of that kind," she replied, with spirit.

"Nevertheless," was my answer, "it is precisely what your boys have been doing. When you are present they conduct themselves like saints; but when your back is turned, there are no greater young Turks on earth. I do not say this in any disparagement of the lads. They are fine, spirited children, and though they would not, I believe, vex you for any consideration, still they cannot help their young blood, and light hearts, and muscles asking to be used, and minds wanting to be occupied. You cannot go fishing, shooting, boating, and cricketing with them; and fond as they are of their mother, they delight in the company of any man able to share in their sports. Because I never had any taste for such things, I have heard that young rascal Ralph call me a 'duffer,' and other equally opprobrious names. Why, he tried to get the best of Mr. Waldrum the first evening we met him at the station; but Valentine threatened to box his ears, and the boy was delighted."

She sat thinking for a minute over all I had said, and then she remarked:

"So it comes to this—I shall not be able to bring up my boys myself."

There was a pathetic quiver about her mouth, a beseeching look in her eyes which tempted me to shirk telling her the truth, but I put aside the temptation. My own views had been enlarged since I saw the influence a man could acquire over the young termagants, and I was not going to run the risk of breaking her heart in the future for the sake of uttering pleasant things in the present.

"My dear," I said, and I took her hand in mine as I spoke, "I am afraid we ought not to blind ourselves any longer. No woman can, after a certain age, bring up boys properly. She can train

them to be hypocrites, selfish tyrants, milksops, absorbed students, shy recluses; but she cannot educate them to be men. The mother's influence exercised in her own especial province is almighty for good; but another influence is needed, and you must send your boys away that they may be fitted for the battle of life, that when they grow into men you may be proud instead of ashamed of them. The girl is all your own of course— "

"Ah!" she interrupted, "Isobel is more a boy even than Ralph. She has not an instinct or taste of a girl about her."

At this I laughed outright.

"Mary," I said, "when you were Isobel's age, what were your instincts and tastes?"

"I do not remember," she answered. "Mamma never let me have any, I think."

"In my opinion you must have greatly resembled your little girl," I observed. "But now you must promise me to be brave. You will try not to be jealous of poor Val's influence over your children; you will, like a wise little woman, remember you cannot alter human nature or

At this juncture she suddenly withdrew her hand, which, quite unconsciously, I had retained.

"Here they come," she said, and the colour rose in her face as if she had been doing something eminently wrong; "I—I will just go upstairs and bathe my eyes."

And she left the room as Valentine, with that curious expression in his face I had noticed the first evening of his arrival, came up to the open French window, and asked me if I would come out for a stroll and a cigar.

"These lads have quite exhausted me," he explained. "Let us have a walk for half an hour."

"I will go with you," shouted Ralph.

"That you shall not," declared Mr. Waldrum, with commendable decision; "I have had quite enough of you for one evening"; which statement was a great relief to me—Ralph's company being about the last thing I should ever have thought of desiring.

For a time we paced along in silence, then said Valentine, knocking the ash off his cigar:

"I suppose Mr. Trevor has not been long dead?"

"Captain Trevor has been dead for many years," I replied.

"Mrs. Trevor still wears very deep mourning," he remarked.

"I suppose she will do so till the end," I replied.

"The end of what?" he asked.

"Her life," I said shortly, and then ensued another silence.

"It was the old story, I presume," he began after a pause; "a love-match, an early death."

"There was no love on her side," I answered; "and Captain Trevor lived to a sufficient age. It is a tale I have never cared to repeat, but as there is no secret in Mrs. Trevor's life, I will tell you all I know about it if you like."

"She puzzles me," he replied; and then I understood his curiosity was piqued.

It did not take me long to finish the narrative. How bald and naked it seemed when reduced to words, and yet what did the whole thing mean? Simply the loss of the best part of a woman's life—the annihilation of youth, hope, love.

He comprehended it all now, even to the will which rendered it impossible for her to make a better or a worse of the future than the past had proved. I told him everything, even to my own remorse at the part I had acted in Winchelsea church.

"We won't talk about this thing again," he said. "I misjudged you very much; I thought you had a *tendresse* for *la belle cousine,* but refrained from speaking, deterred by the idea of losing your liberty and gaining the boys."

"My dear fellow," I observed, "I love and honour Mrs. Trevor, but I never was a marrying man; and if I had been, I am a quarter of a century at least older than she."

"True," he said, "I had forgotten that"; and we walked back to Fairy Water in silence.

CHAPTER VIII

VALENTINE'S FIRST CHANCE

Shortly after that evening Mr. Valentine Waldrum began to tire of the country; he grew weary, I could see, of the still, tranquil, stagnant life, of the remorselessly monotonous meals, of the utter lack of congenial society, of the riotous fondness of the children, of the gentle amiability of his hostess, of the uninviting existence, of which nothing disturbed the routine save the advent of a fresh calf, or the hatching of a successful brood of chickens.

His spirits, at first so much improved, fell to zero; his appetite followed suit, his manners grew restrained, and his face gradually assumed an expression of penitential weariness. Altogether I did not feel in the least degree surprised when he announced to me one morning, after breakfast, that he had received letters which compelled him to return to town.

"I shall not forget Geoffrey, though, Mrs. Trevor," he said to her before his departure; "I will run down as often as I possibly can to see him."

She knew too little of the world—she was so utterly ignorant of the ways and doings of that London near "which she had once lived," to understand fully the extent of the kindness already done by Valentine to her boy, but she was of so grateful and humble a nature that intuition stood her in almost as good stead as experience.

With a pretty colour in her cheeks and tears in her eyes, with a sweet simplicity that made me feel very proud of my cousin, and that I am sure touched Mr. Waldrum sensibly, she thanked him for all he had already done.

"You have laid me under a debt of gratitude I can never repay," she said.

"And Mr. Trevor has laid me under a debt of gratitude I can never repay," answered Valentine, frankly. "He has done far, far more for me than I could ever hope to do for him or his."

"Has he, really? I am so glad," she exclaimed eagerly.

"It was nothing, Mary. He is given to exaggeration," I remarked, with becoming modesty.

"It is no exaggeration," said Valentine, with a look which reminded me of his mother. Ah! welladay, that story was indeed an old one.

"Mrs. Trevor, everything I have I owe to your cousin. If I ever achieve any fame or success worth speaking of, I can never forget he gave me the first shove from shore; he found me at Islington, depressed, disgusted, eating my heart out, and he put courage into me at once. I had a poor little place down in Essex, which no one would buy, upon which no one would lend money. He found a friend to purchase it, and on the strength of that purchase I set up as a West End surgeon, tried the experiments in which I was interested, wrote a book, and am a known man, making a fair income. That is *all* your cousin did for me," with a satirical expression on the "all"; "and as of course it was not worth remembering, I forgot it immediately."

"Do not pay any attention to what he says, Mary," I entreated; "he was a bad boy from the beginning."

"He has been very good to me and mine," she answered, holding out her hand, which he took reluctantly, as it seemed to me, and released immediately.

"I will cure the boy if it be in human power to do so," he said confidently, and thus we parted.

About that time my attention was much engaged concerning a variety of business letters that were perpetually arriving on the subject of Crow Hall, nevertheless it certainly struck me as curious that Mary found nothing to say concerning her late guest.

If I introduced him as a topic of conversation, she listened and tried to seem interested, but she never voluntarily alluded to his existence.

Of course I understood the reason for her silence—she was jealous of his influence over her children.

Well, it was natural; she had only them, and, thanks to my cousin, she had lived out her young life, whilst they might have many another interest beside her; and had, moreover, their lives all before them.

I could not argue the matter with her; nevertheless, I felt hurt. When one introduces a friend to a woman, one expects her to evince some interest in him; more especially when he has tried to serve her and hers.

My cousin Mary was gracious in manner to Mr. Waldrum, but I misdoubted me that she was ungrateful at heart; and he, I think, felt this, for when he did come down to Fairy Water for his promised visits to Geoffrey, he made his stay as short as possible, and, always alleging professional engagements, returned to London with as much speed as might be.

Meanwhile the words I had spoken to Mrs. Trevor about the boys bore fruit. She herself suggested a thing I should never have dared to do—that Ralph should be removed from the mild sway of the neighbouring vicar, and the unrestrained liberty of Fairy Water, to a good school, the selection of which she left to me.

"I cannot part with them all at once," she said, with a forced smile; "but I want to do my duty by them now I understand clearly which way duty lies."

"You are a dear, good little woman," I exclaimed, delighted to find that, even on the subject of her children, she possessed some small share of that common sense so unusual amongst mothers.

At which outbreak she laughed, and asked if I were certain I really thought so, which question I answered in the affirmative with some slight mental reservation.

I had found her good in all relations of life, except it might be in her non-appreciation of my friend; and, after all, was she to be blamed for failing to understand his character?

It rarely happens that a man's friends take kindly to each other. Why should Mr. Waldrum and Mrs. Trevor prove exceptions to this rule?

Besides the strawberry season, there were other festive occasions and high saint days and holidays which I had been in the habit of spending at Fairy Water for more years than there is any necessity to specify.

Christmas Day, of course; Shrove Tuesday, and Ash Wednesday, generally; Mid Lent Sunday occasionally; and Good Friday and Easter time, I may say, without exception. Sometimes I ran down about Whitsuntide for a day or two, and since boyhood I had assisted at the sacrifice of the traditional goose, the appearance of which, smoking hot on the domestic board, is supposed to insure good fortune for twelve months to come. I am not certain that these anniversaries were seasons of any real festivity to me, but the habit of observing them had been growing for years; and as Doctor Johnson felt a sense of uneasiness if he passed one of the familiar posts in Fleet Street without touching it, so I should have experienced a sensation of mental discomfort had the days above enumerated come round and found me absent from my accustomed place.

It was the 28th September in the same year when I had first introduced Mr. Waldrum to Fairy Water—how well I remember the day by reason of what followed after—when Valentine, coming to my lodging, found me dawdling over the remains of a late breakfast.

"I have called," he said, "to know if I can take any message or parcel to Mrs. Trevor. I am going to Fairy Water to-morrow."

"I am going there this evening," I answered. "Come with me, and stay over Sunday."

He demurred to this proposition, but finally agreed that we should travel together, if I would let him return the following afternoon.

"You seem to be as loath to leave London as I am, Val," I remarked.

"Yes," he said; "I think it is the only place for a solitary man."

"You mean, I suppose, that it is the only place where a man need never feel solitary," I observed.

"You have expressed my meaning better than I did," he answered, and then fell into a brown study.

"What is the matter?" I asked, at last; "what is preying on your mind now?"

"Only the loss of a patient," was his reply. "I wonder how old I shall be before people will believe I have sufficient experience to attend the upper ten?"

"Your patient then has left you, not departed this life?" I commented; for at first I really imagined a casualty had occurred.

"Oh! he is not dead," said Valentine. "You know the man I mean—Keith, who has just become Sir Henry Keith, and succeeded to his uncle's estates. He could afford now to pay one a decent fee, and I suppose that is the reason why he has thought fit to send for Cock."

"Never mind, your turn will come some day," I said consolingly. "Yes, when I am too old to care whether it does or not."

"A man is never too old to be indifferent to success," I replied. "Besides, Keith is not a patient worth fretting after. He used to be a poor snob, and now he is a rich one; that is all. When you begin to attend the Royal Family he will remember he used to consult you, and send a polite note to that effect at once. But you may take my word for it," I proceeded; "you will do no good for yourself unless you go into general society."

"I have no inclination to enter into general society," he answered; and then I understood the old wound was still open, that the previous year had failed to obliterate the memory of that tragedy enacted at Crow Hall.

When we reached Fairy Water, we found the local doctor sitting beside the sickboy.

It was he who had written to tell Mr. Waldrum their patient seemed retrograding, and to judge from the expression of his face, Geoffrey might have been *in articulo mortis.* Mrs. Trevor looked as though she had been crying night and day for a fortnight previously, and in this cheerful mental atmosphere the lad's own spirits had fallen to zero.

At a glance almost, Valentine took in the position of affairs.

"You must not distress yourself, Mrs. Trevor," he said; "Geoffrey does not seem so well as I should like to find him, certainly, but there is no thing the matter that cannot be put right very easily."

And then he and Dr. Sloane went into another room and had a long chat together, whilst I took the first convenient opportunity of telling Mary what a baby she was, and relieving my own feelings by scolding her.

Next to Isobel, Geoffrey of all the children was my favourite. His health had prevented his indulging in the riotous pastimes which were the delight of Master Ralph, and his constant and enforced companionship with his mother had imparted to him somewhat of her gentle, patient nature; of the mixture of innocence and thoughtfulness, of simplicity and wisdom, which rendered her character in my eyes at once so rare and so attractive.

I was concerned for the lad, and unhappy about his mother, for both of which reasons I was especially hard on Mrs. Trevor for always "looking at the worst side of everything," and "fancying Geoffrey a great deal more delicate than was really the case," to all of which she listened with a contented smile.

"You can say what you please now," she answered. "I am easy now Mr. Waldrum has seen my boy, and assures me he is not dangerously ill."

We were standing in the conservatory at that moment, she with her white fingers straying amongst the flowers of a great oleander tree, and something, I cannot tell what, prompted me to say:

"You have great faith in Mr. Waldrum, then, Mary?"

She lifted her eyes to mine—sweet, trustful eyes they were too—as she replied:

"Of course I have implicit *faith."*

"In that case do you not think you could manage to be a little more civil to him?"

"Civil!" she repeated. "Am I not civil to him?"

"No; and I fancy he feels your coolness when he is trying to do all in his power for your child."

She swept one look at me from under the shelter of her long lashes, and then there came such a sudden and vivid colour into her face, that for the moment her whole appearance was changed.

"I am very sorry," she said; "I did not mean to vex you or Mr. Waldrum. I have not been much in society, and I cannot help feeling shy with strangers."

"But Valentine ought to be no stranger," I argued; "to me he has always been just like a son."

"Ah! yes, but you have known him so much longer," she answered; and then she gathered one of the oleander buds and put it in her belt, and tripped out of my sight with a step as light as though she had been only nineteen instead of nine-and-twenty.

All that evening she did her best, in a timid, nervous kind of way, to be more sociable towards Mr. Waldrum; and she joined me most earnestly—but then this might not have been disinterested—in asking him to remain over Sunday.

As he positively, and, to my thinking, not very courteously, refused our invitation, all she could do was to order that the slaughtered goose should be cooked for an early dinner, so that her guest might partake of the delicacy before leaving for London.

Next morning came clear, crisp, sunshiny. Valentine and I had agreed over night we could have a long walk before breakfast, and by eight o'clock we were standing on an eminence commanding a view of Low Park, one of the very many residences of the Duke of Severn.

"I should think a man who owned a property like that must find dying a difficult business," remarked my companion.

"The present Duke is quite a young man," I replied; "I should not think he can be more than three or four and twenty. I know his aunt, Lady Mary Carey, and she has often referred to a long minority, during which the rents have been accumulating, and the young Duke growing older."

"I wonder how a man feels, who, looking over those woods and lands, feels they are all his own?"

"Very much as we do, only without the envy, I imagine," was my answer; and then we retraced our steps, talking of indifferent subjects as we did so.

After breakfast, which with me in the country as in London is, I regret to say, a mere formality, I retired to the library to write letters. One in especial occupied my attention. It was addressed to the secretary of a charitable institution, the managers of which wished to purchase Crow Hall, or, should I desire to retain the hall in my own possession, a certain number of acres, on which an asylum might be built, the remainder of the land to be converted into a model farm.

Caution having been the coach that has carried me through life, I answered:

"SIR,—Your proposal being one requiring serious consideration, I must request the delay of a month before giving a final answer.

"Your obedient servant,
"H. STAFFORD TREVOR."

This, and some other letters, I determined to post myself—a love of solitary and surreptitious walks being a peculiarity the country always develops in me; and accordingly, without asking anyone else in the house if he or she desired to send any confidential mission by the next day's mail, I started off to the nearest village all alone.

Just as I was emerging from the entrance gates, a groom in the Severn livery, driving a horse covered with foam, pulled up.

"Beg pardon, sir, but is Mr. Waldrum at your house?"

"I think he is in," I replied; "what do you want with him?"

Already the horse was trotting up the avenue as fast as he knew how, but the man shouted back:

"Duke! Sloane! Brains!"

"It will keep, whatever the matter may prove," thought I, and walked on to the office.

When I returned Mary met me in a pretty flutter. "What do you think?" she said, clasping her hands through my arm, "Mr. Waldrum has been sent for to Low Park."

"What is wrong there?"

"The Duke's gun exploded. He is dangerously injured."

"That is a chance at last for Val," I said.

"How worldly you are," she expostulated.

"Surely, my dear, if the Duke likes to meet with accidents, my friend may as well have the benefit of them as not."

"Of course," she agreed; "but what a dreadful thing to happen."

"What has happened?" I asked.

"Something to his eyes, and head, and hand," was the lucid reply.

"Clearly the goose is not roasting in vain."

"Oh, how can you!" she said, and went away, her handkerchief to her eyes, crying about the injuries of a man she had never seen.

It struck me then, as it has struck me since, that the feminine temperament is one which possesses much more of theoretical than of practical sympathy.

One o'clock chimed, two o'clock in due time followed suit, Valentine came not, and I was growing hungry.

"My dear," said I, "about that goose?"

"You imagine Mr. Waldrum will be detained," she remarked.

"Nothing more probable."

"Shall we wait a quarter of an hour longer?"

"An hour if you like"; which I consider was magnanimous, since hunger was gnawing at my vitals.

Ten minutes, twenty, thirty, forty minutes ticked their way onwards, and Mary was miserable. She had always considered me and me only, and now another guest claimed her courtesy and her patience.

"Oh!" at last she exclaimed, and that "oh" meant a whole thanksgiving service, as she heard the sound of wheels coming up the drive; "here he is."

"Softly, my dear," I remarked, and, arranging my double eye-glass comfortably on my nose, I beheld a phaeton drawn by a pair of ponies dashing over the gravel, containing not Mr. Waldrum, but certainly the very last person I desired to see at Fairy Water—Lady Mary Carey.

I am not often taken with a sudden tremor; it is not a usual thing with me to feel my head shaken down into my heart, and my heart shaken up into my head; but when I beheld that woman lolling back in the phaeton, scanning with her great eyes my cousin's modest home, my spirit sank within me.

She had thick wiry hair, wide nostrils, eager wondering eyes, and protuberant lips. Her skin was mottle-brown and yellow, her figure like nothing save a bundle of clothes tied up for the laundress; she was acquisitive beyond belief, and impertinent and insolent beyond description.

She could not be in the company of a stranger for an hour without giving utterance to some insult. She never knew a person for a week without soliciting some favour or demanding a present. She had divorced one husband, she had worried another into his grave, expecting he would leave her all his money.

In which expectation she was disappointed. As she told the story to everyone there can be no indiscretion in my repeating it.

Mr. Carey made a will, bequeathing to his dearly beloved wife the whole of his fortune, excepting such and such legacies to such and such people, and he placed this document in Lady Mary's hands.

A week subsequently he executed another will, which he left in the hands of his solicitors, leaving her ladyship a life annuity of only three thousand a year.

Upon the strength of this annuity of three thousand, and her own small fortune, Lady Mary led, as best she could the life of a fashionable woman.

She had her receptions, her afternoons, her concerts, her evenings, her small dinners, and to them everyone who could obtain an invitation repaired. What did her plainness, her meanness, her insolence matter? Was she not the sister of one duke, the aunt of another? was it not rather an honour to be snubbed by her? whilst to be taken under her especial protection, and addressed by one's christian-name, were marks of distinction so great that they necessarily produced feelings of envy, hatred, and all uncharitableness in those less favoured by fortune.

To me Lady Mary had proved uniformly good-natured. I had been useful to her; I might be useful still. She called me "Stafford." She got me to dance with girls who knew no one, and girls whom men did not care to know. She commanded my attendance at a new piece, or to the opera. She took my arm as if she paid me a salary for its use; and she treated me like a friend of the house.

Once she conceived a fancy for my studs, and asked me to give them to her, as they were just what she thought she should like to fasten her cuffs; and within a week she decided some charms I had foolishly attached to my chain were the very things she had been seeking for without success.

After that time she searched my person in vain for any trifle to annex. Except for the benefit of her butler, she could not ask me to give her a coat; and he, indeed, was a gentleman of so corpulent a build, that it would have required three or four of my garments to encase his portly form.

It was not often Lady Mary met with a rebuff. People were too much afraid of her tongue and herself to adventure upon trying the experiment; but once I did see a daring shot between wind and water.

It was fired in this wise. Lady Mary had conceived a violent friendship for an authoress of some literary reputation, who was styled by those who admired her person less than her genius, "Rags and Bones." "Rags," because she never had a new gown on her back; "Bones," because whatever flesh might, in years gone by, have covered the framework of her body had long disappeared.

Accompanied by this eccentric person, my lady went out one evening to a party, where she met a fresh authoress who had not as yet forgotten how to put on her clothes, or œased to recollect that men had once thought her pretty.

Said my lady, after the first amenities were over: "How strange to think you write! I always was led to believe literary ladies" (and her glance wandered to "Rags and Bones") "were perfectly indifferent to their personal appearance—indeed, held themselves superior to the adventitious aid of dress."

Said the authoress, without a change of countenance: "It is never safe to generalise upon a class from an individual; otherwise I might say no lady of quality was acquainted with the most ordinary rules of politeness."

A dead silence followed after this speech, which Lady Mary broke by a forced laugh.

"You will do, my dear," she said, patting the fair shoulder with a hand like that of a prize-fighter. "Heaven has given you a tongue, and the wit to use it."

Next day I beheld my lady and the new favourite driving in the Park, *vice* poor, clever, modest, unassuming "Rags and Bones," cashiered.

I met her afterwards.

"You know, dear Mr. Trevor," she said—and I could not help noticing her ill-fitting boots, her terrible bonnet, her gloves which wanted mending—"I can write much better than that woman; but she has a way of saying things, and Lady Mary has taken her up."

"Yes," I replied; "and, after a short time, Lady Mary will let her drop."

"Ah! Mr. Trevor; you are always so nice," said the elderly young lady; and she went home better satisfied.

There was one good thing, however, about Lady Mary. If she lashed other people, she never was nice about applying the whip to herself.

"I know what I am," she would say. "I have always known that. From my earliest youth I have never thought of myself as otherwise than plain—ugly if you will. I do not hate other women because they are pretty, fair, graceful, grateful to men's eyes. I hate them because they are such fools; because they are so petty, so jealous, so frivolous, so false; because if they are clever, they have no hearts; and if they have hearts, they are utterly destitute of head. Of course, I am obliged to know them, visit, receive them. No woman—not even a woman of my age, my rank, and my appearance—can afford to do without them. But I cannot love *le beau sexe;* and, as I am unable to do so, it is useless to affect the feeling."

With all her faults, Lady Mary was no hypocrite, no false friend, no plausible dissembler; and yet, as I said before, it made me turn almost sick to see her drive up to Fairy Water.

Under the circumstances, I would just as soon, or rather, have beheld Beelzebub—horns, tail, cloven hoof, blue flame, and all the other orthodox properties.

"Great Heaven!" I exclaimed. "It is Lady Mary Carey!"

“And who is she?” asked the other Mary, so different from the ~great woman who had come to invade our modest home.

“She is the Duke’s aunt,” I replied. Of course, in that primitive region, there was but one Duke known to fame. “You must not mind anything she may say, Mary. She means nothing by her random talk.”

At that instant the door opened.

“How do, Stafford?” said my lady, walking across he room as unconcernedly as if she had been in the habit of visiting at Fairy Water all her life. “No, you need not introduce me, thank you. You, I am sure,” she went on, addressing my cousin, “must be Mrs. Trevor; and I am Lady Mary Carey.”

Having finished which sentence, she held out her hand for Mary to take if she liked. Mary did like; but, finding her ladyship made no attempt to shake hers, released the great hand with a promptitude which savoured of fear.

Lady Mary looked at her from the tips of her shoes to the widow’s cap, which she had never laid aside—which I felt satisfied she never would—then turned to me and said:

“So I have found you out at last, sir! This is the meaning of those disappearances which have puzzled everyone; of those mysterious visits you were perpetually paying to vague male relatives. Well, it is said that still waters run deep, with a very undesirable gentleman lying at the bottom; but I would not have believed it of you, Stafford. I never could have credited you would turn out so shy and selfish as to keep your pretty cousin’s existence a secret from all your friends.”

“Lady Mary,” I answered gravely, “my cousin, or indeed, I might almost say my daughter, has been so little in the world, that she is ignorant of the meaning of fashionable *badinage,* and I am sure you are too goodnatured to vex her with it.”

“I am a sweet, good-natured creature when I am not angry,” said Lady Mary, “so I will not vex—your daughter,” with a little ringing emphasis on the word; “Mrs. Trevor,” she went on, “I have come to tell you that Mr.Waldrum cannot return to dinner, or any other meal here to-day. My precious nephew has somehow managed to rid himself of two fingers, one eye, and narrowly escaped lodging the remaining contents of his fowling-piece in that part of his anatomy which the surgeons politely term his brain. It is, therefore, necessary—at least so his mother thinks—that your friend should remain in attendance for the present. Such a house!” continued Lady Mary, lifting up her hands in horror at the memory. “All the guests who have any place to go, going; those who have not, trying to look unconscious that they are in the way. Miss Vinon, to whom my nephew is engaged, came tearing across country the moment she heard the news, on a great black horse, attended by a frightened groom. She has been crying at intervals, and taking Mr. Waldrum’s hands, and imploring him to save Egerton, ever since her arrival. Of course it is a matter of importance to her, since it is in the last degree improbable she would ever again meet another duke so young, foolish, and desirable as my nephew. Now, Mrs. Trevor, if you will kindly ask me to dine with you, I shall accept the invitation with pleasure. A house of mourning is not, as you are doubtless aware, a house of feasting except to the servants; and I, for one, do not care for tears, swollen eyes, and red cheeks as accompaniments to a banquet.”

Trembling as if she were going to execution, Mary invited her ladyship to stay for dinner, and to take off her bonnet.

When she came down again I considered it my duty to state the proposed repast was not likely to suit her taste. I reminded her the twenty-ninth of September was the feast of St. Michael and all angels.

“I think,” she interrupted, “it is better known amongst modern heathens as quarter-day.”

“When tenants no doubt formerly propitiated their landlords with a present of a young fat goose, fresh from the stubble-fields,” I added, acknowledging her intervention with a bow. “And in the country, to this present day, a sacrifice of one of the birds which saved Rome is deemed propitious to those who assist at the rite, and calculated to ensure a certain amount of good fortune during the ensuing twelve months.”

“Which means, in plain English, you have a goose for dinner, I suppose? What a tiresome prosy creature you are, Stafford. Have you not known me long enough to come to the point at once, without any nonsensical circumlocution? You have a goose, and I am delighted to hear it. I am weary of the orthodox *menu,* and shall be charmed to meet with a sensible *pièce de résistance* once more.”

We three dined together. Mary had provided other good things besides that plump bird, of which I believed I should never hear the last; and I am bound to say our visitor did justice to all of them.

“That is where you middle-class people have the advantage over us,” she said calmly, when I had helped her a second time to *the* dish of the dinner. “You can live as you like, eat as you like, sleep as you like, do what you like. I could not have a dinner such as this served up to me in my own house if I prayed for it. How very thankful you ought to feel, dear Mrs. Trevor, that you were not born in the shadow of the purple.”

“I do feel very thankful,” answered Mary, with a promptness which astonished me.

“I daresay the habits of our rank would seem irksome to you.”

“My experience of any rank but my own has been extremely limited; but judging from that, I should say they would seem irksome in the extreme.”

I looked at Mary imploringly, and our guest caught the look.

“Let her have her say, Stafford,” she observed; “it delights me to listen to the untutored frankness of an unsophisticated mind. What a brute your husband must have been, my dear, to tie you to perpetual widowhood. You, so young, so *naive,* so pretty.”

“My husband did what he thought was best for me and his children,” retorted Mary, tears filling her eyes, the colour coming up in her cheeks, and all her mind and body rising in battle array against the calm insolence of Lady Mary’s style.

“That is a proposition the truth of which no one, I imagine, would dispute,” answered her ladyship; and then she glanced at me, and laughed as one might at the babble of a child.

“She is very fresh and nice, is she not?” she remarked. “Who can tell what a day may bring forth? I had no idea this day would produce anything like Mrs. Trevor”; and then she changed the subject from personal to general topics, and Mary sat listening in amazement whilst she discussed the latest scandal; told me of the marriages which had been arranged or were to be; retailed the latest anecdote, which had generally something hidden in its point I trusted Mary would fail to understand; and then the wretched meal being over, and dessert placed on the table, she turned to my cousin, and said with that coolness which she always informed me was one of the attributes of good birth:

“I am sure, Mrs. Trevor, you must be longing to get back to your children. Do not let me detain you, not on any account, I beg. I want to have five minutes’ private conversation with your—father before I go.”

With a face which somehow combined the expressions of a criminal who has received a reprieve and a child who has been slapped, Mary left the room. Her ladyship waited till I had closed the door after her, and then drew her chair a little nearer to mine.

She lifted her hand, and brought it with no light weight down on my arm.

"Stafford Trevor," she said, "I never thought you were a fool before. I tell you you are one now."

I drew away my arm, and looked at her just—so she informed me subsequently—as though I had been a thief, and seen in her a policeman, armed with authority and provided with handcuffs, standing at my elbow.

"No, it is not that," she went on. "I do not quarrel with the affection you feel for that simple creature. There is no harm in it that I am aware of. Do not fear that I shall ever suggest there is. I can see no fun in putting serpents into dove's nests. But for you, Stafford—you whom I have always considered, if not a wise man, at least something better than a simpleton—to make the egregious mistake you have done, I feel ashamed of you. There!" and she pushed me away from her with a strength of muscle and freedom of its development which would not have been thought tender in a prize-fighter.

"What have I done, Lady Mary?" I inquired. "Into what mistake have I fallen?"

She brought her head round, and peered in my face curiously. "You really have not an idea?" she said. "Not the faintest idea, on my honour."

"Do you mean to say you don't know that handsome Waldrum is in love with your cousin?"

"Good God, no!" I exclaimed, appalled at the very suggestion.

"Such energy of expression is needless," she observed, in a tone of quiet banter which almost drove me to the verge of insanity. "Nor," she went on, "that your pretty cousin is in love with him?"

I covered my face with my hands, and groaned—actually groaned. Never had I known Lady Mary's intuition in such matters at fault.

"What makes you think this?" I asked at last.

She laughed outright.

"What makes me think the rivers flow to the sea, the sun shines, the rain falls, the wind blows? I see, feel, hear! When he said he wanted to get back to dinner, I noticed an inflection in his voice, a look in his face. When I spoke to her of him, I saw his look reflected in her expression. What have you to say now, sir, why you, a man who ought to know something of the world, have failed so signally in your charge of a young widow entrusted to you for safe keeping?"

"Nothing. If this be so, I have been worse than mad—criminal!"

"If! I tell you it is. What can be done?"

"Nothing."

"Cannot they marry?"

"No, it is impossible."

"Well, your young man had better not come here again."

"He came to see her sick boy."

"The boy must get well, then."

"Oh, Mary!" I cried, "I hoped this would never, never be."

If the aunts of fifty dukes had been present at the moment, I could not have helped that expression of feeling.

"Do you mean to say there is no loophole of escape out of the terms of that man's ridiculous will?"

"None whatever; and even if there were—"Well, what is the other obstacle?"

"I began a sentence I cannot very well finish," I replied.

"Oh! you mean that story about Waldrum's father, I suppose? I heard something of it from the Conynghams; and now that brings me to the second object of my visit, or, I suppose I should say, my first, considering it concerns myself. You have got a quiet out-of-the-way sort of little place in Essex."

"Yes. But, Lady Mary, how does it happen you know everything about my cousin, and me, and the Waldrums?"

She broke into a fit of laughter.

"The explanation is very simple," she said, when she recovered her composure. "Excuse my laughing, but you look so astonished—so slow, in fact, that the temptation is irresistible. This morning my nephew went out very early with a shooting-party. I do not know whether he hit the animal at which he fired, but he certainly succeeded in maiming himself. We sent at once for Doctor Sloane, and telegraphed to London for a surgeon. Dr. Sloane came, and so did a reply to the telegram—'Mr.—is in Switzerland.' Before the telegram reached us, however, Doctor Sloane had begged me to send for a Mr. Waldrum, who was staying at Fairy Water, Mrs. Trevor's place. The name struck me, and I asked for further information. In five minutes I had turned the poor doctor's mind inside out. I was acquainted with the contents of your cousin's will. I had listened to an earnest eulogy of Mrs. Trevor as wife, mother, woman. I heard you were guardian to the children. I knew all about the eldest boy's illness and Mr. Waldrum's visits, which he only paid because of his friendship towards you. Then the man himself appeared. After he had seen his patient, and done what he could for him; after he had quieted the Duchess, and released himself from Miss Vinor, who made a great deal more fuss over her grief with him than would have been the case had he been older and uglier, I secured Mr. Waldrum's ear for a few minutes. I reminded him we had met before, which we had at the Conynghams. I told him I had watched his rise with great interest; that, you know, is always a safe card to play, no matter what the suit may be. I assured him you were the oldest and dearest friend I had in the world; that, in all the troubles and anxieties of my life, I felt I could depend upon you for advice and assistance. That touched him sensibly, I could see," added Lady Mary.

Of course, I knew her ladyship was now playing what she considered a good card to delude me; but I could only take her remark as a compliment, and bow in acknowledgment.

"Finally, I spoke of Mrs. Trevor, and then I knew what I have confided to your ear. That is the mystery of part one. As to part two: the Conynghams told me you had bought a place to which, when weary of the world, you had for years been in the habit of retiring to enjoy the company of bats, owls, and ghosts. So secret were you in the matter that no one suspected you were the actual owner, until quite recently."

"Yes," I said. It was a stupid expression, but I felt so dazed with her ladyship's flow of words; I felt so tired and harassed by the steady stare of her ladyship's black eyes; I was so utterly taken by surprise at the nature of her communications and extent of her information, that I could only sit still and listen, and say "Yes" like an idiot, when she paused to take breath.

"And now, Stafford, I want you to do something for me."

This was a formula with which I had good reason to be well acquainted, and accordingly it landed me on familiar ground at once; but before I could answer her black brows lowered, and she said:

"You are not going to refuse me, I hope."

"When did I ever refuse to do anything for you, Lady Mary, which it was in my power to accomplish?" I inquired, soothingly.

“Never,” she agreed. “You were always a good kind soul, and I know you will not raise any ridiculous objections to the plan I am about to propose. In a word, I want you to let me rent that hermitage of yours in Essex for three months.”

“What? Crow Hall!” I exclaimed.

“I do not know what the name of the place is, and I do not care. I know it will serve the purpose I have in view. Listen to me, Stafford. I do not mind telling you the whole secret. I have got into a scrape; I have lost a great deal of money. I am in debt to an extent I am afraid to contemplate. I sold my house in town—furniture and all—just as it stood, and came down here two days ago, intending to ask Egerton’s assistance, and then reside abroad for a few years to retrench. Mr. Carey left what he did leave to me so tied up that I cannot sell or anticipate even a year’s income.

I sat stunned. Mean though she was, Lady Mary had always borne the character of being extremely liberal to and extravagant on herself—further, she was very speculative; but still I had never dreamed she would get into a mess like this.

That she was ruined I understood perfectly; that the accident which had happened to her nephew precluded all hope of assistance from him for a considerable time to come was equally clear; but how she meant to get out of her difficulties was as great an enigma to me as the fancy she had taken for carrying her perplexities and herself to Crow Hall.

“I cannot imagine—” I began, but she immediately interrupted me with:

“I know you cannot, you dear creature; but I will explain everything to you if you only remain quiet. It is clear Egerton is out of the question for a considerable period; so since there is nothing to be expected from that quarter, I have thought of another plan, which, however, I cannot perfect and carry out except in some lonely place like your Crow Hall; so name your rent, we shall not quarrel over a few pounds, and tell me when I can enter into possession.”

“My dear Lady Mary,” said I, fairly floated out of my usual depth by the torrent of her impetuosity, “if I thought you could possibly exist in Crow Hall, I should beg permission to place it at your disposal for any length of time you liked to name, but I am certain you could not.”

“Why not?” she demanded.

“It is utterly removed from civilisation.”

“So much the better for me.”

“There is no furniture in the house suited to your requirements.”

“You do not know what my requirements are, or whether I want any furniture,” she retorted.

“Even if there were accommodation for servants, none of your people would remain at Crow Hall for three days.”

“Andrews would, and I have discharged all the rest. Now, what other objection have you to urge?”

“Only one,” I said. “The place is haunted.”

“That decides the matter. When can I have possession?”

“I am serious,” I persisted. “Indeed I am. Do you imagine, Lady Mary,” I went on, noticing her incredulous smile, “that I would say such a thing in jest? I have never even mentioned my idea to anyone. Naturally, I do not wish to lose money by my purchase, and if it were known I attached any importance to the stories which have so long hung about the place, my chance of eventually disposing of it would be poor indeed. But there is something ‘uncanny’ about Crow Hall. I would not deceive you on that or any other subject.”

Her smile had never departed.

"What have you seen?" she asked.
"Nothing," I replied.
"What have you heard?"
"The rustle of a woman's dress."
"What have you felt?"
"A sense of oppression as though someone were in the room with me."
After that she sat silent for a few moments. Then she said:
"We will strike a bargain, Stafford. I will exorcise your ghost, and you may refer anyone to me for the character of Crow Hall. Upon the other hand, I may inhabit it for twelve months free of rent. Is it agreed?"
I hesitated. I could not be blind to the advantages I might derive from Lady Mary's tenancy. I did not believe any phantom would trouble her repose, since late dinners, late hours, and a decided liking for good wines are not generally compatible with the seeing of ghosts and viewing of spectres. Nevertheless, I could not choose but hesitate.
"Suppose evil come of it," I thought; and that thought shows how thoroughly impressed I was with the weird legends circulated concerning Crow Hall.
"Well, is it decided?" said her ladyship.
"Lady Mary," I replied, "I wish you would not go to Crow Hall. If I had a dozen places they should all, as you know, be at your disposal. But I do not like your going to that house. You might see nothing to alarm you, but you might—"
"What a goose you are, Stafford," she interrupted. "I shall see nothing half so bad as my debts and my duns, be sure of that. So write to the person in charge. He or she need not leave. Say you have let the place—it is unnecessary to mention my name—and that I may be expected next Thursday. Yes; Thursday will do very well indeed. And now I must go. Where is little Mrs. Trevor? I want to bid her good-bye."
My cousin came into the hall to see our visitor off.
"Thank you so much for your kindness," she said to Mary, carelessly; then moved, Heaven only knows by what feeling of pity or sympathy, or perhaps it might be by the sweet, sad repose of that patient face, my lady, stooping from her high estate, kissed her on both cheeks, and saying, "You are a dear little soul," hurried off to the phaeton, and was driven away.

CHAPTER IX

LADY MARY'S EXPERIENCES

Valentine came next day to Fairy Water to tell us all about his new patient, and to have a look at Geoffrey, who, to Mary's intense relief, was decidedly better.
Twenty-four hours' reflection had satisfied me that if I tried to put my oar into the difficulty presented on the previous afternoon, I should probably catch a crab, and I therefore decided to let matters proceed without my interference. Perhaps Lady Mary had been mistaken, perhaps she had not; in either case, what good could my interference effect? In the one, I might put lovelorn ideas into the heads of innocent people; in the other, I might, by precipitate speaking, crystallise a notion which would otherwise have remained permanently in solution.
No; if Val was in love with my cousin, he could not be considered otherwise than old enough and wise enough to keep away from Fairy Water. Thinking the matter over, it occurred to me he had done so as far as he could, and I determined to give him another opportunity.

"I shall be passing through town on Tuesday, Val," I said. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Thank you, no," he answered; "I must be in London to-morrow, and was just going to ask you the same question."

"You want further advice for the Duke?" I suggested; and he said:

"Yes; I think he ought to see someone more experienced than myself. As matters stand, it is a great responsibility."

"Doubtless," I remarked, but if he noticed the sneer he refrained from comment.

After all, Val Waldrum was a very nice sort of fellow. No matter how grievously out of sorts a man might be—no matter how rude he proved in consequence, Val took no notice; he talked on just as usual; he either did not or would not see that with all my heart I wished him at Low Park, or anywhere else, so long as it was beyond the gates of Fairy Water.

"Never mind," I thought; "he cannot, if he have any sense left, come here often in my absence, and by the time I return he will most probably be able to leave his patient to Sloane."

"Mary," I said out loud, "I want you to give me a pair of swans."

Both Mrs. Trevor and Valentine looked at me in amazement. "Swans!" repeated the latter; "where do you propose to keep them?"

"Not in my lodgings, you may be quite certain," I answered. "But I do not require them yet; I may not require them at all."

"He is thinking of being married, depend upon it," exclaimed Valentine.

Mary looked at me curiously.

"No," I said, "I am certainly not likely to walk into matrimony with my eyes open, and I do not think any man can be held excused who drifts into it."

"I am not quite certain of that," said Valentine; "many a good vessel has gone ashore merely because ignorant of the dangers of the coast."

"Perhaps so," I answered, "but matrimony is a coast from which I should think any prudent captain would keep at a safe distance."

A curious look came into Valentine's eyes. I had said the very thing I had purposed not to say, and he divined there was a second meaning underlying my words.

He rose and walked to one of the windows with a "Humph!" which was, I am sure, involuntary; and I heard him rattling the keys in his pockets, as I feel glad to remember I have often heard him since those days rattling sovereigns.

"Well," he said at last, "I suppose I must be riding back to my noble patient. I hope we shall save his eyesight after all."

"Oh! do; pray, pray do!" exclaimed Mary, whose sympathy was of course much exercised in those days in favour of the young man, with whom it was almost a toss-up, whether he would be blind for life or not.

At sight of the eager, pleading face, Valentine smiled, as he answered, "It does not rest with me, but you may be sure I shall do my best for him, if only for the sake of his *fiancée,* who is the sweetest and most beautiful girl I ever beheld."

He had spoken without the least thought of what a sweeping assertion his words implied, but I could see Mary's colour come and go, heighten and fade, at hearing such unqualified admiration expressed concerning another woman.

It *was* true then; it was. She had escaped all these years, and now, when her youth was fading away, when she might reasonably have been expected to go on living without other than the vaguest ideas of what love meant—through my instrumentality, through my folly and short-

sightedness that knowledge had come to her, from which I had vainly hoped she would be kept for ever.

I went to the front door with Valentine. When I would have bid him good-bye, he laid his hand on my shoulder, and said:

"A wise man can take a hint; nevertheless you might have spoken plainly to me had you liked. Rest satisfied, when once my latest patient can dispense with my attendance, Fairy Water shall see me no more."

Next morning I departed for Crow Hall, and remained there until Lady Mary's arrival.

Although I had made preparations for her comfort and reception, I could not say I felt at all certain she would adhere to her resolution; and it was therefore with feelings of mingled relief and anxiety that I saw the solitary fly, which the nearest town boasted, turn into the drive.

"Now, Stafford, this is kind!" exclaimed her ladyship. "How sweet of you to come all this distance on my account. What a delicious old house!"

"I only hope," I said, in a low tone, "you will be able to remain in it."

She laughed in reply; and then, after grumbling a little because I refused to stay for dinner, allowed me to depart in the fly, which I had detained for the purpose.

"I wonder," I thought, as the wretched vehicle jogged and jolted along the road, "what the next chapter in the history of Crow Hall will bring forth?"

It was a cold, wet, blustering October evening when I returned to Fairy Water. As my movements were uncertain, I had told Mary not to send to the station to meet me; and, as no conveyance of any kind could, in that benighted region, be procured, there was nothing left for me to do except walk every step of the six miles that lay between the railway and my cousin's house.

Being on foot, it was not necessary for me to make my way through the entrance-gates and up the long avenue, and accordingly opening a door in the fence surrounding that part of the property which abutted on the road leading to the nearest town, I struck into the shrubbery paths, and soon reached Mary's own especial garden, a funny little place laid out in the Dutch style, which she kept in order herself, and of which she was, as I often told her, extravagantly proud. Keeping along the gravelled walk, with a thick hedge of yew low and close clipped, I came to what we called the water-side of the house, which brought me in a few seconds to the conservatory I have mentioned.

As usual, the door was unlocked; in that faraway region bolts and bars were at a discount, and turning the handle, I entered.

Cold as I was, and cheerless as had been my walk, the sight of the firelight dancing on the walls of the pleasant drawing-room, reflecting itself from mirrors, gleaming on the pictures, was very pleasant, and gave me a comfortable, home-like feeling; and advancing to the inner door, I pushed the heavy curtains, which were only partially drawn aside, and looked in.

I am not given to play the spy; eavesdropping is a thing repugnant both to my feelings and my principles. What I heard and saw when I thrust back those curtains deprived me of the power of speech and movement. On the hearthrug stood two people: the one Mary, the other Valentine.

"Then you will trust him to me," he said; and there was sadness as well as tenderness in his tone.

I could not catch her answer, if indeed she uttered one; but I did see her face uplifted for a moment to his; the next he held her in his arms, and her head dropped against his breast. It was only for an instant; then they parted as if by some mutual recoil.

“Forgive me, dear.” I heard that. “For all the world could offer, I F would not this had happened.”

She did not speak a word, she only flitted away. She did not see me, she understood nothing save her joy and her sorrow—I grasped all that.

Straight up to Mr. Waldrum I went. “Do you think this right?” I asked.

“No,” he answered.

“I trusted you.”

“I think not,” he said; “if you had foreseen this, you would have kept us asunder.”

“That is true.” I almost whispered the words.

“Not” he went on, “that for one moment I wish to throw the blame off my own shoulders and lay it on those of any other. I, and I only, am to blame. I have known what it all meant to me long before you suspected anything. I tried to fight the battle, and this is the result.” He walked to the door.

“Stay a moment,” I entreated.

“Not to-night; I will write to you and her. I will see you soon, but not here,” and he was gone, the son of my heart and my adoption.

Next day the promised letters came—one for Mary, one for me. She took hers away to some safe sanctuary; I read mine where all the world might see. It was simple enough. The few lines it contained were to the effect that, feeling how dangerous his visits to Fairy Water were becoming to himself, how necessary it was to Geoffrey’s recovery he should be under the eye of a surgeon who had made disease a speciality, he rode over to see Mrs. Trevor, and obtain her consent to removing her son to his house in London.

“That is how it all came about,” he finished. “I give you my word—I pledge you my honour.”

“Poor Val!” I sighed, and put the letter in my pocket-book.

An hour afterwards Mary appeared. She was more than usually solicitous for my comfort, she was more than usually kind and gentle.

“Mary dear,” I said, when we were quite alone.

Turning her face away, she answered, “Yes,” and came close up to where I stood. “You had a letter from Valentine Waldrum this morning,” I began, leading her to a seat; “show it to me.”

She hesitated, poor little soul; it was her first love-letter from a man she loved, and it seemed sacred in her eyes, as though she were still a girl, with the world’s cares and the world’s sorrows all before her.

“I want to see it, dear,” I said, firmly, “in order to understand whether the future he and I are to be friends or foes; whether I shall still be able to respect him, or feel for him a contempt no words can express.

Without another attempt at expostulation, she put the letter in my hand, and then she sat down beside me and watched the expression of my face, like a child or a dog. When I had finished, she put her hand on my hand, laid her face on my arm, and broke out sobbing.

“Do not blame him or me,” she said: “I did not know what it meant; I could not tell what it was. If I had, I should have stopped it long ago.”

I let her cry—crying always does women good; it comforts them, and, in moderation, makes their eyes brighter. While she cried I endeavoured to solve a mental problem:

“Suppose Geoffrey had left her free, should I not have tried to win her?”

Emphatically yes. I understood that now—understood it when she was breaking her heart about a man young enough to be my son, and sobbing out her misery within about four inches of my heart.

Well, we cannot be young always; but the unfortunate thing is the right person for us seems to be born always so long after she ought to come into the world.

"You know what you have to do now, Mary," I suggested, after a few minutes devoted to sentiment on her part, and abstruse reflections on mine.

"Tell me," she whispered.

"I should prefer hearing it from you," I remarked.

She clasped her hands together, and said, like a child repeating some easy lesson:

"I must never see him again, or hear from him, or write to him, or think of him, if I can help doing so.

I drew her to me, lifted the fair, tear-stained face, and kissed it, Heaven be my witness, as a woman might kiss that of her sister, a father that of his child.

"God help you, Mary," I said; "you will get over this in time, but meanwhile it is hard to bear; your pain must be cruel."

She put up her hand and stroked my face, as though to assure me, although the pain might be cruel, she could endure.

"Never, my dear, never, have I known so womanly a woman as yourself—as truly feminine a nature as that possessed by you."

Well, well—I grow garrulous, perhaps. Let me hasten on to the end.

Shortly after that evening I left Fairy Water, Geoffrey in my charge. The easiest chariot from Low Park took him to the station. The Duke of Severn's footmen, directed and assisted by Valentine, carried the sick lad to the invalid carriage provided for him.

Twice a week I went to Valentine's house, and saw the invalid—twice a week I was, after a short time, able to send a good report of the boy back to Fairy Water.

By this time I was once more settled in London. With the exception of a few days at Christmas, I did not intend to leave my lodgings again for six months. The familiar fogs enveloped me, the gaslights which my soul loved tried vainly to dissipate the worse than Egyptian darkness of the deserted streets. Through the dull atmosphere the cries of "Walnuts!"

"Muffins!"

"Crumpets!" resounded with the effect of muffled drums; and there was a pervading feeling in the air, as if the sun had taken a fancy to remain in a state of perpetual eclipse, while the moon, femininely anxious to follow in the fashion and his wake, had decided to do likewise.

At that period of the year I usually dined with people who thought it somewhat of an honour to secure my company, and therefore, though I rarely spent an evening alone, I was generally bored in the evening.

After all, a man need not be a snob, if he says frankly he prefers the society of people who live west of Bond Street to that of the worthy individuals who keep up ponderous establishments in the central London squares.

From Lady Mary Carey I received letters by the dozen. She was so charmed with the place, the neighbourhood, the people—would I kindly call at so-and-so, and order such-and-such articles to be forwarded to her? She did not apologise; she did not ask pardon for the trouble she gave. How could she? Had she not tested the *depth,* and *breadth,* and *length* of my goodness (all in feminine italics) for a greater number of years than any woman *save myself* "would care to remember?"

I had told her it was my intention to send down a couple of swans, so as to lessen the weird desolation of the pine-circled pool; but shortly after taking possession of Crow Hall, she wrote, asking me to defer doing so till she discovered whether the water in the lake sunk much lower.

The summer had been unusually dry and warm; all through the country complaints were rife concerning the drying-up of springs and failing of streams; and it did not strike me as singular that the fated pool should suffer as she described.

It seemed, however, very singular to her—so singular, that she sent me bulletins on the subject twice a week, at all events.

"I am told," she wrote, "that for a century, at all events, the water in this little lake of yours has never been lower than the root of a certain pollard oak. It is now fully three feet lower than that point."

A day or two afterwards came another note: "Water is sinking rapidly."

Fast on the heels of this followed a long letter, crossed, in which italics vainly endeavoured to express her ladyship's astonishment at the phenomenon. "I wish you would come down and see for yourself," was one of her sentences—as if I suspected her of draining the pool; "it really is most extraordinary. The woman you left in charge here considers it a premonitory symptom of the Day of Judgment, and has begged my acceptance of two tracts. She says, I may take her word for it that, when that lake is empty, something will happen."

"Only thirty inches of water left," was the next report—then, *"The pool is dry.* But I am happy. I know where the water has gone, and so do the railway people, to their cost. Their line is flooded. They will have to make a fresh lake for themselves. Crow Hall is besieged. Even from beyond Latchford Common the population repair to see for themselves that the Black Pool has not a drop of water left in it. A variety of barrels and other curiosities appear to be sunk in the mud at the bottom. Some of the navvies and labourers have kindly offered to remove the rubbish, but, as we do not know of what it may consist, I am having the property watched by the sexton. Not another creature in the parish would consent to remain all night in your haunted grounds."

As may be imagined, I started off for Crow Hall at once, where I found Lady Mary in high spirits, the Black Pool dry, the barrels, whatever they may have contained originally, empty of everything but slime, the railway engineers in despair, and Mrs. Paul shaking her head ominously.

"It is all very well to talk of lower levels, and railway cuttings, and the like; but why should the lake dry up at this time, of all times? Will not the seventh of the next month, if any of us live to see it, be the night when Mr. Philip Waldrum's wife disappeared—Heaven be merciful to us sinners!"

Thus Mrs. Paul; whilst Mr. Dogsett looked wise, and delivered himself of oracular sentences.

"It had all been foretold," he explained to me: "but where, or when, or by whom, he could not just rightly remember."

"You will find it a good thing for you in the end," said Lady Mary to me. "Depend upon it, the railway people will have to buy the late site of the Black Pool."

"They will have to pay me well for it," I answered.

"And really you ought to make me a handsome present on the occasion," she remarked. "I am sure my taking Crow Hall has brought good fortune to it."

"You have seen nothing to shake your resolution then?" I asked.

"No; if there are ghosts here, they are not from another world," Lady Mary answered. "I cannot say the house is one I should recommend to a nervous lady. The locks have a way of clicking, the woodwork of cracking, the floors of creaking, the windows of rattling, and the wind of howling in the chimneys, by no means pleasant to a light sleeper. If anyone were disposed to play tricks, it would be easy to frighten even so incredulous a person as myself; but I fancy Mrs.

Paul would not like me to leave, and that if she ever has done any conjuring she repents now of her evil deeds."

"Do you really think then, Lady Mary, that Mrs. Paul had any hand in the appearances which have given the place so evil a repute?"

"Someone must—Mrs. Paul as probably as any other individual; but neither she nor her friends will try to make anything unpleasant for me, or I am greatly mistaken."

I never saw Lady Mary in better spirits than when we parted that day. Judge then of my consternation when a fortnight later I received the following note from Fairy Water:

"Lady Mary Carey is *here*. She arrived an hour since, very ill, and in a state of utter exhaustion, and entreated me to let her stay with me for a short time. She wishes to see you at once, and begs you will bring Mr. Waldrum with you. I suggested sending for Dr. Sloane, but she said 'No'; that Mr. Waldrum alone can treat her case, and that she has something important to say to both of you."

I did not fear taking Valentine with me to Fairy Water. I felt he and Mary could now be safely trusted with the keeping of their own peace, and that they were not likely voluntarily—she to give, he to seek—any opportunity of recurring to the one forbidden subject. Nevertheless, with all my heart and soul I wished Lady Mary had carried her ailments and herself anywhere except to my cousin's house. And further, I dreaded to hear what she might have to tell.

That her illness and her secret both had a common origin at Crow Hall I did not doubt in the least, and as Valentine and I journeyed down from London, I told him frankly the small deceit I had practised, and explained how it happened Lady Mary had taken a fancy to reside at Crow Hall.

He listened with merely slight interruptions to my story, almost in utter silence. When I had quite finished, he said, with a long-drawn sigh:

"If Lady Mary tells me she has seen that woman, it will be the happiest news I have heard since my father's death."

We found the invalid sitting in a great arm-chair in Mary's dressing-room, in a voluminous morning wrapper, her black coarse hair hanging straight down her back, her face destitute of any colour, save the dark hue conferred on it by nature, her nerves so shaken that the tears came into her eyes when she saw us, and the muscles round her mouth twitched when she answered our greeting. What did Lady Mary look like? At that moment she ought to have frightened away any number of ghosts.

Valentine wanted to prescribe for her first, and hear the story afterwards.

I entreated of him not to attempt to talk of anything disagreeable till her health was re-established. "Sit down," she said, peremptorily. "If I do not speak to some one of what mine eyes have seen, I shall go mad, and I can only speak to you, or you," indicating each of us with a nod. "Stafford," she went on, "when I first went to your place, I suspected that woman Paul of complicity with the noises and repeated appearances. I beg to say I earnestly ask her pardon. Now, Mr. Waldrum, before I begin I wish to tell you distinctly that the thing I saw I beheld not in any dream, or while I was labouring under any delusion. It all happened as truly as you sit there. Listen.

"About ten days, Stafford, after you were last at Crow Hall, Mrs. Paul brought me a ring, which she said she had found somewhere about the house, and which she imagined to be one of mine.

"Of course I told her it was mine, and gave her five shillings for her trouble.

"But the ring was not mine; it was one the like of which I had never beheld before, cut, evidently, out of a solid lump of gold, with a good-sized piece of the same metal left solid in the middle like a stone. Into this piece of gold was let on the inner side a cross formed of *lapis lazuli,* and on the outside, carved most exquisitely, was an alto-relievo of the Crucifixion.

"It was the strangest ring, and about the smallest I ever beheld. I could not get it over the middle joint of my little finger, and so put it on the stand on my dressing-table, after I had thoroughly examined and puzzled my brains over it. In an old house strange things do sometimes however turn up, and I went to bed, thinking I would speak about the matter to you, Stafford, and beg you to allow me to retain the ring as a memorial of Crow Hall.

"About eleven o'clock I went to bed. I had been reading nothing sensational, thinking of nothing exciting. I had dined at seven in the anchorite style I have adopted since I left Low Park. Andrews undressed me, made up my fire, lit fresh candles—I always burn two candles at night—left me, and went to her own room, which adjoins mine. Everything was just as usual, everything with the exception of that strange ring, the very existence of which I had forgotten.

"After I had been asleep for perhaps a couple of hours, I woke suddenly, struggling for breath, bathed in perspiration, and with the strangest feeling—instinct I call it—of someone being in the room with me.

"I am not one of those people who can gather their wits together in a moment when roused out of slumber. I always feel more or less dazed when struggling back into real life from the land of dreams; and so I sat up in bed, and shook my mind into consciousness by degrees.

"The fire had burnt black and hollow, the candles were burning dim—as candles for some reason best known to themselves always do in a bedroom—and what made their light appear less bright even than ordinary was the fact that between the bed and the dressing-table stood a woman, searching about amongst the articles lying on the latter, as if for something she had lost.

" 'Andrews,' I said, 'what are you doing? what is the matter?' but no reply came.

"By this time I was wide awake, and had my senses about me. I jumped out of bed, and calling 'Andrews' at the top of my voice, put out a hand to seize the intruder.

"As I did so I saw her face reflected in the glass; then it faded away, and my hands, instead of meeting with any corporeal substance, grasped nothing but thin air.

"At that instant Andrews appeared. 'I have had a bad dream,' I explained. 'Make up a good fire, and sleep in the arm-chair, so that if I want anything you will be nearer at hand.' And then I crept back to bed, but not, you may be sure, to sleep."

"Can you describe the face you saw, Lady Mary?" Valentine asked, bending eagerly forward.

"Stop a little; let me tell you my story in my own way. Next morning the first thing I did was to look for the ring. *It was gone.*

"Now, as Andrews always bolted our door on the inside, it was quite clear no one could have entered the room except by some secret staircase. Further, the figure had not disappeared in any possible sort of way, supposing it to have been flesh and blood: it melted out of my sight, it faded into nothing in a second of time, and what was more to the purpose, my hand passed through the spectre as if it had been composed of nothing more tangible than a fog spray.

"I can tell you both I had plenty of food for thought that morning. It would not have suited my plans to leave Essex then, otherwise I should have packed up within the hour, and neither of you should have heard a word of the story.

"Well, we did not pack up, but I changed my room, and once again my doubts of Mrs. Paul were revived by hearing her remark to Andrews, 'Folks had never slept well in that oak room,'

and further, ‘that those who lived longest would see most.’ However, I could not connect in my innermost heart the face I had seen in the glass with Mrs. Paul, or anyone belonging to her, and I grew so timid, I feared, actually feared, to go upstairs alone, either by day or night.

“I felt so miserable I asked the doctor and the curate to dine with me, and then when they were gone I relapsed into a state of greater wretchedness than ever.

“The next day I had arranged to spend at The Grange. Mr. Conyngham wished to show me all over the house, and Miss—well, Miss Conyngham thought it might be prudent to humour her brother’s whim; at all events, I stood engaged to go to The Grange. There were several matters about which I wished to consult him, several subjects on which I desired his advice, and full of these worldly matters, and wishing to get rid of the remembrance of my nocturnal visitor, I drove off across Latchford Common, and in proper time arrived at your old home, Mr. Waldrum.

“I had a long chat with Mr. Conyngham while we walked about the grounds and wandered through the conservatories, and I may tell you, Stafford,” added her ladyship, “in strict confidence, that he has, in the kindest manner, promised to arrange those difficulties I mentioned to you.

“Good heavens!” I thought, “she has secured a third husband, and that was why she wanted to go to Crow Hall.”

“After luncheon Mr. Conyngham asked if I should not like to see the pictures. The dear good soul who owns The Grange has one craze—he fancies he understands art, and the consequence is he has been fleeced right and left, has purchased a large number of pictures at an exorbitant price, and honestly believes he has the finest collection, on a small scale, that can be found in England.

“Now if there is one thing more than another in which it shocks me to find a nice kind creature deficient, it is art; and if you believe me (I did believe her thoroughly) it went to my heart to see all that rubbish hung solemnly in the sight of day, and think of the money which must have been wasted upon it.

“Suddenly, however, I caught sight of something which arrested my attention.

“ ‘Where did you pick that up, Mr. Conyngham?’ I inquired.

“ ‘That?’ he repeated, following my glance; ‘when Mr. Waldrum left here, my father bought that portrait, thinking that face a very beautiful one.

“ ‘Did you say a portrait?’ I asked; ‘of whom is it a portrait?’

“ ‘Of the mysterious lady Philip Waldrum married, whose disappearance has never yet been accounted for.’

“By some means I got near an open window, on the plea of feeling faint. I obtained a moment’s quiet, and then afterwards a glass of water.

“What was the matter with me, you want to know, Mr. Waldrum? This: the face I saw in the mirror was not merely like that which, linmed on canvas, hung on the walls at The Grange; it was the original of that portrait. You may remember,” she continued, speaking gently to Valentine, “that every trifling detail is carried out in the picture with almost painful minuteness. On the third finger of the left hand above her wedding-ring, that long4ost wife is shown in her picture as wearing another ring, as like that Mrs. Paul brought me as can well be imagined.

“1 tell you as I looked my blood ran cold, but I kept the secret, Stafford; no one shall ever know from me that the Crow Hall Ghost is as far from being laid or explained as ever.”

I thanked her ladyship very earnestly for the courage and kindneSs she had displayed, whilst Valentine, so agitated that he could scarcely frame an intelligible sentence, declared she had lifted a load off his heart which had been growing heavier day by day since his father’s death.

I felt glad to hear him say this, but I did not like the expression I saw on his face as we walked together out of the room.

"One word, Val," I said; "remember that although your position may be different to what it was, Mrs. Trevor is just the same as ever. There are plenty of women in England you can marry now, but you can never marry her."

He shook my hands off, for the first time in my memory, with an impatient gesture, and stalked across the hall and opened the outer door himself, as though it were through any fault of mine Geoffrey had left his widow so powerless in the matter of a second marriage. Upon that step he turned, and said:

"You are guardian to the children; surely it rests with you; surely, if you liked, you could befriend us."

"My dear fellow," I answered, "believe me, I am powerless. I would help you if the will left me a chance of doing so."

"That is all very fine," he muttered.

"It is all very true," I replied.

He stood for a moment irresolute, then remarked: "I am going to Low Park."

"And I beg to suggest," I said, decidedly nettled, "that it will be better for you to stay there; or, at least, not return here."

"I must come here to see Lady Mary."

"If Lady Mary desires your attendance, she must remove to Low Park. I shall make that quite clear to her ladyship's comprehension."

"Do you mean that you would tell her—?"

"I mean that she told me," I interrupted. "Come, Valentine, it is of no use your being either angry or sulky with me. Mrs. Trevor has suffered enough already, without having the additional trouble of a lover she can never marry hanging about the house. If it were a mere question of money, I should not raise an objection; but you know it is not, and that it is your duty to keep away from Fairy Water."

He did not answer a word. He either failed to see my outstretched hand, or declined to see it. He remained looking drearily about him for a few seconds; then pulling his hat down over his forehead, as most men do when trouble has for the nonce completely mastered them, he strode away along the drive; and, for the first time in his life, Valentine Waldrum parted from me in anger—his heart brimful of bitterness, and suspicion, and injustice.

CHAPTER X

THE SECRET OF CROW HALL

As I watched Valentine disappear in the windings of the avenue, I decided upon retracing my road to London without further delay.

If I remained in Fairy Water, I felt that, in his present mood, he would insist on coming to see me, and that it would not be in my power to prevent his doing so without a downright quarrel and open rupture supervening. Old though I might be, lover to his mother as I had been, friend and helper as I had tried to be to both him and Mary, I understood perfectly that for the time being he regarded me with a feeling of the keenest detestation; but I could make allowance for this.

If there be one feeling stronger than another which human beings and the brute creation have in common, it is that of jealousy; and when once a man becomes possessed by it, he is scarcely

more responsible for his rudeness and his ill-temper than a cat is, when, seeing a dog patted, she scratches him till he screams again.

It was, of course, ridiculous for Valentine to be jealous, for a moment, of my presence or my influence; but I felt he was, and decided, as I have said, that I would leave Fairy Water forthwith. To Lady Mary I made no secret of my reason for going.

"Yes," she said, "it is absurd upon his part, no doubt; but still these fancies are beyond the power of rhyme or reason, and it is better to try to keep peace than come to open war. It seems to me an admirable idea altogether. You go to look after your Essex property, and I stay to prevent Mrs. Trevor feeling lonely. I will remain until after Christmas, and prove a very duenna over your pretty cousin."

"And when may your friends hope to see your ladyship in London?" I inquired.

"Whenever my nephew is sufficiently recovered to give me away," she answered. "As no man in his senses would dream of marrying me now, except for my position, it is only fair the kind good soul who gives so much in return for so little should have all the pleasure and *éclat* out of my relatives it is possible to extract from them."

Frequently there was a directness about Lady Mary's high breeding which savoured of simplicity, and produced somewhat the same effect upon unsophisticated people. I cannot say, however, it ever seemed to impress my cousin in that way. Natural and simple herself, she perhaps detected more rapidly than a less unaffected person might have done the false ring in Lady Mary's conversational coin.

I liked the counterfeit, I confess. It was bright, lively, a trifle sarcastic, never wearisome; and what a man has a weakness for is a woman who does not know how to be dull.

The art of vivacity may be acquired—I believe, indeed, it is never beheld in perfection save when acquired; but it is better than any genius or talent, for all that.

After a time, indeed, my cousin wrote to me that Lady Mary was a delightful companion, and made herself quite one of the household—which, indeed, I could readily credit. "The winter has never before seemed so pleasant at Fairy Water," continued Mrs. Trevor; "and I hope you will not be vexed, but Lady Mary has looked out several things here she would like to have in her new house, and I have begged her acceptance of them. She offered to buy them, but of course I told her I could not think of allowing anything of the kind. Ladies of fashion—if Lady Mary be a specimen of them—must be curious people to know, I think. Imagine our going to Low Park, and selecting various articles which happened to strike our fancy! And yet that is just what Lady Mary has done here. Do not think, please, that I object to it at all; only I cannot help saying how odd it seems to me."

When I went down to Fairy Water to partake of the Christmas dinner—which was always a great and wonderful display in that primitive household—I found Lady Mary installed as virtual mistress of the establishment, and my cousin—spite of her cheerful letters, and the fact that Geoffrey had been returned to his home cured of his complaint, if still generally delicate in health—looking thin, pale, and spiritless.

"I am afraid your guest bores you, Mary," I said.

"Ah! no. She is kindness itself."

"What, then, is the matter with you? Are you ill?"

"I am quite well, thank you," she said, shrinking away from me as I had never known her to do before.

Welladay! When Cupid rides, the oldest friend, the wisest man, the ablest scholar, the most profound philosopher, is nowhere in the race.

Said Lady Mary: "That *protégé* of yours is writing to her perpetually, I am afraid.

"I wash my hands of them and their affairs," I answered, with the determination and energy of a man who, dealing straightforwardly with other people himself, likes to be dealt by straightforwardly in return. But I repented me of this speech when, a day or two after, my cousin came to me and said—with the soft colour rising in her face, and her eyes downcast, and head a little drooped:

"Stafford, I am constantly receiving letters from Mr. Waldrum. I try to explain to him how I am situated; but either I cannot be explicit, or else he fails to comprehend. Will you tell him—will you—that I would not give up my children if I loved him a thousand times more than I do?"

"You set me a hard task, my dear," I answered.

"Is it too hard?" she inquired.

"Not when you ask me to do it," was my reply, and I left Fairy Water next day.

Before I wrote to Valentine, I furnished myself with a copy of Geoffrey's will. A perusal of it would, I considered, be more convincing than reams of argument or expostulation from me.

"You see she cannot have the children if she marry again," I wrote. "She says positively she will not give up the children. Is it manly to continue to importune a woman situated as Mary is? Of course this is a matter in which you must take your own way. I cannot and will not interfere further; so instead of hurling reproaches at your head, or stating that your letters must cease, when I have no power to prevent your sending or Mary receiving them, I simply repeat my question, and ask you if you consider it manly to increase a woman's troubles?"

To which I received this reply:

"I do not. She shall be troubled no more by me. Pray assure her of this, and believe, if you can, that I am still yours gratefully,

"V. WALDRUM."

My heart yearned over Valentine, but I did not mean to take him back into favour all at once. He had been ill-humoured, sulky, obstinate, defiant; and if I welcomed back the penitent at the first sign of contrition, who could tell what liberties he might not indulge in subsequently?

No, he should go his way and I would go mine; mine about that period taking me very frequently, and very much against my will, into Essex.

The fact is, Crow Hall had to my mind become a perfect *bête noire*. Sometimes, when ensconced in bed, the street noises in my ears, the objects familiar in a superior class of lodging-house meeting my eyes, a sudden memory of that dreary residence would cross my mind, and cause me to vow, incontinently, I would solve the difficulty connected with it by some means.

Already I had made my money out of it. The railway company were compelled to buy the Black Pool, and a very handsome sum they paid me for it.

Before, however, the lake was filled again with water, one of the navvies had discovered a curious fact.

At a place overgrown with brambles, ivy, and periwinkle, choked with weeds, wreathed over in the summer with convolvulus and wild briony, he had found an opening, and not merely an opening, but landing-steps.

"Used for smuggling purposes, doubtless, in years gone by," said a practical man in the London office of the company.

"No doubt," I answered, and went straight off to an architect I knew, who upon the strength of our plan contrived to keep a sickly wife and various unnecessary children.

To say he jumped at my proposal is a mild way of expressing his acquiescence. Ghosts! what did he care for ghosts? Ghosts meant bad air, bad drainage, bad water, and twenty other bad things besides. Only let him see the place, and I might rest assured means would be found of ridding Crow Hall of spectres.

"My good friend," said I, interposing; "there is only one way of laying the ghost. We must pull the old part of the house down, but I want your advice as to how that pulling down had best be accomplished."

We travelled into Essex together, and took up our quarters at Crow Hall. I did not put him in the "Guest Chamber"—that haunted oak room—neither did I occupy it myself, but directly after breakfast we repaired to that apartment.

He measured it within, he measured the house without. He then went upstairs once more, and sounded one wall that met the fireplace. He went over about three feet of that again and again.

"There is a space here," he remarked, "not accounted for."

"How shall we account for it?" I asked.

"Send for a bricklayer"; which I did.

In the most matter-of-fact way my friend told him to open a hole in the wall.

After he had been working for two hours the room was filled with rubbish, and we were able to put a candle and our heads through the aperture.

"Well?" inquired my friend triumphantly.

"There is a staircase, sure enough," I agreed.

"Shall we go down it?"

"I will not for any earthly consideration," was my prompt reply.

"Then I will presently," he remarked.

"Notwithstanding your wife and family?" I ventured to suggest.

"Notwithstanding twenty wives and twenty families," he replied, with a firmness born perhaps of his distance from the home atmosphere.

He explored the staircase, and came back baffled, but not despondent.

"We must examine the cellars," he said; "that way lies success."

"That way lies madness," I murmured.

"Eh? what did you say?" he exclaimed.

"I said nothing to the purpose," I replied, curtly.

We went down into the cellars, but nothing could there be discovered to help us in our difficulty.

"Part of the house," he remarked, "seems to have been built on the ground; but there is nothing unusual in that—nothing at least so unusual as to justify me in undermining the place to search for further cellarage. With your permission I will work from the staircase."

I gave permission, and for I suppose three mortal hours, that bricklayer, urged on by my friend, and stimulated with beer, for which his "mate" was being perpetually despatched, chipped away with his cold chisel upon mortar which was more, so he averred, like granite, than honest lime and sand.

By this time the winter's day had long closed; and the workman, intimating that his arms were a bit stiffish, and that it was tight working where there was no room to work, left us for the night, with the assurance that he would be back again after breakfast the next morning.

After this my friend, whose name was Tuft, and who is at the present moment distinguishing himself by designing various edifices each more ugly, and more uncomfortable, and more

thoroughly according to the ethics of modern art than its predecessor, was, like many another busy man, taken with a notion that he must inspect once more the ghost's battle-field.

"Let the ghost rest for to-night, there's a good soul," I entreated; the idea of the ghost being, if I may say so, laid very considerably by the discovery of that secret staircase, but he would listen to no remonstrance.

"Stay here and rest, my dear sir," he entreated; "but let me, do let me examine once again the work accomplished to-day."

He repaired to the scene of his triumphs, and remained there for so long a time that I was thinking of seeing what had become of him, when he burst in upon me, pale but exultant.

"Come with me, come!" he cried; "the secret of Crow Hall is solved at last."

"Do you mean," said I, "that you want me to go down those steps to-night?"

"Yes, most decidedly."

"Then most decidedly I shall do nothing of the kind. To-morrow morning, if you have anything to show me, I will see it."

"How very odd you are," he remarked. "Perhaps you might be odd if you had seen in Crow Hall the things that have appeared to me and others." His enthusiasm died out a little after this.

On the whole, Crow Hall was not a nice house in which to be reminded of ghost-stories late at night.

Morning brought, however, fresh courage to Mr. Tuft; the presence of the bricklayer and his mate, who were already, ten minutes after breakfast, thirsting for beer, inspired me with such confidence that I agreed to descend those steps, the very sight of which filled me with dismay.

Mr. Tuft went first, carrying a dark lantern, the bricklayer followed him, bearing an ordinary lantern, with which he lit my steps, and last of all came the man whom he called mate.

What a smell of damp and mould greeted our nostrils as we descended the steps, and at last found ourselves standing in a space about three feet square, one side of which was occupied by a doorway through which I could see a space beyond black as Erebus.

"I 'spose it's all right, gov'nor?" said the bricklayer, addressing Mr. Tuft; "no foul air, nor nothing of that sort?"

"No foul nonsense," exclaimed Mr. Tuft; though that gentleman subsequently informed me the idea was not so preposterous as I might imagine from the tone of his reply.

"We began work at the wrong wall yesterday," he condescended to explain. "We could not tell, because all the sides were plastered over roughly to conceal the entrance, but no doubt the chipping and hammering loosened fastenings, or I might have failed to find and open the door last night. Now shall we go forward?"

"By all means," I agreed, and we passed into the yawning blackness beyond.

We found ourselves in a cellar, or dungeon, square, except for the little vestibule which had been taken out of one corner; behind us was the concealed door by which we had entered; facing it was another door, which stood open; this latter gave ingress to three other small chambers. Out of one of these opened an archway, leading to what seemed a subterraneous passage; out of another a steep flight of stone steps descended to unknown depths.

"I should say many a brave gentleman has lain *perdu* here, till he could escape to the coast, in the good old times, when no one could reckon how long he might be permitted to keep his head on his shoulders," said Mr. Tuft, waving his dark lantern above his head, and flashing the light now on the walls, the ground, the ceiling.

"I have always understood this was a smugglers' haunt," I remarked.

"The smuggling came after, doubtless," agreed Mr. Tuft, graciously.

“There does not seem much in these places to reward our search,” 1 suggested, trying to speak carelessly, spite of a growing feeling of giddiness and nausea which made me glad to lay my hand on the bricklayer’s shoulder as we moved from place to place.

“No,” said Mr. Tuft, “dirt, dust, damp, mildew, are the usual tenants of concealed apartments nowadays. With the exception of a few empty barrels, there is nothing here to stimulate curiosity.”

At this moment the bricklayer’s mate, who had been lounging about the rooms with a sort of speculative stare, turned from a small heap of dust, which he first turned over with his foot, and then grubbed amongst with his hands, broke across Mr. Tuft’s speech by saying:

“Show a light here, Bill.”

Without troubling Bill, Mr. Tuft skipped across the floor, and threw a glance across the entrance of the subterranean passage.

“It’s bones, ain’t it?” asked the discoverer, looking up in Mr. Tuft’s face, “and bits of glass.”

Mr. Tuft pushed him aside, and kneeling down, took something from the ground and held it to the light.

“Come here, Trevor,” he said, in a voice hoarse with excitement.

Still giddy and sick I staggered to his side.

“What is that?” he asked, putting something into my hand and flashing his bull’s-eye on it.

“What is it? A diamond to be sure. For Heaven’s sake,” I went on, addressing the bricklayer, “help me into the air—I feel as if I were dying.”

In an instant the men caught me—not too soon—for I almost reeled into their arms.

Though it was a cold winter’s day I prayed them to take me into the open air, anywhere out of the atmosphere of that accursed house.

When I was a little better—when I had sat for awhile with the icy wind cooling my forehead, and swallowed some brandy which Mrs. Paul brought me of her own free will, though ordinarily she disapproved of what she called spiritual liquors, believing that tea was the only beverage “sinful creatures with immortal souls” should indulge in, when I had in a sentence, to quote Bill’s mate, done what he styled, “come to hisself”—Mr. Tuft joined me.

“Shall I close the door again, Trevor,” he said, “till you are well enough to go down with me again? There are jewels there worth a king’s ransom.

“Collect them,” I answered, “and then come back to me; never again will I set foot in any part of Crow Hall save Mrs. Paul’s kitchen.”

Leaning on his arm I made my way to that pleasant apartment. In it there was an old-fashioned sofa, upholstered in brown moreen, on which I stretched myself.

Mrs. Paul considerately placed a small table beside my couch, on which she left a Bible, hymnbook, Mr. Wesley’s Discourses, and a few tracts before leaving me to repose.

Subsequently, I ascertained she assisted Mr. Tuft in picking up the bright stones that lay amongst the dust and bones, constituting the ghastly heap which had once, so we conjectured, been Philip Waldrum’s wife.

I did not see the gems—I never saw them in fact. Mr. Tuft packed them away in my bag, and saw that and the rest of my luggage, together with my own person, *en route* for London during the course of the same afternoon.

I signed him a cheque for present expenses before I left, told him to raze Crow Hall with the ground, not to leave one stone of the old house on the other, begged him to send for the clergyman and the doctor, and the sexton and the undertaker, and let the dust and the bones be laid in the churchyard if possible.

Then I travelled back to town, reached Bishopsgate, hired a cab to take me to my lodgings; after which ensues a blank; a part of my life is blotted out of my memory—of the hours, days, weeks which ensued after I got out of the train and entered the cab, memory holds no record.

When I take up the thread of my recollection once again, I am lying in bed in my lodgings, and I have awakened wondering why it is broad daylight and why I feel so tired. I try to ring the bell, but my arm refuses to obey my wish. I see my hands—they are wasted—mere skin and bone, like those of a skeleton.

Someone, hearing me essay to move, comes and stands by my side.

"Mary!" I exclaim, but my voice is weak and hollow.

"Yes, dear."

"What is it—what does it mean?"

"You have been very ill, but you are better now, thank God." And to her—His instrument—often and often since that day, has Valentine Waldrum told me her nursing saved my life.

"I tell you honestly," be said, "I did not think at one time you had a chance left."

"It was that house," I murmured.

"Yes, I know," was his reply; "you must not talk of it."

"But I must," I answered. "Ask for the black bag I brought back with me from Essex." He left the room, and returned with it in his hand.

"The key," I said wearily, "is on a bunch, which you will find in my pocket."

He looked for the keys and brought them to me.

"That unlocks the bag," I remarked, stopping him as he touched a small brass key.

"Shall I open it?" he inquired.

"No; take the bag home with you. For God's sake never let me see its contents again. You will find there that which will make you a rich man for life."

He thought I was wandering again, evidently, for he did not take the bag. It was not till I had grown almost well again that we recurred to the subject.

"I hope you got a good price for those diamonds, Val," I said.

"What diamonds?" he inquired.

"Those in the bag I told you to take away with you some time back."

"I did not take it. Were you in your right mind when you wished me to do so?" he asked.

"My good fellow," I answered, "so long as that bag is in the house I shall not get strong. Its contents caused my illness. Take them away."

And he did. About the same time Mary took me away to the seaside.

When next I saw Valentine Waldrum, I was well again, and leading the old life which I had decided years and years before was the life which suited me best. Crow Hall had meanwhile been levelled with the ground, the Charitable Society had bought the farm, and the railway company had purchased the ground formerly laid out as lawn, orchard, gardens, and drive.

"I shall go abroad," he said. "Thanks to you I am now rich enough to go where I please."

I did not answer. I knew it was the best thing he could do, and yet my heart sank within me at his words. In other lands he might forget, and win and woo someone free to return his love. In England he could not forget Mary, and alas! I knew Mary could not forget him.

I was leading my old life, as I have said. I was dining out more frequently than ever, when one night, or rather morning, when I was just about letting myself in with a latch-key, which was at once the pain and the pleasure of my landlady's life, a young fellow, in full evening dress, sprang out of a hansom, and addressing me said:

“Mr. Trevor, Lady Mary Conyngham wants to see you immediately.”

“What, at this hour!”! exclaimed.

“On the instant,” he replied.

“Is Mr. Conyngham dead or dying?” I inquired.

‘Neither. She has bound me to secrecy, and the torture of the boot should not wring any admission from me.”

We jumped into the cab, and drove to the great town house plebeian Mr. Conyngham had bought and furnished for his well-born bride.

Straight upstairs we went, without announcement, to the drawing-room, where, daylight already fighting its way through the Venetian blinds, Lady Mary, surrounded by a number of excited and expectant guests, stood holding a paper in her fingers.

Seeing me, she thrust it into my hands.

“Read, read,” she said; and the guests, falling back, formed a semicircle round me.

I was so confused, that my glasses fell twice off my nose whilst I was trying to adjust them.

“In the name of Heaven, Stafford,” cried her ladyship, “if you cannot see, why do you not wear spectacles?”

Which was an extremely unjust and cruel speech, inasmuch as her ladyship knew I used glasses not to aid, but merely to preserve my eyesight.

When, however, I beheld the first statement set forth in the paper thrust upon me, I confess I felt like one blind.

“The last will and testament of Geoffrey Trevor, of Fairy Water, in the parish of so-and-so, situated in such-and-such county—”

“Will someone read it aloud?” I entreated, whereupon a young man, with extremely red hair, at a sign from Lady Mary, took the document from me, and recited its contents aloud.

It was the missing will, the will of which my cousin Geoffrey had spoken to his wife, and that he had laid away in a secret corner of the cabinet he had pointed to in his last agony; that cabinet being one of the articles of furniture Lady Mary had fancied she should like when staying at Fairy Water.

Many and many a time I had examined the secret drawers of that cabinet in hopes of discovering something to Mary’s advantage, but doubtless judicious bumping about on the part of the railway company had loosened the false bottom underneath, on which some curious guest examining the relic had found the will and a letter sealed and directed to Mrs. Trevor.

“That dear little woman can marry Valentine Waldrum now, and be the happiest wife in England!” said Lady Mary, excitedly.

Ill-natured people declare her ladyship was so delighted about the discovery, that she put her arms round my neck and kissed me.

If this be so, I can state solemnly I retain no recollection of her condescension.

And for the rest—

After reading the letter and perusing the will, Mrs. Trevor announced her intention of remaining a widow, and devoting herself to his children for the rest of her life; but after a time we talked her into a better and more rational frame of mind.

I told her it was her duty to marry Valentine Waldrum, and as for once in her life duty proved synonymous with pleasure, she promised to do as she was told.

The Duke of Severn wanted to give her away, but that being a privilege I meant to yield to no man, I asserted my prior claim, and accordingly he accompanied Valentine as best man, whilst Miss Vinon, all smiles and beauty, was sole bridesmaid at the quiet wedding.

I stood at the hall door looking after the newly-married pair as they drove away, and I alone saw Mary put her head out of the window and kiss her hand to me in token of farewell.

Then, my dear, that day, for the first time since I first beheld you, was my heart free from a dull, aching, remorseful pain.

Is there anything more to tell? Yes, Valentine and his wife live at Fairy Water, and we hope, when Geoffrey comes of age, to come to some arrangement by which they can continue to reside in the old place.

Valentine has made a name, but by his pen rather than his original profession.

He is wealthy, thanks to the jewels discovered at Crow Hall, and he is happy, thanks to the woman he once thought he should never be able to marry.

The ring which Lady Mary described so graphically, and which was eventually taken off a skeleton finger discovered in that ghastly heap of dust, Valentine offered for her ladyship's acceptance.

At first she recoiled from the mere mention of the trinket; then she expressed a desire to look at it again; then she remembered Crow Hall was no longer in existence, and that the original owner of the ring was lying in consecrated ground. Finally, she said it was the most curious piece of jewellery she had ever seen or heard of, and that it could be easily enlarged.

After which, she accepted the present. To this hour she wears it. I can honestly say, whenever my eye falls on that ring, I shiver. How she can endure it on her finger passes my comprehension. But then, as her ladyship sometimes is good enough to lucidly explain—

"Different ranks view different things differently."

In my opinion it is extremely fortunate that they do.