A Golden Argosy

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Published: 1886
in »Chambers's Journal«, London, Vol 63

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Chapter I

Eleven o‘clock! Before the vibration of the nearest chimes had died away, the rain—which had long been threatening over London—poured down for some five minutes in a fierce gust, and then, as if exhausted by its efforts, subsided into a steady drizzle. The waves of light, cast on the glistening pavement from the gas lamps flickering in the wind, shone on the stones; but the unstable shadows were cast back by the stronger, refulgence of the electric light at Covent Garden. Back into the gathered mist of Long Acre the pallid gleam receded; while, on the opposite side, the darkness of Russell Street seemed darker still. By Tavistock Street was a gin-shop, whose gilded front, points of flame, and dazzling glass seemed to smile a smile of crafty welcome to the wayfarer. A few yards away from the knot of loafers clustering with hungry eyes round the door, stood a woman. There were others of her sex close by, but not like her, and though her dress was poor and dilapidated to the last degree, the others saw instinctively she was not as they. She was young, presumably not more than five-and-twenty years, and on her face she bore the shadow of great care. Gazing, half sullenly, half wistfully, into the temptingly arrayed window, her profile strongly marked by the great blaze of light farther up the street, the proud carriage of the head formed a painful contrast to her scanty garb and sorrow-stricken face. She was a handsome, poorly dressed woman, with a haughty bearing, a look of ever-present care, and she had twopence in her pocket.

If you will consider what it is to have such a meagre sum standing between you and starvation, you may realise the position of this woman. To be alone, unfriended, penniless, in a city of four million souls, is indeed a low depth of human misery. Perhaps she thought so, for her mind was quickly formed. Pushing back the door with steady hand, she entered the noisy bar. She had half expected to be an object of interest, perhaps suspicion; but, alas, too many of us in this world carry our life‘s history written in our faces, to cause any feelings of surprise. The barman served her with the cordial she ordered, and with a business-like „chink,“ swept away her last two coppers. Even had he known they were her last, the man would have evinced no undue emotion. He was not gifted with much imagination, and besides, it was a common thing there to receive the last pittance that bridges over the gulf between a human being and starvation. There she sat, resting her tired limbs, deriving a fictitious strength from the cordial, dimly conscious that the struggle against fate was past, and nothing remained for it but—a speedy exit from further trouble—one plunge from the bridges! Slowly and meditatively she sipped at her tumbler, wondering—strange thought—why those old-fashioned glasses had never been broken. Slowly, but surely, the liquid decreased, till only a few drops remained. The time had come, then! She finished it, drew her scanty shawl closer about her shoulders, and went out again into the London night.

Only half-past eleven, and the streets filled with people. Lower down, in Wellington Street, the theatre-goers were pouring out of the Lyceum. The portico was one dazzling blaze of beauty and color; men in evening dress, and dainty ladies waiting for their luxurious carriages. The outcast wandered on, wondering vaguely whether there was any sorrow, any ruin, any disgrace, remorse, or dishonor in the brilliant crowd, and so she drifted into the Strand, heedlessly and aimlessly. Along the great street as far as St. Clement‘s Danes, unnoticed and unheeded, her feet dragging painfully, she knew not where. Then

back again to watch the last few people leaving the Lyceum, and then unconsciously she turned towards the river, down Wellington Street, to Waterloo Bridge. On that Bridge of Sighs she stopped, waiting, had she but known it, for her fate.

It was quiet there on that wet night—few foot-passengers about, and she was quite alone as she stood in one of the buttresses, looking into the shining flood beneath. Down the river, as far as her eye could reach, were the golden points of light flickering and swaying in the fast-rushing water. The lap of the tide on the soft oozing mud on the Surrey side mingled almost pleasantly with the swirl and swish of the churning waves under the bridge. The dull thud of the cabs and omnibuses in the Strand came quietly and subdued; but she heard them not. The gas lamps had changed to the light of day, the heavy winter sky was of the purest blue, and the hoarse murmur of the distant Strand was the rustling of the summer wind in the trees. The far-off voices of the multitude softened and melted into the accents of one she used to love; and this is what she saw like a silent picture, the memories ringing in her head like the loud sea a child hears in a shell. A long old house of grey stone, with a green veranda covered with ivy and flowering creepers; a rambling lawn, sloping away to a tiny lake, all golden with yellow iris and water-lilies. In the centre of the lawn, a statue of Niobe; and seated by that statue was herself, and with her a girl some few years younger—a girl with golden hair surrounding an oval face, fair as the face of an angel, and lighted by truthful velvety violet eyes. This was the picture mirrored in the swift water. She climbed the parapet, looked, steadily around: the lovely face in the water was so near, and she longed to hear the beautiful vision speak. And lo! at that moment the voice of her darling spoke, and a hand was laid about her waist, and the voice said: „Not that way, I implore you—not that way.“

The woman paused, slowly regained her position on the bridge, and gazed into the face of her companion with dilated eyes. But the other girl had her back to the light, and she could not see.

„A voice from the grave. Have I been dreaming?“ she said, passing her hand wearily across her brow.

„A voice of providence. Can you have reflected on what you were doing? Another moment, and think of it—oh, think of it!“

„A voice from the grave,“ repeated the would-be suicide slowly. „Surely this must be a good omen. Her voice!—how like her voice.“

The rescuing angel paused a minute, struggling with a dim memory. Where had she in her turn heard that voice before? With a sudden impulse, they seized each other, and bore towards the nearest gaslight, and there gazed intently in each other‘s face. The guardian angel looked a look of glad surprise; the pale face of the hapless woman was glorified, as she seized her rescuer round her neck and sobbed on her breast piteously.

„Nelly, Miss Nelly, my darling; don‘t you know me?“

„Madge, why Madge! O Madge! to think of it—to think of it.“

Presently they grew calmer. The girl called Nelly placed the other woman‘s arm within her own and walked quietly away from the hated bridge; and, thoroughly conquered, the hapless one accompanied her. No word was spoken as they walked on for a mile or so, across the Strand, towards Holborn, and there disappeared.

The night-traffic of London went on. The great thoroughfares plied their business, unheedful of tragedy and sorrow. A life had been saved; but what is one unit in the greatest city in the universe? The hand of fate was in it. It was only one of those airy trifles of which life is composed, and yet the one minute that saved a life, unravelled the first tiny thread of a tangled skein that bound up a great wrong.

Chapter II

Two years earlier. It was afternoon, and the sun, climbing over the house, shone into a sick-room at Eastwood—a comfortable, cheerful, old room; from floor to ceiling was panelled oak, and the walls decorated with artist proofs of famous pictures. The two large mullioned windows were open to the summer air, and from the outside came the delicate scent of mignonette and heliotrope in the tiled jardinieres on the ledges. The soft Persian carpet of pale blue deadened the sound of footsteps; rugs of various harmonious hues were scattered about; and the articles of virtù and costly bric-à-brac were more suitable to a drawing-room than a bed-chamber.

On the bed reclined the figure of a man, evidently in the last stage of consumption. His cheek was flushed and feverish, and his fine blue eyes were unnaturally bright with the disease which was sapping his vital energy. An old man undoubtedly, in spite of his large frame and finely moulded chest, which, though hollow and wasted, showed signs of a powerful physique at some remote period. His forehead was high and broad and powerful; his features finely chiselled; but the mouth, though benevolent-looking, was shifty and uneasy. He looked like a kind man and a good friend; but his face was haunted by a constant fear. With a pencil, he was engaged in tracing some characters on a sheet of paper; and ever and anon, at the slightest movement, even the trembling of a leaf, he looked up in agitation. The task was no light one, for his hand trembled, and his breath came and went with what was to him a violent exertion. Slowly and painfully the work went on; and as it approached completion, a smile of satisfaction shot across his sensitive mouth, at the same time a look of remorseful sorrow filled his whole face. It was only a few words on a piece of paper he was writing, but he seemed to realise the importance of his work. It was only a farewell letter; but in these few valedictory lines the happiness of two young lives were bound up. At last the task was finished, and he lay back with an air of great content.

At that moment, a woman entered the room. The sick man hid the paper hastily beneath the pillow with a look of fear on his face, pitiable to see. But the woman who entered did not look capable of inspiring any such sentiment. She was young and pretty, a trifle vain, perhaps, of her good looks and attractive appearance, but the model of what a „neat-handed Phillis“ should be.

Directly the dying man saw her, his expression changed to one of intense eagerness. Beckoning her to come close to him, he drew her head close to his face and said: „She is not about, is she? Do you think she can hear what I am saying? Sometimes I fancy she hears my very thoughts.“

„No, sir,“ replied the maid. „Miss Wakefield is not in the house just now; she has gone into the village.“

„Very good. Listen, and answer me truly. Do you ever hear from—from Nelly now? Poor child, poor child!“

The woman‘s face changed from one of interest to that of shame and remorse. She looked into the old man‘s face, and then burst into a fit of hot passionate tears.

„Hush, hush!“ he cried, terrified by her vehemence. „For God‘s sake, stop, or it will be too late, too late!“

„O sir, I must tell you,“ sobbed the contrite woman, burying her face in the bedclothes. „Letters came from Miss Nelly to you, time after time; but I destroyed them all.“

„Why?“ The voice was stern, and the girl looked up affrighted.

„O sir, forgive me. Surely you know. Is it possible to get an order from Miss Wakefield, and not obey? Indeed, I have tried to speak, but I was afraid to do anything. Even you, sir——“

„Ah,“ said the invalid, with a sigh of ineffable sadness, „I know how hard it is. The influence she has over one is wonderful, wonderful. But I am forgetting. Margaret Boulton, look me in the face. Do you love Miss Nelly as you used to do, and would you do something for her if I asked you?“

„God be my witness, I would, sir,“ replied the girl solemnly.

„Do you know where she is?“

„Alas, no. It is a year since we heard.—But master, if you ask me to give her a letter or a paper, I will do so, if I have to beg my way to London to find her. I have been punished for not speaking out before. Indeed, indeed, sir, you may trust me.“

He looked into her face with a deep unfathomable glance for some moments; but the girl returned his gaze as steadily.

„I think I can,“ he said at length. „Now, repeat after me: ‹I swear that the paper intrusted to my care shall be delivered to the person for whom it is intended; and that I will never part with it until it is safely and securely delivered.›“

The woman repeated the words with simple solemnity.

„Now,“ he said, at the same time producing the paper he had written with such pain and care, „I deliver this into your hands, and may heaven bless and prosper your undertaking. Take great care, for it contains a precious secret, and never part with it while life remains.“

The paper was a curious-looking document enough, folded small, but bearing nothing outside to betray the secret it contained. We shall see in the future how it fared.

The girl glanced at the folded paper, and thrust it rapidly in her bosom. A smile of peace and tranquility passed over the dying man‘s face, and he gave her a look of intense gratitude. At this moment another woman entered the room. She was tall and thin, with a face of grave determination, and a mouth and chin denoting a firmness amounting to cruelty. There was a dangerous light in her basilisk eyes at this moment, as she gave the servant a glance of intense hate and malice—a look which seemed to search out the bottom of her soul.

„Margaret, what are you doing here? Leave the room a once. How often have I told you never to come in here.“

Margaret left; and the woman with the snaky eyes busied herself silently about the sick-room. The dying man watched her in a dazed fascinated manner,

as a bird turns to watch the motions of a serpent; and he shivered as he noticed the feline way in which she moistened her thin lips. He tried to turn his eyes away, but failed. Then, as if conscious of his feelings, the woman said: „Well, do you hate me worse than usual to-day?“

„You know I never hated you, Selina,“ he replied wearily.

„Yes you do,“ she answered, with a sullen glowering triumph in her eyes. „You do hate me for the influence I have over you. You hate me because you dare not hate me. You hate me because I parted you from your beggar‘s brat, and trained you to behave as a man should.“

Perfectly cowed, he watched her moistening her thin lips, till his eyes could no longer see. Presently he felt a change creeping over him; his breath came shorter and shorter; and his chest heaved spasmodically. With one last effort he raised himself up in his bed. „Selina,“ he said painfully, „let me alone; oh, let me alone!“

„Too late,“ she replied, not caring to disguise her triumphant tone.

He lay back with the dews of death clustering on his forehead. Suddenly, out of the gathering darkness grew perfect dazzling light; his lips moved; the words „Nelly forgive!“ were audible like a whispered sigh. He was dead.

The dark woman bent over him, placing her ear to his heart; but no sound came. „Mine!“ she said—„mine, mine! At last, all mine!“

The thin webs of fate‘s weaving were in her hands securely—all save one. It was not worth the holding, so it floated down life‘s stream, gathering as it went.

Chapter III

Mr Carver of Bedford Row, in the county of Middlesex, was exercised in his mind; and the most annoying part of it was that he was so exercised at his own trouble and expense; that is to say, he was not elucidating some knotty legal point at the charge of a client, but he was speculating over one of the most extraordinary events that had ever happened to him in the whole course of his long and honorable career. The matter stood briefly thus: His client, Charles Morton, of Eastwood, Somersetshire, died on the 9th of April in the year of grace 1882. On the 1st of May, 1880, Mr Carver had made the gentleman‘s will, which left all his possessions, to the amount of some forty thousand pounds, to his niece, Eleanor Attewood. Six months later, Mr Morton‘s half-sister, Miss Wakefield, took up her residence at Eastwood, and from that time everything had changed. Eleanor had married the son of a clergyman in the neighborhood, and at the instigation of his half-sister, Mr Morton had disinherited his niece; and one year before he died, had made a fresh will, leaving everything to Miss Wakefield. Mr Carver, be it remarked, strongly objected to this injustice, seeing the baneful influence which had brought it about; and had he been able to find Eleanor, he hoped to alter the unjust state of things. But she disappeared with her husband, and left no trace behind; so the obnoxious will was proved.

Then came the most extraordinary part of the affair. With the exception of a few hundreds in the bank at Eastwood, for household purposes, not a single penny of Mr Morton‘s money could be found. All his property was mortgaged to a high amount; all his securities were disposed of, and not one penny could be traced. The mortgages on the property were properly drawn up by a highly

respectable solicitor at Eastwood, the money advanced by a man of undoubted probity; and, further, the money had been paid over to Mr Morton one day early in the year 1882. Advertisements were inserted in the papers, in fact everything was done to trace the missing money, but in vain. All Miss Wakefield had for her pains and trouble was a poor sum of about eleven hundred pounds, so she had to retire again to her genteel poverty in a cheap London boarding-house.

This melancholy fact did not give Mr Carver any particular sorrow; he disliked that lady, and was especially glad that her deep cunning and underhand ways had frustrated themselves. In all probability, he thought, Mr Morton had in a fit of suspicion got hold of all his ready cash and securities, for the purpose of balking the fair lady whom he had made his heiress; but nevertheless the affair was puzzling, and Mr Carver hated to be puzzled.

Mr Carver stood at his office in Bedford Row, drumming his fingers on the grimy window-panes and softly whistling. Nothing was heard in the office but the scratch of the confidential clerk‘s quill pen as he scribbled out a draft for his employer‘s inspection.

„This is a very queer case, Bates, very queer,“ said Mr Carver, addressing his clerk.

„Yes, sir,“ replied Mr Bates, continuing the scratching. That gentleman possessed the instinct of always being able to divine what his chief was thinking of. Therefore, when Mr Bates said „Yes, sir,“ he knew that the Eastwood mystery had been alluded to.

„I‘d most cheerfully give—let me see, what would I give? Well, I wouldn‘t mind paying down my cheque for“——

„One thousand pounds, sir. No, sir; I don‘t think you would.“

„You‘re a wonderful fellow, Bates,“ said his admiring master. „‘Pon my honor, Bates, that‘s the exact sum I was going to mention.“

„It is strange, sir,“ said the imperturbable Bates, „that you and I always think the same things. I suppose it is being with you so long. Now, if I was to think you would give me a partnership, perhaps you would think the same thing too.“

„Bates,“ said Mr Carver earnestly, never smiling, as was his wont, at his clerk‘s quiet badinage, „if we unravel this mystery, as I hope we may, I‘ll tell you what, Bates, don‘t be surprised if I give you a partnership.“

„Ah, sir, if we unravel it. Now, if we could only find“——

„Miss Eleanor. Just what I was thinking.“

At this moment a grimy clerk put his head in at the door.

„Please, sir, a young person of the name of Seaton.“

„It is Miss Eleanor, by Jove!“ said Bates, actually excited.

„Wonderful!“ said Mr Carver.

In a few seconds the lady was ushered into the presence of Mr Carver. She was tall and fair, with a style of beauty uncommon to the people of to-day. Clad from head to foot in plain black, hat, jacket, and dress cut with a simplicity almost severe, and relieved only by a white collar at the throat, there was something in her air and bearing which spoke of a culture and breeding not easily defined in words, but nevertheless unmistakable. It was a face and figure that men would look at and turn again to watch, even in the busy street. Her complexion was almost painfully perfect in its clear pallid whiteness, and the large dark lustrous eyes shone out from the marble face with dazzling brightness. She had a perfect abundance of real golden hair, looped up in a

great knot behind; but the rebellious straying tresses fell over her broad low forehead like an aureole round the head of a saint.

„Don‘t you know me, Mr Carver?“ she said at length.

„My dear Eleanor, my dear Eleanor, do sit down!“ This was the person whom he had been longing for two years to see, and Mr Carver, cool as he was, was rather knocked off his balance for a moment.

„Poor child! Why, why didn‘t you come and see me before?“

„Pride, Mr Carver—pride,“ she replied, with a painful air of assumed playfulness.

„But surely pride did not prevent your coming to see your old friend?“

„Indeed, it did, Mr Carver. You would not have me part with one of my few possessions?“

„Nonsense, nonsense!“ said the lawyer, with assumed severity. „Now, sit down there, and tell me everything you have done for the last two years.“

„It is soon told. When my uncle—poor deluded man—turned me, as he did, out of his house on account of my marriage, something had to be done; so we came to London. For two years my husband has been trying to earn a living by literature. Far better had he stayed in the country and taken to breaking stones or working in the fields. It is a bitter life, Mr Carver. The man who wants to achieve fortune that way must have a stout heart; he must be devoid of pride and callous to failure. If I had all the eloquence of a Dickens at my tongue‘s end, I could not sum up two years‘ degradation and bitter miserable poverty and disappointment better than in the few words, ‹Trying to live by literature,›— However, it is useless to struggle against it any longer. Mr Carver, sorely against my inclination, I have come to you to help us.“

„My dear child, you hurt me,“ said Mr Carver huskily, „you hurt me; you do indeed. For two years I have been searching for you everywhere. You have only to ask me, and you know anything I can I will do.“

„God bless you,“ replied Eleanor, with the gathering tears thick in her eyes. „I know you will. I knew that when I came here. How can I thank you?“

„Don‘t do anything of the sort; I don‘t want any thanks. But before you go, I will do something for you. Now, listen to me. Before your uncle died“——

„Died! Is he dead?“

„How stupid of me. I didn‘t know“——

Mr Carver stopped abruptly, and paused till the natural emotions called forth in the young lady‘s mind had had time to expend themselves. She then asked when the event had happened.

„Two years ago,“ said Mr Carver. „And now, tell me—since you last saw him, had you any word or communication from him in any shape or form? Any letter or message?“

Eleanor shook her head, half sadly, half scornfully.

„You don‘t seem to know Miss Wakefield,“ she said. „No message was likely to reach me, while she remained at Eastwood.“

„No; I suppose not. So you have heard nothing? Very good. Now, a most wonderful thing has happened. When your uncle died and his will came to be read, he had left everything to Miss Wakefield. No reason to tell you that, I suppose? Now comes the strangest part of the story. With the exception of a few hundreds in the local bank, not a penny can be found. All the property has been mortgaged to the uttermost farthing; all the stock is sold out; and, in fact, nothing is left but Eastwood, which, as you know, is a small place, and not

worth much. We have been searching for two years, and not a trace can we find.“

„Perhaps Miss Wakefield is hiding the plunder away,“ Eleanor suggested with some indifference.

„Impossible,“ eagerly exclaimed Mr Carver—„impossible. What object could she have in doing so? The money was clearly left to her; and it is not likely that a woman so fond of show would deliberately choose to spend her life in a dingy lodging-house.“

„And Eastwood?“

„Is empty. It will not let, neither can we sell it.“

„So Miss Wakefield is no better off than she was four years ago!“ Eleanor said calmly. „Come, Mr Carver, that is good news, at any rate. It almost reconciles me to my position.“

„Nelly, I wish you would not speak so,“ said Mr Carver seriously. „It hurts me. You were not so hard at one time.“

„Forgive me, my dear old friend,“ she replied simply. „Only consider what a life we have been living for the past two years, and you will understand.“

„And your husband?“

„Killing himself,“ she said; „wearing out body and soul in one long struggle for existence. It hurts me to see him. Always hoping, and always working, always smiling and cheerful before me; and ever the best of men and husband. Dear friend, if you knew what he is to me, and saw him as I do day after day, literally wearing out, you would consider my hardness pardonable. I am rebellious, you know.“

„No, no,“ said Mr Carver, a suspicious gleam behind his spectacles; „I can understand it. The only thing I blame you for is that you did not come to me before. You know what a lonely old bachelor I am, and—how rich I am. It would have been a positive kindness of you to come and see me.—Now, listen. On Sunday, you and your husband must come and dine with me. You know the old Russell Square address?“

„God bless you for a true friend!“ said Eleanor, her tears flowing freely now. „We will come; and I may bring my little girl with me?“

„Eh, what?“ replied the lawyer—„little girl? Of course, of course! Then we will talk over old times, and see what can be done to make those cheeks look a little like they used to do.—So you have got a little girl, have you? Dear, dear, how the time goes!—Now, tell me candidly, do you want any assistance—any, ah—that is—a little—in short, money?“

Eleanor colored to the roots of her hair, and was about to reply hastily, but said nothing.

„Yes, yes,“ said Mr Carver rapidly.—„I think, Bates“——

But Mr Bates already had his hand on the cheque-book, and commenced to fill in the date. Mr Carver gave him a look of approbation, and flashed him a sign with his fingers signifying the amount.

„I suppose you have some friends?“ he continued hastily, to cover Eleanor's confusion. „It‘s a poor world that won‘t stand one good friend.“

„Yes, we have one,“ replied Eleanor, her face lighting up with a tender glow—„a good friend. You have heard of Jasper Felix the author? He is far the best friend we have.“

„Heard of Felix! I should think I have. Read every one of his books. I am glad to hear of his befriending you. I knew the man who writes as he does must have a noble heart.“

„He has. What we should have done without his assistance, I shudder to contemplate. I honestly believe that not one of my husband‘s literary efforts would have been accepted, had it not been for him.“

„I can‘t help thinking, Nelly, that there is a providence in these things, and I feel that better days are in store for you. Anyway, it won‘t be my fault if it is not so. I have a presentiment that things will come out all right in the end, and I fancy that your uncle‘s fortune his hidden away somewhere; and if it is hidden away, it must be, I cannot help thinking, for your benefit.“

„Don‘t count upon it, Mr Carver,“ said Eleanor calmly. „I look upon the money as gone.“

„Nonsense!“ said the gentleman cheerfully; „while there is life there is hope. I begin to feel that I am playing a leading character in a romance; I do, indeed! Firstly, your uncle dies, and his fortune is lost; secondly, you disappear; and at the very moment I am longing—literally longing—to see you, you turn up. Now, all that remains is to find the hidden treasure, and to be happy ever afterwards, like the people in a fairy tale.“

„Always enthusiastic,“ laughed Eleanor. „All we have to do is to discover a mystic clue to a buried chest of diamonds, only we lack the clue.“

„‘Pon my word, my dear, do you know I really think you have hit it?“ replied Mr Carver with great solemnity. „Now, at the time you left Eastwood, your companion Margaret was in the house; and after your uncle‘s death, she disappeared. From a little hint Miss Wakefield dropped to me, your old friend was in the sick-room alone with your uncle the day he died.“

„Alone? and then disappeared,“ said Eleanor, all trace of apathy gone, and her eyes shining with interest.

„Alone. Now, if we could only find Margaret Boulton“——

Eleanor rose from her seat, and approached Mr Carver slowly. Then she said calmly: 'There is no difficulty about that; she is at my house now. I found her only last night on Waterloo Bridge—in fact, I saved her.“

„Saved her? Didn‘t I say there was a providence in it? Saved her?“

„From suicide!“

A quarter of an hour later, Eleanor was standing outside Mr Carver‘s office, evidently seeking a companion. From the bright flush on her face and the sparkle in her eyes, hope—and a strong hope—had revived. She stood there, quite unconscious of the admiration of passers-by, sweeping the street in search of her quest. Presently the object she was seeking came in view. He was a tall man, of slight figure, with blue eyes deeply sunk in a face far from handsome, but full of intellectual power and great character; a heavy, carelessly trimmed moustache hid a sensitive mouth, but did not disguise a bright smile. That face and figure was a famous one in London, and people there turned in the busy street to watch Jasper Felix, and admire his rugged powerful face and gaunt figure. He came swinging down the street now with firm elastic step, and treated Eleanor to one of his brightest smiles.

„Did you think I had forgotten you?“ he said. „I have been prowling about Gray‘s Inn Road, for, sooth to say, the air of Bedford Row does not agree with me.“

„I hope I have not detained you," said Eleanor timidly; „I know how valuable your time is to you."

„My dear child, don't mention it," replied the great novelist lightly; „my time has been well occupied. First, I have been watching a fight between two paviors. Do you know it is quite extraordinary how those powerful men can knock each other about without doing much harm. Then I have been having a long chat with an intellectual chimney-sweep—a clever man, but a great Radical. I have spent quite an enjoyable half-hour."

„A half-hour! Have I been so long? Mr Felix, I am quite horrified at having taken up so much of your time."

„Awful, isn't it," he laughed lightly. „Well, you won't detain me much longer, for here you are close at home.—Now, I will just run into Fleet Street on my own business, and try and sell this little paper of your husband's at the same time. I'll call in this afternoon; only, mind, you must look as happy as you do now."

Jasper Felix made his way through a court into Holborn, and along that busy thoroughfare till he turned down Chancery Lane. Crossing the street by the famous Griffin, he disappeared in one of the interminable courts leading out of Samuel Johnson's favorite promenade, Fleet Street. The object of his journey was here. On the door-plate was the inscription, »The Midas Magazine«, and beneath the legend, »First Floor«... Ascending the dingy stair, he stopped opposite a door on which, in white letters, was written the word »Editor«. At this door he knocked. Without pausing for a reply, he pushed open the door.

„How de do, Simpson?" said Mr Felix, with a look of amusement in his blue eyes.

„Glad to see you, Felix," said the editor of the Midas cordially. „I thought you had forgotten us. I hope you have something for our journal in your pocket."

„I have something in my pocket to show you," answered Felix, „and I think you will appreciate it."

„Is it something of your own?" queried the man of letters.

„No, it is not; and, what is more, I doubt if I could write anything so good myself. I know when you have seen it, you will accept it."

„Um! I don't know," replied the editor dubiously. „You see, I am simply inundated with amateur efforts. Of course, sometimes I get something good; but usually——Now, if the matter in discussion was a manuscript of your own——"

„Now, seriously, Simpson, what do you care for me or anything of mine? It is the name you want, not the work. You know well enough what sells magazines of the Midas type. It is not so much the literary matter as the name. The announcement that the next month's Midas will contain the opening chapters of a new serial by someone with a name, is quite sufficient to increase your circulation by hundreds."

„'Pon my honor, you're very candid," rejoined Mr Simpson. „But what is this wonderful production you have?"

„Well, I'll leave it with you. You need not trouble to read it, because, if you don't take it, I know who will."

„What do you want for this triumph of genius?"

„Well, in a word, ten pounds. Take it or leave it."

„If you say it is worth it, I suppose I must oblige you."

„That is a good way of putting it; and it will oblige me. But mark me—this man will some day confer favors by writing for you, instead of, as you regard it at present, favoring him."

The proprietor of the Midas sighed gently. The idea of paying over ten pounds to an unknown contributor was not nice; but the fact of offending Felix was worse.

„If," said he, harping on the old string, and shaking his head with a gentle deprecating motion—„if it was one of yours now"——

„What confounded nonsense you talk!" exclaimed Felix impatiently.

„Don't get wild, Felix," replied Mr Simpson soothingly. „I will take your protege's offering, to oblige you."

„But I don't want you to oblige me. I want you to accept—and pay for—an article good enough for anything. It is a fair transaction; and if there is any favor about it, then it certainly is not on your side."

Mr Simpson showed his white teeth in a dazzling smile. „Well, Felix, I do admire your assurance," he said softly. „I never heard the matter put in that light before. My contributors, as a rule, don't point their manuscript at my head metaphorically, and demand speedy insertion and prompt pay.—Do you want a cheque for this manuscript now?"

„Yes, you may as well give me the cash now."

Mr Simpson drew a cheque for the desired amount, and passed it over to Felix, who folded the pink slip, and placed it in his pocket; whereupon the conversation drifted into other channels.

Chapter IV

Queen Square, Bloomsbury, is a neighbourhood which by no means accords with the expectation evoked by its high-sounding patronymic. It is, besides, somewhat difficult to to find, and when discovered, it has a guilty-looking air of having been playing hide-and-seek with its most aristocratic neighbors, Russell and Bloomsbury, and lost itself. Before Southampton Row was the stately thoroughfare it is now, Queen Square must have been a parasite of Russell Square; but in time it seems to have been built out. You stumble upon it suddenly, in making a short-cut from Southampton Row to Bedford Row, and wonder how it got there. It is quiet, decayed—in a word, shabby-genteel—and cheap.

On the south side, sheltered by two sad-looking trees of a nondescript character, and fronted by an imposing-looking portico, is a decayed-looking house, the stucco of which bears strong likeness to the outside of Stilton cheese. The windows are none too clean, and the blinds and curtains are all deeply tinged with London fog and London smoke. For the information of the metropolis at large, the door bears a tarnished brass plate announcing that it is the habitation of Mrs Whipple; and furthermore—from the same source—the inquiring mind is further enlightened with the fact that Mrs Whipple is a dressmaker. A few fly-blown prints of fashions, of a startling description and impossible colour, support this fact; and information is further added by the announcement that the artiste within lets apartments; for the legend is inscribed, in runaway letters, on the back of an old showcard which is suspended in one of the ground-floor windows.

From the general tout ensemble of the Whipple mansion, the most casual-minded individual on lodgings bent can easily judge of its cheapness. The

„ground-floor“—be it whispered in the strictest confidence—pays twenty-five shillings per week; the honoured „drawing-rooms,“ two pounds; and the slighted „second-floors,“ what the estimable Whipple denominates „a matter of fifteen shillings.“ It is with the second-floors that our business lies.

The room was large, and furnished with an eye to economy. The carpet was of no particular pattern, having long since been worn down to the thread; and the household goods consisted of five chairs and a couch covered by that peculiar-looking horsehair, which might, from its hardness and capacity for wear, be woven steel. A misty-looking glass, in a maple frame, and a chimney-board decked with two blue-and-green shepherdesses of an impossible period, completed the garniture. In the centre of the room was a round oak table with spidery uncertain legs, and at the table sat a young man writing. He was young, apparently not more than thirty, but the unmistakable shadow of care lay on his face. His dress was suggestive of one who had been somewhat dandyish in time gone by, but who had latterly ceased to trouble about appearances or neatness. For a time he continued steadily at his work, watched intently by a little child who sat coiled up in the hard-looking armchair, and waiting with exemplary patience for the worker to quit his employment. As he worked on, the child became visibly interested as the page approached completion, and at last, with a weary sigh, he finished, pushed his work from him, and turned with a bright smile to the patient little one.

„You‘ve been a very good little girl, Nelly.—Now, what is it you have so particularly to say to me?“ he said.

„Is it a tale you are writing, papa?“ she asked.

„Yes, darling; but not the sort of tale to interest you.“

„I like all your tales, papa. Uncle Jasper told mamma they were all so ‹liginal.› I like liginal tales.“

„I suppose you mean original, darling?“

„I said liginal,“ persisted the little one, with childish gravity. „Are you going to sell that one, papa? I hope you will; I want a new dolly so badly. My old dolly is getting quite shabby.“

„Some day you shall have plenty.“

The child looked up in his face solemnly. „Really, papa? But do you know, pa, that some day seems such a long way off? How old am I, papa?“

„Very, very old, Nelly,“ he replied with a little laugh. „Not quite so old as I am, but very old.“

„Yes, papa? Then do you know, ever since I can remember, that some day has been coming. Will it come this week?“

„I don't know, darling. It may come any time. It may come to-day; perhaps it is on the way now.“

„I don‘t know, papa,' replied the little one, shaking her head solemnly. „It is an awful while coming. I prayed so hard last night for it to come, after mamma put me in bed. What makes mamma cry when she puts me to bed? Is she crying for some day?“

„Oh, that‘s all your fancy, little one,“ replied the father huskily. „Mamma does not cry. You must be mistaken.“

„No, indeed, papa; I‘se not mistook. One day I heard mamma sing about some day, and then she cried—she made my face quite wet.“

„Hush, Nelly; don‘t talk like that, darling.“

„But she did,“ persisted the little one. „Do you ever cry, papa?“

„Look at that little sparrow, Nelly. Does he not look hungry, poor little fellow? He wants to come in the room to you.“

„I dess he‘s waiting for some day papa,“ said the child, looking out at the dingy London sparrow perched on the window ledge. „He looks so patient. I wonder if he‘s hungry? I am, papa.“

The father looked at his little one with passionate tenderness. „Wait till mamma comes, my darling.“

„All right, papa; but I am so hungry!—Oh, here is mamma. Doesn‘t she look nice, papa, and so happy?“

When Eleanor entered the dingy room, her husband could not fail to notice the flush of hope and happiness on her face. He looked at her with expectation in his eyes.

„Did you think mother was never coming, Nelly? and do you want your dinner, my child?“

„You do look nice, ma,“ said the child admiringly. „You look as if you had found some day.“

Eleanor looked inquiringly at her husband, for him to explain the little one‘s meaning.

„Nelly and I have been having a metaphysical discussion,“ he said with playful gravity. „We have been discussing the virtues of the future. She is wishing for that impossible some day that people always expect.“

„I don‘t think she will be disappointed,“ said Mrs Seaton, with a fond little smile at her child. „I believe I have found it.—Edgar, I have been to see Mr Carver.“

„I supposed it would have come to that. And he, I suppose, has been poisoned by the sorceress, and refused to see you?“

„O no,“ said Eleanor playfully. „We had quite a long chat—in fact, he asked us all to dinner on Sunday.“

„Wonderful! And he gave you a lot of good advice on the virtues of economy, and his blessing at parting.“

„No,“ she said; „he must have forgotten that: he gave me this envelope for you with his compliments and best wishes.“

Edgar Seaton took the proffered envelope listlessly, and opened it with careless fingers. But as soon as he saw the shape of the enclosure, his expression changed to one of eagerness. „Why, it is a cheque?“ he exclaimed excitedly.

„O no,“ said his wife, laughingly; „it is only the blessing.“

„Well, it is a blessing in disguise,“ Seaton said, his voice trembling with emotion. „It is a cheque for twenty-five pounds.—Nelly, God has been very good to us to-day.“

„Yes, dear,“ said his wife simply, with tears in her eyes.

Little Nelly looked from one to the other in puzzled suspense, scarcely knowing whether to laugh or cry. Even her childish instinct discovered the gravity of the situation.

„Papa, has some day come? You look so happy.“

He caught her up in his arms and kissed her lovingly, and held her in one arm, while he passed the other round his wife. „Yes, darling. Your prayer has been answered. Some day—God be thanked—has come at last.“ For a moment no one spoke, for the hearts of husband and wife were full of quiet

thankfulness. What a little it takes to make poor humanity happy, and fill up the cup of pleasure to the brim!

Round the merry dinner-table all was bright and cheerful, and it is no exaggeration to say the board groaned under the profuse spread. Eleanor lost no time in acquainting her husband with the strange story of her uncle‘s property, and Mr Carver‘s views on the subject—a view of the situation which he felt almost inclined to share after a little consideration. It was extremely likely, he thought, that Margaret Boulton would be able to throw some light on the subject; indeed the fact of her strange rescue from her self-imposed fate pointed almost to a providential interference. It was known that she had a long conversation with Mr Morton the day he died, a circumstance which seemed to have given Miss Wakefield great uneasiness; and her strange disappearance from Eastwood directly after the funeral gave some coloring to the fact.

Margaret Boulton had not risen that day owing to a severe cold caught by her exposure to the rain on the previous night; and Edgar and his wife decided, directly she did so, to question her upon the matter. It would be very strange if she could not give some clue.

„I think, Nelly, we had better take Felix into our confidence,“ said Edgar, when the remains of dinner had disappeared in company with the grimy domestic. „He will be sure to be of some assistance to us; and the more brains we have the better.“

„Certainly, dear,“ she acquiesced; „he should know at once.“

„I think I will walk to his rooms this afternoon.“

„No occasion,“ said a cheerful voice at that moment. „Mr Felix is here very much at your service. I‘ve got some good news for you; and I am sure, from your faces, you can return the compliment.“

Chapter V

Mr Felix was much struck by the tale he heard, and was inclined, in spite of the dictates of common-sense, to follow the Will-o‘-the-wisp which grave Mr Carver had discovered. In a prosaic age, such a thing as the disappearance of a respectable Englishman‘s wealth was on the face of it startling enough; and therefore, although the thread was at present extremely intangible, he felt there must be something romantic about the matter. Mr Felix, be it remembered, was a man of sense; but he was a dreamer of dreams, and a weaver of romance by profession and choice; consequently, he was inclined to pooh-pooh Edgar‘s half-deprecating, half-enthusiastic view of the case.

„I do not think you are altogether right, Seaton, in treating this affair so cavalierly,“ he said. „In the first place, Miss Wakefield is no relation in blood to your wife‘s uncle. If the property was in her hands, I should feel myself justified in taking steps to have the existing will set aside; but so long as there is nothing worth doing battle for, it is not worth while, unless Miss Wakefield has the money, and is afraid of proceedings——“

„That is almost impossible,“ Eleanor interrupted. „You have really no conception how fond she is of show and display, and I know no such fear would prevent her indulging her fancy, if she had the means to do so.“

„So long as you are really persuaded that is the case, we have one difficulty out of the way," Felix continued. „Then we can take it for granted that she neither has the money nor has the slightest idea where it is.—Now, tell me about this Margaret Boulton."

„That is soon told," Eleanor replied. „Last night, shortly after eleven, I was crossing Waterloo Bridge——"

„Bad neighborhood for a lady to be alone," interrupted Felix, with a reproachful glance at Seaton.—„I beg your pardon. Go on, please."

„I had missed my husband at Waterloo Station, and I was hurrying home as quickly as I could——"

„Why did you not take a cab?" exclaimed Felix with some asperity. Then seeing Eleanor color, he said hastily: „What a dolt I am! I—I am very sorry. Please, go on."

„As I was saying," continued Eleanor, „just as I was crossing the bridge, I saw a woman close by me climb on to one of the buttresses. I don't remember much about it, for it was over in less than a minute, and seems like a dream now; but it was my old nurse, or rather companion, Margaret Boulton, strange as it seems. Now, you know quite as much as I can tell you."

Felix mused for a time over this strange history. He could not shake off the feeling that it was more than a mere coincidence. „Seriously," he said, „I feel something will come of this."

„I hope so," answered Eleanor with a little sigh. „Things certainly look a little better now than they did; but we need some permanent benefit sadly."

„I thought some day had come, mamma," piped little Nelly from her nest on the hearthrug.

„Little pitchers have long ears," said the novelist. „Come and sit on poor old Uncle Jasper's knee, Nelly, and give him a kiss."

„Yes, I will, Uncle Jasper; but I'm not a little pitcher, and I've not dot long ears—Mamma, are my ears long?"

„No, darling," replied her mother with a smile. „Uncle Felix was not speaking of you."

„Then I will sit upon his knee." Whereupon she climbed up on to that lofty perch, and proceeded to draw invidious distinctions between Mr Felix' moustache and the hirsute appendage of her father, a mode of criticism which gave the good-natured literary celebrity huge delight.

„Now," continued Felix, when he had placed the little lady entirely to her satisfaction—„now to resume. In the first place, I should particularly like to see this Margaret Boulton to-day."

„I do not quite agree with you, Mr Felix. It would be cruel, with her nerves in such a state, to cross-examine her to-day," Mrs Seaton said with womanly consideration. „You can have no idea what such a reaction means."

„Precisely," said Felix grimly. „Do you not see what I mean? Her nervous system is particularly highly strung at present—the brain in a state of violent activity, probably; and she is certain to be in a position to remember the minutest detail, and may give us an apparently trivial hint, which may turn out of the utmost importance."

„Still, it seems the refinement of cruelty," said Eleanor, her womanly kindness getting the better of her curiosity. „She is in a particularly nervous state. Naturally, she is inclined to be morbidly religious, and the mere thought of her attempted crime last night upsets her."

„Yes, perhaps so," Felix said; „but I should like to see her now. We cannot tell how important it may be to us."

„I declare your enthusiasm is positively contagious," laughed Seaton,— „Really, Felix, I did not imagine you were so deeply imbued with curiosity. My wife is bad enough, but you are positively girlish."

„Indeed, sir, you belie me," said Eleanor with mock-indignation. „I am moved by a little natural inquisitiveness; but I shall certainly not permit that unfortunate girl to be annoyed for the purpose of gratifying the whim of two grown-up children."

„Mea culpa," Felix replied humbly. „But I should like to see the interesting patient, if only for a few minutes."

Eleanor laughed merrily at this persistent charge. „Well, well," she said, „I will go up to Margaret and ascertain if she is fit to see any one just yet; but I warn you not to be disappointed, for she certainly shall not be further excited."

„I do not think the curiosity is all on our side," Felix said, as Eleanor was leaving the room.—„You are a fortunate man, Seaton, in spite of your troubles," he continued. „A wife like yours must make anxiety seem lighter."

„Indeed, you are right," Edgar answered earnestly. „Many a time I have felt like giving it up, and should have done so, if it had not been for Eleanor."

„Strange, too," said Felix musingly, „that she does not give one the impression of being so brave and courageous. But you never can tell. I have been making a study of humanity for twenty years, and I have been often disappointed in my models. I have seen the weakest do the work of the strongest. I have seen the strongest, on the other hand, go down before the first breath of trouble. I have seen the most acid of them all make the most angelic of wives."

„I wonder you have never married, Felix."

„Did I not tell you my model women have always been the first to disappoint me?" he replied lightly. „Besides, what woman could know Jasper Felix and love him?"

„Your reputation alone——"

„Yes, my reputation—and my money," Felix said bitterly. „Twenty years ago, when I was plain Jasper Felix, I did——But bah! I don't want to discuss faded rose-leaves with you.—Let us change the subject. I have some good news for you. In the first place, I have sold the article you gave me."

„Come, that is cheering. I suppose you managed to screw a guinea out of one of your friends for me?"

„On the contrary, I sold it on its merits," Felix replied, „and ten pounds the price."

„Ten pounds! Am I dreaming, or am I a genius?"

„Neither; which is true, if not complimentary. There, is the cheque to prove you are not dreaming; and as to the other thing, you have no genius, but you have considerable talent.—But I have some further news for you. I have had a note from the editor of Mayfair, to whom I showed your work. Now, Baker of the Mayfair is about the finest judge of literary capacity I know. He says he was particularly struck with your descriptive writing; and if you like to undertake the work, he wants you to visit the principal of the foreign gambling clubs in London, and work up a series of gossiping articles for his paper. The work will not be particularly pleasant; but you will have the entree of all these clubs, and the golden key to get to the working part of the machinery. The thing will be

hard and somewhat hazardous; but it is a grand opportunity of earning considerable kudos. Will you undertake it?“

„Undertake it!“ said Seaton, springing to his feet. „Will I not? Felix, you have made a new man of me. Had it not been for you, I don‘t know what would have become of us by this time. I cannot thank you in words, but you know that I feel your kindness.“

„I do not see how this should not lead to something like fortune; anyway, it means comfort and ease, if I do not mistake your capacity,“ said Felix, totally ignoring the other‘s gratitude. „If I were in your place, I should not tell my wife I was doing anything dangerous.“

„Poor child, how thankful she will be! But you are perfectly right as regards the danger—not that I fear it particularly, though there is no reason to make her anxious.“

„What mischief are you plotting?“ said Eleanor, entering the room at that moment. „You look on particularly good terms with yourselves.“

„Good news, Nelly, good news! I have actually got permanent work to do. You need not ask whose doing it is.“

„No, no,“ said Felix modestly. „It is your own capability you must thank.—What about the patient?“

„I really must ask you to postpone your inquiry for the present,“ she replied; „she is incapable of answering any questions just now. Indeed, I am so uneasy, that I have sent for a doctor.“

„Indeed! Well, I suppose we must wait for the present.—And now, I must tear myself away,“ said Felix, as he rose and proceeded to button his overcoat.—„Seaton, you must hold yourself in readiness for your work at any moment.—No thanks, please,“ as Eleanor was about to speak. „Now, I must go.—Good-night, little Nelly; don‘t forget to think of poor old Uncle Jasper sometimes.“

„Good-night, Felix,“ said Edgar with a hearty hand-shake. „I won‘t thank you; but you know how I feel.—Good-night, dear old boy!“

Chapter VI

„**H**ow do you feel now, Margaret?“

„Nearly over, Miss Nelly. I shall die with the morning.“

A week later and the patient had got gradually worse. The constant exposure, the hard life, and the weeks of semi-starvation, had told its tale on the weak womanly frame. The exposure in the rain and cold on that eventful night had hastened on the consumption which had long settled in the delicate chest. All signs of mental exhaustion had passed away, and the calm hopeful waiting frame of mind had succeeded. She was waiting for death; not with any feeling of terror, but with hopefulness and expectation.

Up to the present, Eleanor had not the heart to ask for any memento or rememberance of the old life; but had nursed her patient with an unceasing watchful care, which only a true woman is capable of. All that day she had sat beside the bed, never moving, but noting, as hour after hour passed steadily away, the gradual change from feverish restlessness to quiet content, never speaking, or causing her patient to speak, though she was longing for some

word or sign. „You have been very good to me, Miss Nelly. Had it not been for you, where should I have been now!“

„Hush, Margaret; don‘t speak like that. Remember, everything is forgiven now. Where there is great temptation, there is much forgiveness.“

„I hope so, miss—I hope so. Some day, we shall all know.“

„Don‘t try to talk too much.“

For a while she lay back, her face, with its bright hectic flush, marked out in painful contrast to the white pillow. Eleanor watched her with a look of infinite pity and tenderness. The distant hum of busy Holborn came with dull force into the room, and the heavy rain beat upon the windows like a mournful dirge. The little American clock on the mantel-shelf was the only sound, save the dry painful cough, which ever and anon proceeded from the dying woman's lips. The night sped on; the sullen roar of the distant traffic grew less and less; the wind dropped, and the girl's hard breathing could be heard painfully and distinctly. Presently, a change came over her face—a kind of bright, almost unearthly intelligence.

„Are you in any pain, Madge?“ Eleanor asked with pitying air.

„How much lighter it is!“ said the dying girl. „My head is quite clear now, miss, and all the pain has gone.—Miss Nelly, I have been dreaming of the old home. Do you remember how we used to sit by the old fountain under the weeping-ash, and wonder what our fortunes would be? I little thought it would come to this.—Tell me, miss, are you in—in want?“

„Not exactly, Madge; but the struggle is hard sometimes.“

„I thought so,“ the dying girl continued. „I would have helped you after she came; but you know the power she had over your poor uncle, a power that increased daily. She used to frighten me. I tremble now when I think of her.“

„Don‘t think of her,“ said Eleanor soothingly. „Try and rest a little, and not talk. It cannot be good for you.“

The sufferer smiled painfully, and a terrible fit of coughing shook her frame. When she recovered, she continued: „It is no use, Miss Nelly; all the rest and all your kind nursing cannot save me now. I used to wonder, when you left Eastwood so suddenly, why you did not take me; but now I know it is all for the best. Until the very last, I stayed in the house.“

„And did not my uncle give you any message, any letter for me?“ asked Eleanor, with an eagerness she could not conceal.

„I am coming to that. The day he died, I was in his room, for she was away, and he asked me if I ever heard from you. I knew you had written letters to him which he never got; and so I told him. Then he gave me a paper for you, which he made me swear to deliver to you by my own hand; and I promised to find you. You know how I found you,“ she continued brokenly, burying her face in her hands.

„Don‘t think of that now, Margaret,“ said Eleanor, taking one wasted hand in her own. „That is past and forgiven.“

„I hope so, miss. Please, bring me that dress, and I will discharge my trust before it is too late. Take a pair of scissors and unpick the seams inside the bosom on the left side.“

The speaker watched Eleanor with feverish impatience, whilst, with trembling fingers, she followed the instructions. Not until she had drawn out a flat parcel, wrapped securely in oiled paper, did the look of impatience transform to an air of relief.

„Yes, that is it," said Margaret, as Eleanor tore off the covering. „I have seen the letter, and have a strange feeling that it contains some secret, it is so vague and rambling, and those dotted lines across it are so strange. Your uncle was so terribly in earnest, that I cannot but think the paper has some hidden meaning. Please, read it to me. Perhaps I can make something of it."

„It certainly does appear strange," observed Eleanor, with suppressed excitement.

[Morton's Note]

Turning towards the light, Eleanor read as follows:

> Darling, we must now be friends. Remember, Nelly, in the garden you promised to obey my wishes. Under the care of Miss Wakefield I hoped you would improve but now I see it was not to be, and as prudence teaches us that all is for the best I must be content. Ask Edgar to forgive me the wrong I have done you both in the past, and this I feel his generous heart will not withhold from me. Now that it is too late, I see how blind I have been, and could I live my life over again how different things would be. Times are changed, yet the memory of past days lingers within me, and like Niobe, I mourn you. When I am gone you will find my blessing a gift that is better than money.

The paper was half a sheet of ordinary foolscap, and the words were written without a single break or margin. It was divided perpendicularly by five dotted lines, and by four lines horizontally, and displayed nothing to the casual eye but an ordinary letter in a feeble handwriting.

The tiny threads of fate had begun to gather. All yet was dark and misty; but in the gloom, faint and transient, was one small ray of light.

Eleanor gazed at the paper abstractedly for a few moments, vaguely trying to find some hidden clue to the mystery.

„You must take care of that paper, Miss Nelly. Something tells me it contains a secret."

„And have you been searching for me two long years, for the sole purpose of giving me this?" Eleanor asked.

„Yes, miss," the sufferer replied simply. „I promised you know. Indeed, I could not look at your uncle and break a vow like mine."

„And you came to London on purpose?"

„Yes. No one knew where I was gone. I have no friends that I remember, and so I came to London. It is an old tale, miss. Trying day by day to get employment, and as regularly failing. I have tried many things the last two bitter years. I have existed—I cannot call it living—in the vilest parts of London, and tried to keep myself by my needle; but that only means dying by inches. God alone knows the struggle it is for a friendless woman here to keep honest and virtuous. The temptation is awful; and as I have been so sorely tried, I hope it will count in my favor hereafter. I have seen sights that the wealthy world knows nothing of. I have lived where a well-dressed man or woman dare not set foot. Oh, the wealth and the misery of this place they call London!"

„And you have suffered like this for me?“ Eleanor said, the tears streaming down her face. „You have gone through all this simply for my sake? Do you know, Madge, what a thoroughly good woman you really are?“

„I, miss?“ the dying girl exclaimed in surprise. „How can I possibly be that, when you know what you do of me! O no; I am a miserable sinner by the side of you. Do you think, Miss Nelly, I shall be forgiven?“

„I do not doubt it,“ said, Eleanor softly; „I cannot doubt it. How many in your situation could have withstood your temptation?“

„I am so glad you think so, miss; it is comfort to me to hear you say that. You were always so good to me,“ she continued gratefully. „Do you know, Miss Nelly dear, whenever I thought of death, I always pictured you as being by my side?“

„Do you feel any pain or restlessness now, Margaret?“

„No, Miss; thank you. I feel quite peaceful and contented. I have done my task, though it has been a hard one at times. I don‘t think I could have rested in my grave if I had not seen you.—Lift me up a little higher, please, and come a little closer. I can scarcely see you now. My eyes are quite misty. I wonder if all dying people think about their younger days, Miss Nelly? I do. I can see it all distinctly: the old broken fountain under the tree where we used to sit and talk about the days to come; and how happy we all were there before she came. Your uncle was a different man then, when he sat with us and listened to you singing hymns. Sing me one of the old hymns now, please.“

In a subdued key, Eleanor sang „Abide with me,“ the listener moving her pallid lips to the words. Presently, the singer finished, and the dying girl lay quiet for a moment.

„Abide with me. How sweet it sounds! ‹Swift to its close ebbs out life‘s little day.› I am glad you chose my favorite hymn, Miss Nelly. I shall die repeating these words: ‹The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide.› Now it is darker still; but I can feel your hand in mine, and I am safe. I did not think death was so blessed and peaceful as this. I am going, going—floating away.“

„Margaret, speak to me!“

„Just one word more. How light it is getting! Is it morning? I can see. I think I am forgiven. I feel better, better! quite forgiven. Light, light, light! everywhere! I can see at last.“

It was all over. The weary aching heart was at rest. Only a woman, done to death in the flower of youth by starvation and exposure; but not before her task was done, her work accomplished. No lofty ambition to stir her pulses, no great goal to point to for its end. Only a woman, who had given her life to carry out a dying trust; only a woman, who had preserved virtue and honesty amid the direst temptation. What an epitaph for a gravestone! An eulogy that needs no glittering marble to point the way up to the Great White Throne.

Chapter VII

Mr Carver sat in his private office a few days later, with Margaret‘s legacy before him. A hundred times he had turned the paper over. He had held it to the light; he had looked at it upside down, and he had looked at it sideways and longways; in fact, every way that his ingenuity could devise. He had even held it

to the fire, in faint hopes of sympathetic ink; but his labor had met with no reward. The secret was not discovered.

The astute legal gentleman consulted his diary, where he had carefully noted down all the facts of the extraordinary case; and the more he studied the matter, the more convinced he became that there was a mystery concealed somewhere; and, moreover, that the key was in his hands, only, unfortunately, the key was a complicated one. Indeed, to such absurd lengths had he gone in the matter, that Edgar Allan Poe's romances of »The Gold Bug« and »The Purloined Letter« lay before him, and his study of those ingenious narratives had permeated his brain to such an extent lately, that he had begun to discover mystery in everything. The tales of the American genius convinced him that the solution was a simple one—provokingly simple, only, like all simple things, the hardest of attainment. He was quite aware of the methodical habits of his late client, Mr Morton, and felt that such a man could not have written such a letter, even on his dying bed, unless he had a powerful motive in so doing. Despite the uneasy consciousness that the affair was a ludicrous one to engage the attention of a sober business man like himself, he could not shake off the fascination which held him.

„Pretty sort of thing this for a man at my time of life to get mixed up in," he muttered to himself. „What would the profession say if they knew Richard Carver had taken to read detective romances in business hours? I shall find myself writing poetry some day, if I don't take care, and coming to the office in a billy-cock hat and turn-down collar. I feel like the heavy father in the transpontine drama; but when I look in that girl's eyes, I feel fit for any lunacy. Pshaw!—Bates!"

Mr Bates entered the apartment at his superior's bidding. „Well, sir?" he said. The estimable Bates was a man of few words.

„I can not make this thing out," exclaimed Mr Carver, rubbing his head in irritating perplexity. „The more I look at it the worse it seems. Yet I am convinced——"

„That there is some mystery about it!"

„Precisely what I was going to remark. Now, Bates, we must—we really must—unravel this complication. I feel convinced that there is something hidden here. You must lend me your aid in the matter. There is a lot at stake. For instance, if——"

„We get it out properly, I get my partnership; if not, I shall have to—whistle for it, sir!"

„You are a very wonderful fellow, Bates—very. That is precisely what I was going to say," Mr Carver exclaimed admiringly. „Now, I have been reading a book—a standard work, I may say."

„Williams's Executors, sir, or——?"

„No," said Mr Carver shortly, and not without some confusion; „it is not that admirable volume—it is, in fact, a—a romance."

Mr Bates coughed dryly, but respectfully, behind his hand. „I beg your pardon, sir; I don't quite understand. Do you mean you have been reading a—novel?"

„Well, not exactly," replied Mr Carver blushing faintly. „It is, as I have said, a romance—a romance," he continued with an emphasis upon the substantive, to mark the difference between that and an ordinary work of fiction. „It is a book treating upon hidden things, and explaining, in a light and pleasant way, the

method of logically working out a problem by common-sense. Now, for instance, in the passage I have marked, an allusion is made, by way of example.—Did you ever—ha, ha! play at marbles, Bates?“

„Well, sir, many years ago, I might have indulged in that little amusement,“ Mr Bates admitted with professional caution; „but really, sir, it is such a long time ago, that I hardly remember.“

„Very good, Bates. Now, in the course of your experience upon the subject of marbles, do you ever remember placing a game called »Odd and Even«?“

Bates looked at his principal in utter amazement, and Mr Carver, catching the expression of his face, burst into a hearty laugh, faintly echoed by the bewildered clerk. The notion of two gray-headed men solemnly discussing a game of marbles in business hours, suddenly struck him as being particularly ludicrous.

„Well, sir,“ Bates said with a look of relief, „I don‘t remember the fascinating amusement you speak of, and I was wondering what it could possibly have to do with the case in point.“

„Well, I won‘t go into it now; but if you should like to read it for yourself, there it is,“ said Mr Carver, pushing over the yellow-bound volume to his subordinate.

Mr Bates eyed the volume suspiciously, and touched it gingerly with his forefinger. „As a matter of professional duty, sir, if you desire it, I will read the matter you refer to; but if it is a question of recreation, then, sir, with your permission, I would rather not.“

„That is a hint for me, I suppose. Bates,“ said Mr Carver with much good-humor, „not to occupy my time with frivolous literature.“

„Well, sir, I do not consider these the sort of books for a place on a solicitor‘s table; but I suppose you know best.“

„I don‘t think such a thing has happened before, Bates,“ Mr Carver answered with humility. „You see, this is an exceptional case, and I take great interest in the parties.“

„Well, there is something in that,“ said Mr Bates severely, „so I suppose we must admit it on this occasion.—But don‘t you think, sir, there is some way of getting to the bottom of this affair, without wasting valuable time on such as that?“ and he pointed contemptuously at the book before him.

„Perhaps so, Bates—perhaps so. I think the best thing we can do is to consult an expert. Not a man who is versed in writings, but one of those clever gentlemen who make a study of ciphers. For all we know, there may be a common form of cipher in this paper.“

„That is my opinion, sir. Depend upon it, marbles have nothing to do with this mystery.“

„Mr Seaton wishes to see you, sir,“ said a clerk at this moment.

„Indeed! Ask him to come in.—Good-morning, my dear sir,“ as Seaton entered. „We have just been discussing your little affair, Bates and I; but we can make nothing of it—positively nothing.“

„No; I suppose not,“ Edgar replied lightly. „I, for my part, cannot understand your making so much of a common scrap of paper. Depend upon it, the precious document is only an ordinary valedictory letter after all. Take my advice—throw it in the fire, and think no more about it.“

„Certainly not, sir,“ Mr Carver replied indignantly. „I don‘t for one moment believe it to be anything but an important cipher.—What are you smiling at?“

Edgar had caught sight of the yellow volumes on the table, and could not repress a smile. „Have you read those tales?“ he said.

„Yes, I have; and they are particularly interesting.“

„Then I won‘t say any more,“ Edgar replied. „When a man is fresh from these romances, he is incapable of regarding ordinary life for a time. But the disease cures itself. In the course of a month or so, you will begin to forget these complications, and probably burn that fatal paper.“

„I intend to do nothing of the sort; I am going to submit it to an expert this afternoon, and get his opinion.“

„Yes. And he will keep it for a fortnight, after having read it over once, and then you will get an elaborate report, covering some sheets of paper, stating that it is an ordinary letter. Who was the enemy who lent you Poe‘s works?“

„I read those books before you were born, young man; and I may tell you—apart from them—that I am fully convinced that there is a mystery somewhere. ‘Pon my word, you take the matter very coolly, considering all things. But let us put aside the mystery for a time, and tell me something of yourself.“

„I am looking up now, thanks to you and Felix,“ Edgar replied gratefully. „I have an appointment at last.“

„I am sure I am heartily glad to hear it. What is it?“

„It was the doing of Felix, of course. The editor of Mayfair was rather taken by my descriptive style in a paper which Felix showed him, and made me an offer of doing the principal continental gambling-houses in London.“

„Um,“ said Mr Carver doubtfully. „And the pay?“

„Is particularly good, besides which, I have the entree of these places—the golden key, you know.“

„Have you told your wife about it?“

„Well, not altogether; she might imagine it was dangerous for me. She knows partly what I am doing; but I must not frighten her. I have had two nights of it, and apart from the excitement and the heat, it is certainly not dangerous.“

„I am glad of that,“ said Mr Carver; „and am heartily pleased to hear of your success—providing it lasts.“

„Oh, it is sure to last, for I have hundreds of places to go to. To-night I am going to a foreign place in Leicester Square. I go about midnight, and think I may generally be able to get home about two. I have to go alone always.“

„Well, I hope now you have started, you will continue as well,“ Mr Carver said heartily; „at any rate, you can continue until I unravel the mystery, and place you in possession of your fortune. Until then, it will do very well.“

„I am not going to count on that,“ Edgar replied; „and if it is a failure, I shall not be so disappointed as you, I fancy.“

Chapter VIII

It wanted a few minutes to eleven o‘clock, the same night when Seaton turned into Long Acre on his peculiar business. A sharp walk soon brought him to the Alhambra, whence the people were pouring out into the square. Turning down ---- Street, he soon reached his destination—a long narrow house, in total darkness—a sombre contrast to the neighboring buildings, which were mostly a blaze of light, and busy with the occupations of life. A quiet double rap for some

time produced no impression; and just as he had stood upon the door-step long enough to acquire considerable impatience, a sliding panel in the door was pushed back, and a face, in the dim gas-light, was obtruded. A short but somewhat enigmatical conversation ensued, at the end of which the door was grudgingly opened, and Edgar found himself in black darkness. The truculent attendant having barricaded the exit, gave a peculiar whistle, and immediately the light in the hall was turned up. It was a perfectly bare place; but the carpet underfoot was of the heaviest texture, and apparently—as an extra precaution—had been covered with india-rubber matting, so that the footsteps were perfectly deadened; indeed, not the slightest foot-fall could be heard. Following his guide in the direction of the rear of the house, and ascending a short flight of steps, Edgar was thrust unceremoniously into a dark room, the door of which was immediately closed behind him and locked. For a few seconds, Edgar stood quite at a loss to understand his position, till the peculiar whistle was again repeated, and immediately, as if by magic, the room was brilliantly lighted. When Edgar recovered from the glare, he looked curiously around. It was a large room, without windows, save a long skylight, and furnished with an evident aim at culture; but though the furniture was handsome, it was too gaudy to please a tasteful eye. The principal component parts consisted of glass gilt and crimson velvet; quite the sort of apartment that the boy-hero discovers, when he is led with dauntless mien and defiant eye into the presence of the Pirate king; and indeed some of the faces of the men seated around the green board would have done perfectly well for that bloodthirsty favorite of our juvenile fiction.

There were some thirty men in the room, two-thirds of them playing rouge-et-noir; nor did they cease their rapt attention to the game for one moment to survey the new-comer, that office being perfectly filled by the Argus-eyed proprietor, who was moving unceasingly about the room. „Will you play, sare?“ he said insinuatingly to Edgar, who was leisurely surveying the group and making little mental notes for his guidance.

„Thanks! Presently, when I have finished my cigar,“ he replied.

„Ver good, sare, ver good. Will not m‘sieu take some refreshment—a leetle champein or eau-di-vie?“

„Anything,“ Edgar replied carelessly, as the polite proprietor proceeded to get the desired refreshment.

For a few minutes Edgar sat watching his incongruous companions, as he drank sparingly of the champagne before him. The gathering was of the usual run of such places, mostly foreigners, as befitted the neighborhood, and not particularly desirable foreigners at that. On the green table the stakes were apparently small, for Edgar could see nothing but silver, with here and there, a piece of gold. At a smaller table four men were playing the game called poker for small stakes; but what particularly interested Edgar was a young man deep in the fascination of ecarte with a man who to him was evidently a stranger. The younger man—quite a boy, in fact—was losing heavily, and the money on the table here was gold alone, with some bank-notes. Directly Edgar saw the older man, who was winning steadily, he knew him at once; only two nights before he had seen him in a gambling-house at the West End playing the same game, with the same result. Standing behind the winner was a sinister-looking scoundrel, backing the winner‘s luck with the unfortunate youngster, and occasionally winning a half-crown from a tall raw-looking American, who was

apparently simple enough to risk his money on the loser. Attracted by some impulse he could not understand, Edgar quitted his seat and took his stand alongside the stranger, who was losing his money with such simple good-nature.

„Stranger, you have all the luck, and that‘s a fact. There goes another piece of my family plate. Your business is better ‘n gold-mining, and I want you to believe it,“ drawled the American, passing another half-crown across the table.

„You are a bit unlucky,“ replied the stranger, with a flash of his white teeth; „but your turn will come, particularly as the young gentleman is really the better player. I should back him myself, only I believe in a man‘s luck.“

„Wall, now, I shouldn‘t wonder if the younker is the best player,“ the American replied, with an emphasis on the last word. „So I fancy I shall give him another trial. He‘s a bit like a young hoss, he is—but he‘s honest.“

„You don't mean to insinuate we‘re not on the square, eh?“ said the lucky player sullenly; „because, if that is so——“

„Now, don‘t you get riled, don‘t,“ said the American soothingly. „I‘m a peaceable individual, and apt to get easily frightened. I‘m a-goin‘ to back the young un again.“

The game proceeded: the younger man lost. Another game followed, the American backing him again, and gradually, in his excitement, bending further and further over the table. The players, deep in their movements, scarcely noticed him.

„My game!“ said the elder man triumphantly. „Did you ever see such luck in your life? Here is the king again.“

The American, quick as thought, picked up the pack of cards and turned them leisurely over in his hand. „Well, now, stranger,“ he said, with great distinctness, „I don‘t know much about cards, and that‘s a fact. I‘ve seen some strange things in my time, but I never—no, never—seed a pack of cards before with two kings of the same suit.“

„It must be a mistake,“ exclaimed the stranger, jumping to his feet with an oath. „Perhaps the cards have got mixed.“

„Wall, it‘s not a nice mistake, I reckon. Out to ‘Frisco, I seed a gentleman of your persuasion dance at his own funeral for a mistake like that. He didn‘t dance long, and the exertion killed him; at least that‘s what the crowner‘s jury said.“

„Do you mean to insinuate that I‘m a swindler, sir? Do you mean to infer that I cheated this gentleman?“ blustered the detected sharper, approaching the speaker with a menacing air.

„That is about the longitude of it,“ replied the American cheerfully.

Without another word and without the slightest warning, the swindler rushed at the American; but he had evidently reckoned without his host, for he was met by a crushing blow full in the face, which sent him reeling across the room. His colleague deeming discretion the better part of valour, and warned by a menacing glance from Edgar, desisted from his evident intention of aiding in the attack.

By this time the sinister proprietor and the players from the other tables had gathered round, evidently, from the expression of their eyes, ripe for any sort of mischief and plunder. Clearly, the little group were in a desperate strait.

„Have it out,“ whispered Edgar eagerly to his gaunt companion. „I‘m quite with you. They certainly mean mischief.“

„All right, Britisher," replied the American coolly. „I'll pull through it somehow. Keep your back to mine."

The proprietor was the first to speak. „I understand, sare, you accuse one of my customer of the cheat. Cheat yourself—pah!" he said, snapping his fingers in the American's face. „Who are you, sare, that comes here to accuse of the cheat?"

„Look, here," said the American grimly. „My name is Aeneas B. Slimm, generally known as Long Ben. I don't easily rile, you grinning little monkey; but when I do rile, I rile hard, and that's a fact. I ain't been in the mines for ten years without knowing a scoundrel when I meet him, and I never had the privilege of seein' such a fine sample as I see around me to-night. Now you open that door right away; you hear me say it."

The Frenchman clenched his teeth determinedly, but did not speak, and the crowd gathered more closely around the trio.

„Stand back!" shouted Mr Slimm—„stand back, or some of ye will suffer. Will you open that door?"

The only answer was a rush by some one in the crowd, a movement which that some one bitterly repented, for the iron-clamped toe of the American's boot struck him prone to the floor, sick and faint with the pain. At this moment the peculiar whistle was heard, and the room was instantly in darkness. Before the crowd could collect themselves for a rush, Mr Slimm passed his hand beneath his long coat-tails and produced a flat lantern, which was fastened round his waist like a policeman's, and which gave sufficient light to guard against any attack; certainly enough light to show the hungry swindlers the cold gleam of a revolver barrel covering the assembly. The American passed a second weapon to Edgar, and stood calmly waiting for the next move.

„Now," he said, sullenly and distinctly, „I think we are quits. We air going to leave this pleasant company right away, but first we propose to do justice. Where is the artist who plays cards with two kings of one suit? He'd better come forward, because this weapon has a bad way of going off. He need not fancy I can't see him, because I can. He is skulking behind the brigand with the ear-rings."

The detected swindler came forward sullenly.

„Young man," said Mr Slimm, turning towards the boy who had been losing so heavily, „how much have you lost?"

The youngster thought a moment, and said about twenty pounds.

„Twenty pounds. Very good.—Now, my friend, I'm going to trouble you for the loan of twenty pounds. I don't expect to be in a position to pay you back just at present; but until I do, you can console yourself by remembering that virtue is its own reward. Come, no sulking; shell out that money, or——"

With great reluctance, the sharper produced the money and handed it over to the youth. The American watched the transaction with grave satisfaction, and then turned to the landlord. „Mr Frenchman, we wish you a very good-night. We have not been very profitable customers, nor have we trespassed upon your hospitality. If you want payment badly, you can get it out of the thief who won my half-crowns.—Good-night, gentlemen; we may meet again. If we do, and I am on the jury, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt."

A moment later, they were in the street, and walking away at a brisk pace, the ungrateful youth disappearing with all speed.

„I am much obliged to you," Edgar said; „you got me well out of that."

„Not at all," Mr Slimm replied modestly „you would have got out of it yourself; you've plenty of grit."

„Well, I don't know," Edgar said admiringly; „I would give something to have your pluck and coolness."

„Practice," replied the American dryly. „That isn't what I call a scrape—that's only a little amusement. But I was rather glad you were with me. I like the look of your face; there's plenty of character there. As to that pesky young snip, if I'd known he was going to slip off like that, do you think I should have bothered about his money for him? No, sir."

„I fancy he was too frightened to say or do much."

„Perhaps so.—Have a cigar?—I daresay he's some worn-out roue of eighteen, all his nerves destroyed by late hours and dissipation, at a time when he ought to be still at his books."

„Do you always get over a thing as calmly as this affair?" asked Edgar, at the same time manipulating one of his companion's huge cigar's. „I don't think dissipation has had much effect on your nerves."

„Well, it don't, and that's a fact," Mr Slimm admitted candidly; „and I've had my fling to.—I tell you what it is, Mr—Mr——"

„Seaton—Edgar Seaton is my name."

„Well, Mr Seaton, I've looked death in the face too often to be put out by a little thing like that. When a man has slept, as I have, in the mines with a matter of one thousand ounces of gold in his tent for six weeks, among the most awful blackguards in the world, and plucky blackguards too, his nerves are fit for most anything afterwards. That's what I done, ay, and had to fight for it more than once."

„But that does not seem so bad as some dangers."

„Isn't it?" replied the American with shudder. „When you wake up and find yourself in bed with a rattlesnake, you've got a chance then; when you are on the ground with a panther over you, there is just a squeak then; but to go to sleep expecting to wake up with a knife in your ribs, is quite another apple.—Well, I must say goodnight. Here is Covent Garden. I am staying at the Bedford. Come and breakfast with me to-morrow, and don't forget to ask for Aeneas Slimm."

„I will come," said Edgar, with a hearty hand-shake.—„Good- night."

Chapter IX

It was nearly ten o'clock on the following morning before Edgar reached the Bedford, Covent Garden. He found the American in his private room waiting his arrival, and clad in a loose dressing-gown, which made him look extra tall and thin—a wonderful garment, embracing every known hue and colour, and strongly resembling, save as to its garishness, a Canadian wood in the fall. Mr Slimm laid aside a disreputable brier he was smoking, as soon as he perceived his visitor. „Morning!" he said briskly. „Tolerably punctual. Hope you don't object to the smell of tobacco so early?"

„I don't know," Edgar replied, throwing himself down in a chair. „Like most well-regulated Britons, I cannot say I am partial to the smell of tobacco before breakfast."

„Do you know," Mr Slimm responded dryly, „I have seen the time when I never smoked before breakfast. I don't allude to any great outbreak of virtue on my part; but the fact is, when a man can't get a breakfast, he can't be accused of smoking before it—no, sir." Having administered this crushing piece of logic with characteristic force, Mr. Slimm rang the bell and proceeded to order „the fixings," which was his term for the matutinal repast.

„You Britishers have got some sound notions on the subject of dinners and promiscuous refreshment; but your imagination don't soar to breakfast. There's nothing substantial about it," said Mr Slimm, after finishing a pound or so of steak. „The Francatelli who rules the kitchen here is fairly good; and I flatter myself if I stay here much longer he will know what a breakfast is. I stayed for a week at a place off the Strand once; but I was almost starved. Ham and eggs, chops and steaks, was the programme, with a sole, by way of a treat, on Sundays."

„Very sad," replied Edgar, with considerable gravity. „You must have suffered. You don't seem, however, particularly short here."

„Well, no," Mr Slimm admitted, at the same time helping himself to fish; I can manage here."

„I hope last night's little scrimmage has not injured your appetite this morning?" Edgar asked politely.

„Not much. Aeneas Slimm generally can pick up his crumbs tolerably. This little village is a fine place to sharpen the appetite."

„How long do you propose to stay here?"

„I don't know; it all depends. I am doing London, you see, and when I do a place, I do it well. You've got some fine old landmarks here—very fine," said Mr Slimm with proverbial American reverence for the antique. „I guess we should be proud of the Tower over to New York—yes, sir."

„I have never been over it," Edgar said carelessly.

„Do, tell. Man, I guess you're funning. Seems to me kind o' incredible for an Englishman to live in London and not see the Tower."

„Really, Mr Slimm, I have never seen the Tower."

„Wall, if this don't beat snakes! Never seen the Tower!" exclaimed the American, chipping his third egg. „Maybe you never heard of a picturesque pile known to the inquiring stranger as the British Museum!—Now, have you ever heard of Westminster Abbey?"

„Well," said Edgar laughingly, „I believe I have; but I must confess that I have never been inside either of the places you mention."

„Wonderful! Mr Seaton, you're born to make a name. The man who can pass these places without emotion, ain't no common shake. I guess you're the kind of matter they make genius out of."

„You seem to be astonished. Surely, in New York, you have buildings and churches quite as fine as anything in London?"

„You think so, do you? Wall, if it's any consolation to you, keep on thinking so; it won't hurt any one.—Mr Seaton," continued Slimm, lowering his voice reverently, „when I get pottering about down at Westminster, and look at the Abbey and the House of Parliament, strike me if I don't wish I was a Britisher myself!"

„That is high praise indeed; and I think it is due to your native patriotism to say your approval does you credit. But candidly, it always struck me that our Houses of Parliament are particularly mean-looking for their position."

„Maybe, maybe," Mr Slimm replied meditatively; „but there's something about them that makes me feel chockful of poetry. When I wander into the Abbey among these silent stones and listen to that grand organ, I feel it does me good."

„You do not look like a man who took any particular delight in music."

„I don't, and that's a fact. I don't know F sharp from a bull's foot; but I can feel it. When the artist presiding at the instrument pulls out that wonderful stop like a human voice, I feel real mean, and that's a fact—yes, sir."

„It is wonderful what an effect music has on the human understanding," Edgar replied. „‹Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.› My wife always says——"

„Your wife! I didn't know you were married."

„Considering I never told you that interesting fact, I do not see very well how you could know," Edgar replied with a smile; which was, however, not so cordially received by Mr Slimm.

„Um," he said, doubtfully.—„Now, look here, my young friend; I'm a rough chap, and I've just got to say my mind, if I die for it. Don't you think a young married man has no business in such a place as we met last night?"

„But, you see, I had business there," Edgar said, still smiling. „It was stern business, and nothing else, which took me to that place."

„You've got the bulge of me, and that's a fact."

„You mean, you don't understand. Well, I am what is usually known—or rather, in my case, unknown—as a literary man. I am working up a series of articles on gambling-houses."

„Why don't you get on a more respectable line?"

Edgar tapped his pocket and nodded significantly.

„Hard up," said Mr Slimm. „Case of need's must, when what's-his-name drives. You don't look as if you were dragged up to this sort of thing neither?"

„To be candid with you, I was not," Edgar replied, urged by some strange impulse to confide in the American. „I am a University man without money. My history is a common one. Educated at a public school, and afterwards at Cambridge, I am expected to get a living in some mysterious way. All my little money was spent upon my education, and then I had to shift for myself. Much good my second-class honors have done me."

„Then, to prove your wisdom, you got married."

„Of course. But now comes the most remarkable part of my story. My wife was her uncle's heiress—not that her money was any inducement to me—and I was engaged to her with his approval. It was arranged I was to manage his property, and we were to live with him. Then a relative of his—a lady—came to stay, and everything went wrong from that time. Finally, acting under the lady's wonderful fascination, my wife's uncle forbade our marriage, and ordered her to marry a nephew of the lady's. This, of course, she refused to do, and was consequently disinherited."

„What sort of a seraph was the lady?" asked Mr Slimm, with considerable interest.

„Don't mention her, pray. She had the evil-eye, if ever woman had.—But to continue. After our wedding, we came to London, and at different times tried to bring about a reconciliation; but to no effect. Then the old gentleman died."

„A common story enough; but considerable rough on you and your wife," said Mr Slimm.

„After that, a most remarkable occurrence happened. When the will was proved, not a sixpence of the old gentleman‘s money could be found—that is, excepting the few hundreds in the local bank, for household expenses. It is four years ago now, and to this day not one farthing of the money has turned up.“

„Penny plain, and twopence colored,“ the American said sententiously—„to be continued in our next. There‘s the making of a sound family romance about this.—Anything more?“

„A little. An old companion of my wife‘s turned up the other day—or I should say my wife found her accidentally in London. She was standing in the rain on Waterloo Bridge, looking into the water.—You comprehend, don‘t you?“

„‹One more unfortunate, weary of breath,›“ quoted Mr Slimm with a tender inflection which surprised Edgar. „Go on.“

„It was a wonderful coincidence, if nothing more. It appeared that my wife‘s uncle on his dying bed gave her a paper for my wife; and he charged her most solemnly to find her and deliver it, which has been done.“

„And it was some secret cipher, bet my boots.“

„On the contrary, it is only a letter—a valedictory letter, containing no clue whatever.“

„Stranger, you take this matter sort of calm,“ said Slimm solemnly. „I should like to see that letter. Mark me; providence has a hand in this, and I want you not to forget it. Such a meeting as that between your wife and her old companion didn‘t happen for nothing. Listen, and I‘ll tell you what once happened to me in Australia. I shall never forget it. I‘m a rich man now, for my wants; but I was poor then; in fact, it was just at the time when fortune had turned. I had, at the time I am speaking of, nearly a thousand ounces of dust buried in my tent. As far as I could tell, not a soul in the camp knew what I had, as I had kept it quiet. Well, one night I started out to visit an old chum in a neighboring claim. It was nearly dark when I started, and I had no companion but my dog. I had not gone very far when he began to act in a ridiculous manner, barking and snapping at my horse‘s heels, till I thought he was stark mad. Then he turned towards home, stopping every now and then to whine, and finally he struck off home in a bee-line. I rode on, never thinking anything about it till suddenly my horse stumbled and nearly threw me. He had never done such a thing before, and I hadn‘t got twenty yards before he did it again. Stranger, I want you to believe I was scared, and I don‘t scare easy either. Then I thought of the tales I had read about dogs and their cunning, and, urged by something I can‘t understand I turned back. You‘d better believe I'm glad I did. When I got back to my tent, I stole in quietly, and there were three of the biggest scoundrels in the camp digging away exactly over the gold. I didn‘t give them much time for meditation, I reckon. It was a tough fight; but I saved my gold. I got this valentine to remember it by; darn their ugly pictures; and Mr Slimm bared his huge chest, and displayed a livid gash seamed and lined thereon.

„And the robbers—what became of them?“

„Suffocation,“ Slimm replied laconically. „The quality of mercy is strained pretty considerable in a mining camp.“

„And the dog?“

„Dead!—killed by these scoundrels. I ain‘t powerful in the water-cart line; but I don‘t mind saying I snivelled then. I can‘t think of that faithful insect without

a kind of lumpiness in my throat.—And now, my friend, don‘t you tell me there‘s no such thing as fate. You mind if your affair don‘t turn out trumps yet.“

„I don‘t think so,“ Edgar replied dubiously. „It is all forgotten now, though it was a nine day‘s wonder in Somersetshire at the time.“

„Somersetshire!“ said the American to Edgar. „Now, that‘s strange. I‘m going to Somersetshire in a few days to see a man I haven‘t set eyes on for years. He is a very different man from me—a quiet, scholarly gentleman, a little older than myself. He is a bookish sort of man; and I met him in the mines. We kind of froze to each other; and when we parted, it was understood that whenever I came to England, I was to go and see him. What part of Somersetshire do you hail from?“

„The name of my wife‘s old home is Eastwood.“

„Eastwood? Tell me quickly, is it possible that your wife‘s uncle is Mr Charles Morton?“

„The same,“ Edgar gasped.—„What do you know of him?“

„What do I know of him? Why, he was the man I was going to visit; and he‘s dead, poor old fellow! You see, I always liked him, and once I saved his life. It‘s a curious thing, but when you do a man a favour, or save his life, or any trifle of that kind, you always get to like him some way. Poor old Morton! Well, if this don‘t beat snakes! And your wife is the little Nelly he was always raving about? Dear, dear!“

„There must be something more than meets the eye here,“ Edgar said, with a little quaver in his voice. „Taking all the circumstances into consideration, it looks as if some inscrutable providence has a hand in it.“

„You bet. I‘m not particularly learned, nor no scholar; but I do remember some lines of your immortal poet which tells us: ‹There‘s a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.› The more I think of life, the more it puzzles me, and that‘s a fact. To think of you and I—two people in five millions—meeting by such chance! And to think of your wife being the niece of my old friend!“

„Did he speak much of her to you?“ Edgar asked.

„A few. ‹Speak› is no word for it: he raved about her. If ever a man loved a girl, it was your uncle. You must not judge him harshly.“

„I do not; I never did. That there has been collusion, or something more, I have always been convinced. He was so fond of me till his half-sister came; and as to Nelly, he worshipped her.“

„He just did, I know. I should like to see that letter.“

„So you shall; but really, I can see nothing in it.“

„Try and describe it to me.“

„That soon done. It is a commonplace epistle, saying he wished to be remembered as a friend, asking me to forgive him, and hinting that if he had his life to live over again, how different things would be.“

„That is only a blind, perhaps.—Describe the letter.“

„It is written on part of a sheet of foolscap; and from the beginning of the first line to the finish, the paper is covered with writing.“

„No heading of superscription, no signature?“ queried Mr Slimm.

„No; it is not signed; but is precisely like a letter without heading or signature trimmed close up to the writing with a pair of scissors.“

„And is it folded, or are there any lines about it?“

„It is folded like an ordinary note, and there are various horizontal and perpendicular lines upon it. The lines are dotted. Can you make anything of it?“

„Yes,“ said the American quietly. „ can make fortune of it. Show me that letter for five minutes, and I will show you something you would give ten-thousand pounds to see.“

And so, arranging for an early meeting, they parted for the day.

* * * * *

Next morning, Eleanor told her husband of a curious dream she had had during the night. She thought she stood on a strange shore, with the sea spread out before her to the utmost horizon. It was sunrise, and coming towards her over the quiet waters, was a great ship—an „Argosy with golden sails“—and somehow she thought it brought golden treasures for her. Three times she dreamed the dream, and, saw the stately ship. She asked Edgar what he thought of it. He said that dreams went by contraries.

Chapter X

A cynical writer somewhere observes, that no man is too rich not to be glad to get a thousand pounds; and we may therefore assume the joy of an individual who possesses about as many pence, in prospect of obtaining possession of that sum. It was with this kind of joy—not, however, quite free from incredulity—that Edgar, when he met Mr Slimm by appointment at his hotel next day, listened to that gentleman‘s renewed asseverations that there were thousands of pounds somewhere in that bit of paper which had been such a mystery to Edgar and his friends. Mr Slimm was this morning more enthusiastic than ever on the subject; but Edgar only smiled in reply, and eyed his cigar with the air of a connoisseur in the weed. The notion of his possessing such a sum was decidedly puzzling. His coolness attracted Mr Slimm‘s admiration.

„I‘ve seen a man hanged in the middle of a comic song,“ that gentleman observed, with an air of studious reflection; „and I guess he was somewhat frigid. I once saw a man meet a long-lost brother whom he had given up for dead, and ask him for a borrowed sovereign, by way of salutation, and I calculate that was cool; but for pure solid stoical calmness, you are right there and blooming.“

„Had I expressed any perturbation, it would have been on account of my doubting your sanity,“ Edgar replied. „Does it not strike you as a little strange that a casual acquaintance should discover a puzzle worth ten thousand pounds to me?“

„The unexpected always happens; and blessed things happen swiftly, as great and good things always do,“ said Slimm sententiously. „I haven‘t quite got the touch of them quotations, but the essence is about consolidated, I calculate.“

„What a fund of philosophy you have!“

„You may say that,“ said the American with some little pride. „You see, some years ago I was down to New Orleans, and, I had considerable fever—fact, I wasn‘t out of the house for months. Reading ain‘t much in my line; but I had to put up with it then. There was a good library in the house, and at first I used to

pick out the plums; but that wouldn‘t do, so I took ‘em in alphabetical order. It was a large assortment of experience to me. First, I‘d get Blair on the Grave, and read that till I was uncertain whether I was an or‘nary man or a desperate bad one. Then I would hitch on to British Battles, and get the taste out of my mouth. I reckon I stored up enough knowledge to ruin an or‘nary digestion. I read a cookery book once, followed by a chemistry work. I got mixed there. But to return to our muttons, as the Mo‘sieus say. I ain‘t joking about that letter, and that‘s a fact.“

„But what can you know about it?“ Edgar queried, becoming interested, in spite of himself and his better judgment.

„Well, you listen, and I‘ll tell you.“

Edgar composed himself to listen, excited more than he cared to show by the impressive air of his companion, and the absence of that quaint smile which usually distinguished him; nor could the younger man fail to notice not only the change of manner but the change of voice. Mr Slimm was no longer a rough miner; and his accent, if not of refinement, was that of cultivation. Carefully choosing another cigar, and lighting it with deliberate slowness, each moment served to raise his companion‘s impatience, a consummation which the astute American doubtless desired.

„When I first knew your uncle,“ he said at length, „we were both much younger men, and, as I have before told you, I saved his life. That was in the mines. Well, after a time I lost sight of him, as is generally the case with such wanderers. After he left the mines, I did not stay long; for a kind of home-sickness came over me, and I concluded to get away. I determined to get back and settle down; and for the first time in my life, the notion of marriage came into my head. I had not returned long when I met my fate. Mr Seaton, I will not weary you with a description of my wife. If ever there was an angel upon earth——But no matter; still, it is always a mystery to my mind what she could see in a rough uncouth fellow like me. Well, in course of time we married. I had some money then; but we decided before the year was out that it would be best to get some business or occupation for me. So, after little Amy was born, we moved West.

„For five years we lived there in our little paradise, and two more children came to brighten our Western home. I was rapidly growing a rich man, for the country was good, and the fear of Indians kept more timorous people away. As for us, we were the best of friends; and the old chief used to come to my farmhouse and nurse little Amy for hours. I shall never forget that sight. The dear little one, with her blue eyes and fair curls, sitting on that stern old man‘s knee, playing with his beads, and not the least afraid; while the old fellow used to grunt and laugh and get as near a smile as it is possible for an Indian to do. But this was not to last. The old chief died, and a half-breed was appointed in his place. I never liked that man. There was something so truculent and vicious in his face, that it was impossible to like the ruffian. Well, one day he insulted my wife; she screamed, and I ran to her assistance. I took in the situation at a glance, and gave him there and then about the soundest thrashing a man ever had in his life. He went away threatening dire vengeance and looking the deadliest hate; but next morning he came and apologised in such humble terms—for the scoundrel spoke English as well as his own tongue—that I was fain to forget it. Another peaceful year passed away, and then I was summoned

to New York on business. Without a single care or anxiety, I left my precious ones behind. I had done it before, and they were not the least afraid.

„One night, when I had completed my business, and had prepared everything for my start in the morning, I was strolling aimlessly along Broadway, when I was hailed by a shout, accompanied by a hearty slap on the back. I turned round, and there I saw Charlie Morton. Mind, I am talking of over twenty years ago, and I think of him as the dashing, good natured, weak Charlie Morton I used to know.—Well, to resume. Over a quiet smoke, he arranged to accompany me.

„It was a glorious morning when we set out, and our hearts were light and gladsome, and our spirits as bright as the weather. Was not I returning to my darlings! We rode on mile after mile and day after day, till we were within twelve hours of my house. Then we found, by unmistakable signs, that the Indians were on the war-path. This was uncomfortable news for us; but still I never had an uneasy thought for the people at home.

„When the following morning dawned I rose with a strange presentiment of coming evil; but I shook it off, thinking it was the excitement of returning, for I had never been away from my wife so long before. It was just about noon when I thought I saw a solitary figure in the distance. It was a strange thing to meet a stray Indian there, and judge of my surprise when I saw him making towards us! It turned out to be a deaf and dumb Sioux I employed about the clearing, and one of the same tribe we were so friendly with. By his excited state and jaded appearance, he had travelled far and hurriedly. When we came up to him, a horrible fear came over me, for then I saw he was in his war-paint. Hurriedly, I made signs to him to know if all was well at home. He shook his head sadly; and with that composure which always characterises his race, proceeded to search for something in his deerskin vest. You can imagine the eagerness with which I watched him; and when he produced a note, with what eagerness did I snatch it out of his hand! Hastily, I read it, and sank back in my saddle with a sense of almost painful relief. Apparently, all was well. The missive was half a sheet of note-paper, or, more properly, half of half a sheet of paper, containing some twelve lines, written right across the paper, with no signature or heading, saying how anxious she was for my return. I handed it to Morton with a feeling of delight and thankfulness; but, to my surprise, as he read it, he became graver and graver. At last he burst forth: ‹Slimm, have you any secret cipher between yourselves?›“

„‹No,› I replied, somewhat startled at the question, ‹Why?›

„‹Because there is something more here than meets the eye. You will not mind my saying so; but the body of this note is almost cold, not to say frivolous, while words, burning words, catch my eye here and there. Can you explain it?›

„‹Go on!›

„I hardly knew my own voice, it sounded so hard and strained.

„‹Yes,› he mused, twisting the paper in his supple fingers, ‹there is more here than meets the eye. This old messenger is a Sioux; that tribe is on the war-path, and the chief thoroughly understands English. An ordinary appeal for help would be worse than useless, if it fell into his hands. I perceive this paper is creased, and creased with method, and the most touching words are always confined within certain creases. Now, I will fold this longways, and turn the

paper so; and then fold it thus, and thus. We are coming to the enigma. Now thus.—No; this way, and—Merciful powers!›

„He almost reeled from his saddle, and I leant over him with straining eyes and read: ‹For God‘s sake, hasten. On the war-path. White Cloud [the chief] has declared. ... Hasten to us.› I stopped to see no more. Mechanically thrusting the paper into his saddle-bag, Morton urged me forward; and for some hours we rode like madmen, spurring our horses till the poor creatures almost dropped. At last, in the distance I saw what was my home—a smoking mass of ruins. In the garden lay my three children—dead: and not a quarter of a mile away my wife—also dead!“

The American here stopped, and threw himself on his face upon the couch where he had been reclining, his huge frame shaking with the violence of his emotion. Edgar watched him with an infinite pity in his eyes for some moments, not daring to intrude upon his grief. Presently, Slimm calmed himself, and raising his face, said: „Wall, my friend, I guess them statistics are sorter calculated to blight what the poet calls ‹love‘s young dream.›—Pass the brandy,“ he continued, with an air of ghastly cheerfulness.

„Why did you tell me this?“ Edgar said, pained and shocked at the recital and its horrible climax.

„Well, you see I wanted to convince you of the truth of my words. I shall never allude to my story again, and I hope you never will either; though I dream of it at times.—Your wife‘s uncle kept that paper, and I have not the slightest doubt that the same plan has been taken as regards his wealth. I can‘t explain it to you at this moment; but from the description you have given of his last letter, I have not the smallest hesitation in saying that it is formed on the same lines as the fatal note I have told you of. Charlie Morton was a good fellow, but he had not the slightest imagination or originality.“

„And you really think that paper contains a secret of importance?“

„Never doubted it for a moment. Look at the whole circumstances. Fancy your meeting me; fancy my knowing your uncle; fancy——Bah! It‘s clear as mud.“

„The coincidences are certainly wonderful.“

„Well, they are a few.—And now,“ said Mr Slimm, dropping into his most pronounced Yankee style, „let this Adonis truss his points, freeze onto a clean biled rag, and don his plug-hat, and we‘ll go and interview that interestin‘ epistle—yes, sir.“

Chapter XI

Edgar and his transatlantic companion walked along Holborn in silence. The former was deeply immersed in thought, and the American, in spite of his forced gaiety, had not yet lost all trace of his late emotion. Presently, they quitted the busy street and turned into one of the narrow lanes leading to Queen Square. Arrived at the house, they were admitted by the grimy diminutive maid-of-all-work, and slowly ascended the maze of stairs leading to Edgar‘s sitting-room. There were two persons who looked up as they entered—Eleanor and Jasper Felix. Edgar performed the ceremony of introduction, asking his companion if he had ever heard of the great novelist. He had.

„Yes," said Mr Slimm impressively, „I believe that name has been mentioned in my hearing once, if not more.—Allow me to shake hands with you, sir. I ain't given to worshipping everybody who writes a ream of nonsense and calls it a novel; but when I come across men like you, I want to remember it. We don't have many of your stamp across the Atlantic, though Nathaniel Hawthorne runs you very close."

„Indeed, you are very complimentary," Felix replied; „and I take your word as flattering. I don't like flattery as a rule, especially American flattery. It is rare, in a general way. I feel as if they always want something, you know."

„Well, I do calculate my countrymen don't give much away for nothing. They like a quid pro quo; and if they can get the quid without the quo, so much the better are they pleased. But I didn't come here to discuss the idiosyncrasies of my countrymen."

Mr Slimm seemed to possess the happy knack of making his conversation suit his company. Edgar could not help contrasting him now with the typical Yankee of the gambling-house; they hardly seemed like the same man.

„Have you got your uncle's letter?" Edgar asked his wife.

„Why?" she asked, without the slightest curiosity.

„Why? I have almost come to your way of thinking," replied Edgar. „Do you know, a wonderful thing has happened this morning. To make a long story short, my good friend here was an old friend of your uncle's. The story is a very sad one; but the gist of it is that the paper your uncle left so nearly resembles a tragic document which he and Mr Slimm once perused together—what, is termed a cipher—that he is almost sure it is taken from the same. The coincidence is so strange, the two letters are so remarkably alike——"

„Is this really so, Mr Slimm?" Eleanor asked eagerly.

„Yes, madam," he said quietly. „Some day I will tell you the tale, but not now, of how I came to be in receipt of that terrible document. Your uncle was with me; and from what I know of the circumstances, they must be the same. If you don't mind me seeing it——"

Before he could finish his sentence, Eleanor was out of the room, and a silence, an uneasy silence of expectancy, fell on the group. No one spoke, and the few minutes she was away seemed like hours. Then she reappeared, and put the paper in his hands.

He merely glanced at it for a moment; indeed, he had not time to read it through before a smile began to ripple over his quaint-looking, weather-beaten face. The smile gradually grew into a laugh, and then he turned to view the anxious group with a face full of congratulation and triumph.

„Have you found it? Is it so?" burst from three people simultaneously.

He was provokingly slow in his reply, and his Yankee drawl was more painfully apparent than ever. „Young man," said he to Edgar, „what might have been the nominal value of your uncle's estate—if he had any?"

„About thirty or forty thousand pounds."

„And I promised, if you would let me see this paper, I would show you something worth ten thousand pounds. Well, you must pardon me for my little mistake. One can't always guard against mistakes, and this paper is worth four times that amount."

For a few moments everyone was aghast at the value of the discovery.

Edgar was the first to recover himself. „You are not joking, Slimm?" he exclaimed hoarsely.

„Never a bit," he replied, with a gaiety delicately intended to cover and arouse the emotion of the others. „There it is on the face of the paper, as plainly as possible—the fateful words staring me in the face. You could see them yourselves, if you only knew how."

„Wonderful!" exclaimed Felix. „And that simple paper contains a secret worth ail that money?"

„Why, certainly. Not only that, but where it is, and the exact spot in which it is concealed. Only to think—a starving, desperate woman dragging such a secret as that about London; and only to think of a single moment preventing it being buried in the Thames. Wonderful, wonderful!"

„Perhaps you will disclose it to us," said Edgar, impatient at this philosophical tirade.

„No!" Eleanor put in resolutely—'no, Edgar! I do not think it would be fair. Considering the time and trouble Mr Carver has given to the matter, it would only be right for him to know at the same time. The dear old gentleman has been so enthusiastic throughout, and so kind, that I should feel disappointed if he did not hear the secret disclosed when we are all together."

„How thoughtful you are, Mrs Seaton!" remarked Felix with great admiration. „Of course you are right. The old fellow will be delighted beyond measure, and will fancy he has a hand in the matter himself."

„I do not see why we should wait for that," Edgar grumbled.

„Impatient boy!" said Eleanor with a charming smile. „Talk about curiosity in woman, indeed!"

„All right," he replied laughingly, his brow clearing at one glance from his wife. „I suppose we must wait. I do not see, however, what is to prevent us starting to see him at once. Probably, you won't be more than an hour putting on your bonnet, Nelly?"

„I shall be with you in five minutes"; and, singular to relate, she was.

„Curiosity," remarked Edgar, „is a great stimulus, even to women."

Arrived at Bedford Row, they found Mr Carver at his office, and fortunately disengaged. It did not take the astute gentleman long to perceive, from the faces of his visitors, that something very great and very fortunate had happened.

„Well, good people," he said, cheerfully rubbing his head with considerable vigour, „what news? Not particularly bad, by the look of you."

Edgar stated the case briefly, and at the beginning of his narrative it was plain to see that the worthy solicitor was somewhat disappointed; but when he learned they were nearly as much in the dark as he, he resumed his usual rubicund aspect.

„Dear, dear! how fortunate. Wonderful, wonderful!" he exclaimed, hopping about excitedly, „Never heard such a thing in my life—never, and thirty years in practice too. Quite a hero, Edgar."

„No, sir," Edgar put in modestly. „Mr Slimm is the hero. Had it not been for him, we could never have discovered the hidden mine. Talk about Aladdin's lamp!"

„And so you knew my poor client?" broke in Mr Carver, addressing Slimm. „What a fine fellow he was in those days! I suppose you showed him the secret of the cipher?"

„Wall, no, stranger," replied the American, the old Adam cropping out again strongly. „He guessed it by instinct, if it wasn't something higher'n that. I did not know it myself, though it was sent to me by one very dear to me, to warn

me of danger. You see, it might have come into the hands of an enemy who understood English, and it was just a desperate chance. It came a trifle late to save my peace of mind," he continued naturally, and bitterly, „and I shall never forget it. The sight of that piece of paper in that lady's hands," pointing to the important document, „gave me a touch of the old feeling when I first saw it."

„Poor fellow, poor fellow! Pray, don't distress yourself upon our account. A mere explanation——"

„I'd almost forgotten," replied Mr Slimm, taking the paper from Eleanor's hands. „If you will be good enough to listen, I will explain it."

They drew close round the table, and he proceeded to explain.

„The paper I hold in my hand," said the American, „is filled with writing, commencing at the top of the paper, without anything of a margin, and ending in the same manner. The paper, you perceive, is ruled with dotted lines, which makes the task of deciphering the secret all the easier. It has five dotted perpendicular lines at equal distances; and four horizontal, not so equal in distance. These are guide-lines. Now, I will take the letter and fold it along the centre dotted line from top to bottom, with the writing inside—so. Then from the second dotted line, counting from the right-hand side, I fold it backwards, showing the writing—thus. Then I fold the fourth dotted line from the right hand over the writing. The first part is accomplished by turning the narrow slip of writing between the fifth line and the left-hand side back thus; and then you see this. The rest is simple. Fold the slip in two, keeping the writing inside; then turn the bottom portion back and fold it across the lower dotted line, and the puzzle is complete. Or there is yet a simpler way. In each corner of the paper there are a few words inclosed by the dotted lines. Begin at the top at the word ‹Darling,› then across the line to the words ‹Nelly, in.› Then the next line, which is all inclosed at the top in the corner squares. Read the same way at the bottom corner squares; and see the result. You are puzzled by the folding, I see; but try the other way. Here," he said, handing the paper to Nelly; please read aloud what you can make of it."

Following his instructions, Nelly made out the words thus:

Darling.. .. .. Nelly, in
the garden.. ..under the
Niobe.. .. .. . you will
find my.. .. .. money.

The murder was out! The mystery which had puzzled everyone was explained; and after all, it was so simple! The simplicity of the affair was its greatest safeguard. It was so simple, so particularly devoid of intricacy, that it had baffled them all. Something bewildering and elaborate they had expected, but nothing like this. Mr Carver, notwithstanding his joy, looked inexpressibly foolish. Edgar gave way to his emotion in mirth. „O shade of Edgar Allan Poe, what a climax!" he exclaimed. „Was it for this our worthy friend waded through the abstruse philosophy of »The Purloined Letter« and the intricacies of »The Gold Bug«? Was it for this that »The Murders in the Rue Morgue« and »The Mystery of Marie Roget« were committed to memory?"

„Be quiet, you young jackanapes!" exclaimed Mr Carver testily; and then, seeing the ludicrous side of the matter, he joined in the younger man's mirth with equal heartiness.

„But why," said Eleanor, still serious, and dwelling upon the mystery—„why did not uncle fold the letter in the way he wished it to be read?"

„Well, madam," Mr Slimm explained, „you see in that case the letter would have adopted itself to the folds so readily, that, had it fallen into a stranger's hand, he would have discovered the secret at once. Your uncle must have remembered the letter he founded his upon, and how easily he discovered that. By folding this paper in the ordinary way, improper curiosity was baffled."

„Yes, I suppose so," Eleanor mused. „Anyway, thank heaven, we have solved the mystery, and we are free at last!"

„Don't look so serious, darling," Edgar said brightly. „It is all ours now, to do what we like with. How happy we shall be!"

„Ahem!" coughed Mr Bates ominously, the only remark which, by the way, he had made during the scene.

„Bless me, Bates!" ejaculated Mr Carver in his abrupt way. „Really, I had quite forgotten you.—Shake hands, Bates! Let me shake hands with my future partner."

„Begging your pardon, sir, I think not. You"—reproachfully—„seem to have forgotten the will. Mr Morton's last testament left this property to Miss Wakefield—this money is part of his estate."

Mr Carver groaned and sank back in his chair. It was too true. Mr Morton's last will devised his estate to Miss Wakefield, and this treasure was hers beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Chapter XII

Imagine a man paying forty thousand pounds into the Bank of England, and learning to-morrow that that stupendous financial concern had stopped payment! Imagine Lady Clara Vere de Vere discovering her wonderful parure with its European renown, to be paste! Imagine the feelings of Thomas Carlyle when the carelessness of John Stuart Mill destroyed the labor of years! Imagine poor Euclid's state of mind when his wife burnt his books! In short, imagine, each of you, the greatest calamity you can think of, and you will have some faint notion of the feelings of the quartet in Mr Carver's office at Mr Bates's disconcerting discovery.

For a few minutes, silence reigned supreme, and then Edgar commenced to whistle. It was not a particularly cheerful air, but it sufficed to arouse the others from their stupefaction.

„If I had not been an infatuated old idiot," said Mr Carver, hurling the unfortunate volume of romance with unnecessary violence across the room, „I should have forseen this"; and murmuring something about strait-waistcoats and the thick-headedness of society in general, he lapsed into gloomy silence.

Mr Bates regarded his chief in mild disapproval. Such an ebullition of feeling by no means accorded with his views of professional etiquette; besides, he had a feeling that his discovery had not been treated in a proper and business-like manner. „Hem!" said that gentleman, clearing his throat gently—„hem! If I may be allowed to make a remark—apologising to you, sir"—Mr Carver nodded with dark meaning—„and taking upon myself to make a suggestion; might it not be possible that where the money is, a will may be concealed also?"

The party ceased to contemplate space, and a ray of hope quivered on the gloomy horizon for a moment. Mr Carver, however, eyed his clerk with an air of indignation blended with resigned sorrow. „I suppose, Bates, every man has moments of incipient insanity," he said in accents of the most scathing sarcasm. „You, I perceive, are only mortal. I should be sorry to imagine you to have arrived at the worst stage; but I may be allowed, I think, to point out to you one little fact. Do you for one moment suppose that a man who is idiot enough to bury his treasure in this manner, has enough sense remaining to make a will?" and Mr Carver looked at his subordinate with the air of a man who has made his great point and confounded his adversary.

„I do not agree with, you, sir," retorted Bates mildly. „A gentleman who has brains enough to carry out such a scheme as this, was not likely to forget a vital part. You are generally sharp enough to see a point like this. What with romances and games of marbles, hem! and such other frivolities, business seems quite forgotten!"

It was curious to note with what eagerness the parties most interested hung upon the clerk's words.

„Bates, Bates! I never thought it would come to this," returned the pseudo-justice, shaking his head in more sorrow than anger. „A man still in the prime of life, and to talk like this! Poor fellow, poor fellow!"

„Well, sir, you may doubt, and of course you have a right to your own opinion; but we shall see."

„See, Bates! how can we see?" exclaimed the lawyer. „Is not this treasure buried upon Miss Wakefield's property, and are we likely to get an order to search that property?—O yes, of course"—returning to the sarcastic mode—„Miss Wakefield is so gentle, so amiable, so sweet, and unsuspecting! Bates, I am ashamed of you!"

The imperturbable Bates shrugged his shoulders slightly and resumed his writing. So far as he was concerned, the matter was done with; but he knew the character of his superior sufficiently to know that the words he had said would take root, for, sooth to say, Mr Carver laid considerable weight upon his junior's acumen, though, between the twain, such an idea was tacitly ignored.

During the above interesting duologue, Mr Slimm had been eyeing the antagonists with a smile of placid amusement. That wily gentleman was rather taken with Bates' argument.

„Seems to me," he said, „the advantage is not all on one side. The honored mistress of Eastwood, the lady whom our friend"—pointing to Mr Carver—„has spoken of in such eulogistic terms, is no better off than we are. She has the property where the money is concealed, and, as far as we know now, it belongs to her. Any movement on our side will be sufficient to arouse her suspicions. Providing the money is found, as I have before said, as far as we know, it belongs to her. It is scarcely worth while going to the trouble and expense of unearthing this wealth for her. So far, she has the bulge on us. On the other hand, we know where the money is. She does not, and there we have the bulge on her."

„And what is your proposition?" Mr Carver inquired.

„Arbitration," replied the American. „There is only one thing to do, and that is compromise. Even supposing our friends only get half, surely that is better than nothing. It's the easiest thing in the world. All you have to do is to say to the lady: ‹Miss Wakefield, Mr Morton left you his money. You cannot find the

money. Mrs Seaton knows where it is. The money, we admit, is yours, though in justice it should belong to her. In a word, my dear lady, divide‹“; and Mr Slimm leant back in his chair whistling a little air from Princess Ada, as if the whole thing was settled to the satisfaction of all parties.

Mr Carver looked at him as a connoisseur eyes a bad copy of an old master. „Mr Slimm, I presume you have never seen the lady?“

Mr Slimm shook his head.

„I thought not,“ continued Mr Carver. „You have been all over the world, and in the course of your rambles I presume you have seen the Sphinx?—Very good. Now, I do not suppose it ever struck you as a good idea to interview that curiosity, or to sit down before its stony charms with a view to learning its past history and the date of its birth.—No? The idea is too absurd; but I may venture to say, without exceeding the bounds of professional caution, that you are just as likely to get any display of emotion from Miss Wakefield—and indeed, the wonderful stone is much the more pleasant object——“

„But she is not so very awful, Mr Carver,“ Eleanor interposed.

„My dear, I know she is not endowed with venomous fangs, though she has the wisdom of the serpent. I am prepared to do anything for you in any shape or form, but I do draw the line at Miss Wakefield. As regards interviewing her upon such a subject, I must respectfully but firmly decline.“

„Surely you don‘t object to such a course being taken?“ Edgar asked eagerly. „There is no particular harm in it.“

„On the contrary, I think it is the right course to adopt; but I do not propose to be the victim,“ said Mr Carver drily. „If any one in this select company has some evil to atone for, and wants a peculiarly torturing penance, let him undertake the task.“

Felix looked at Mr Bates; Edgar looked at his wife, and each waited politely and considerately for the others to speak. It is not often one meets such pure disregard of self in this grasping world. However, the task must be done; and as Mr Carver disclaimed it, and Bates had no interest in the affair, moreover, Eleanor not being expected to volunteer, manifestly the work lay before the American, Edgar, or Felix.

The American, like another Curtius, was prepared to fling himself into the gulf. With characteristic and national modesty, he merely waited, willing to yield the van of battle; but the delicacy of the others left him no alternative. He volunteered to go.

„I am a man of few words,“ he said, „and I guess I am about calculated to fill the vacancy. I am alone in the world, and if I fail to return, there will be no dear one to mourn the loss. I have one little favor to ask before I go, and that is, in case the worst happens, to spare me an epitaph. You will think of me sometimes; and when you sit round your winter firesides and the wind is howling in the naked trees——“ Here he waved his hands deprecatingly towards the company, as if praying them to spare his emotions.

Mr Carver‘s eyes twinkled at this tirade. „Well, that is settled then,“ he said. „The sooner you go the better. Shall we say to-morrow?—Very good. The address is 34 Cedar Road, Hampstead.“

„It is well,“ said the victim to friendship. „Before I quit you once and for ever, I should like to break the bread of joviality once more; for the last time, I should like to look upon the wine when it is red. To drop the language of metaphor, I invite you all to lunch with me at the Holborn.“

It was left, then, in Mr Slimm‘s hands to consummate what he denominated as *working the oracle*.

„What do you think of my dream now?“ Eleanor asked her husband as they walked home together.

„Your »Argosy with golden sails«?“ queried Edgar. „Well, I am beginning to think it may come into port after all.“

* * * * *

Like the *condemned man* of the penny-a-liner, Mr Slimm passed a good night, and the thought of the task he had undertaken did not deter him from making a hearty and substantial breakfast. Without so much as a tremor, he ordered a cab, and sped away northwards on his diplomatic errand.

Cedar Road may, without any great stretch of imagination, be termed dingy. It is not the dinginess of the typical London street, but a jaunty kind of griminess, a griminess which knows itself to be grimy, but swaggers with a pretension of spick-and-span cleanliness; a sort of place which makes one think of that cheap gentility which wears gaudy apparel and unclean linen, or no linen at all. I may better explain my meaning by saying that the majority of the houses were black with smoke, and yet, singularly enough, the facings of light stone at the corners have preserved their natural colour, and each house was adorned by a veranda painted a staring green, which stood out in ghastly contrast to the fog stained fronts. Every house had a little grass plot—called, by a stretch of courtesy, the lawn—fronting it. It was presumedly of grass, because it was vegetation of some kind, but about as much like the genuine article as London milk resembles the original lacteal fluid. In the centre of each „lawn“ was an oval flower-bed, tenanted by some hardy annuals, bearing infinitesimal blooms of a neutral tint. Each house was approached by a flight of steps rising from the road, which gentle ascent served to keep the prying gaze of the vulgar from peering too closely into the genteel seclusion of the dining-rooms. Every house was the counterpart of its neighbour, each having the same sad-coloured curtains and wire-blinds on the ground-floor, the same cheap muslins at the drawing-room windows, and the same drawn blinds, surmounted with brass rods, to the bedrooms. A canary likewise hung in a painted cage in every drawing-room window; No. 34 boasting in addition a stagnant-looking aquarium, containing three torpid goldfish in extremely dirty water.

After three peals of the bell, each outrivalling its predecessor in volume, which is not saying much for the bell metal at No. 34, Mr Slimm was answered. Through the fragile door he had distinctly heard the sounds of revelry within, and acquired the information that some mystic Melissa was „tidying,“ and therefore ‘Tilda must transform herself for the nonce into the slave of the bell. By the petulant expression on ‘Tilda‘s face, the errand was not particularly pleasant to her.

In answer to his query, the misanthropic ‘Tilda vouchsafed the information that Miss Wakefield was in, adding, that he had better come this way; which siren summons he lost no time in obeying, and was thus introduced into the seclusion of Miss Wakefield‘s chamber. Inquiring his name with a snap, and having obtained the desired information, the bewitching 'Tilda disappeared, and apparently appeared to be singing some sort of ditty in a crescendo voice at the foot of the stairs; the fact of the case being that Miss Wakefield was summoned viva voce; her part of the conversation being inaudible, and the voice of the charmer being perfectly distinct to the visitor, the song running something after

this fashion: „Miss Wakefield“—um, um, „wanted, mum“—um, um. „A man, please“—um, um, um. „Rather tall“ (very distinctly)—um. „No; he is not a gentleman“—um, um, um. „All right, miss.“ And then she reappeared with the information that Miss Wakefield would be down at once.

The space of time mentioned having resolved itself into a quarter of an hour, Mr Slimm was enabled to complete his plan of campaign, not that he anticipated any resistance—in which deduction he was decidedly wrong—but because he thought it best to be quite prepared with his story, and in a position to receive the enemy in good and compact order. By the time he had done this, and taken a mental inventory of all the furniture in the room—not a violent effort of memory—the door opened, and Miss Wakefield entered.

Chapter XIII

With the exception of her eyes and her teeth, Miss Wakefield was an ordinary, nay, almost a benevolent, woman. About sixty years of age, with a figure perfectly straight and supple, and wearing her own hair, which was purple black, she might have passed for forty, save for the innumerable lines and wrinkles on her face. Her eyes were full of a furtive evil light, and never failed to cast a baleful influence over the spectator; her teeth were large and white, but gapped here and there in the front like a saw. Mr Slimm mentally compared her with some choice assortments of womankind he had encountered in the mines and kindred places, and they did not suffer in the comparison.

„Your business?“ she said coldly.

„adam, you will do me the favor to sit down,“ he replied. „What I have to say will take a considerable time.“

„Thank you,“ she said, with the same frigid air; „I prefer to stand.“ Some subtle instinct told her this visit boded no good, and she knew in dealing with an adversary what an advantage a standing position gives one.

By way of answer, Mr Slimm continued standing also.

„Madam,“ he commenced, „what I have to say to you concerns the affairs of the late Mr Morton of Eastwood. He was an old friend of mine. Very recently, I heard of his death. I am determined to have justice done.“

Was it fancy, or did these thin feline lips grow white? He could have sworn he saw them quiver. Anyway, fancy or not, if the worst came to the worst, he had a great card to play.

Mr Slimm continued: „He died, as you are aware, after a curious illness, and rather suddenly at the last. If I am correct, there was no inquest.“

It was not fancy, then! Mr Slimm‘s keen eyes detected a sudden shiver agitate her frame, and his ear caught a quick painful respiration. Why did no one think of this? he said to himself.

„However, for the present we will pass that over. Mr Morton was known to have been a rich man. All he had was left, I understand, to you?“

„In that, sir, you are perfectly right. Pray, continue.“

„Now, at one time, I understand, poor Morton intended to leave everything to his niece. Was that so?“

Miss Wakefield inclined her head coldly.

„And since his death, not the slightest trace of the bulk of the money has been discovered. Is that not so?“

Miss Wakefield inclined her head once more.

„Well, we have now discovered where the money is.“

„Discovered where the money is! where my money is!“ the woman cried with a grating laugh. „And I presume you came to bring it to me. After all this long while, fancy getting my own at last!“

„I suppose you will do something for Mrs Seaton?“ inquired Slimm.

„Do something for them—of course I will,“ she laughed hardly. „I'll go and call on them. I will let them see me ride in my carriage, while they are begging in the gutter. I will give them a sixpence when they come to ask alms at my house.—Oh, tell me, are they starving?—are they starving, I say?“ she gasped at her passionate utterance, clutching the American by the arm. „Are they living on charity? Oh, I hope so—I hope so, for I hate them—hate them!“ The last words hissed lingeringly and spitefully through her teeth.

„Well, not quite,“ Slimm replied cheerfully. „It must be consoling to your womanly feelings to know they are getting on first-rate—in fact, they are as happy and comfortable as two people can be.“

„I am sorry for that,“ she said, with a little pant between each word. „I hoped they were starving. What right have they to be happy, when I am so miserable?“

„Really, madam, it is no pleasure to bring you news, you take it so uncomfortably,“ Slimm replied. „These histrionics, I know, are intended merely to disguise your delicate and tender feelings. Now, we admit this money belongs to you. What will you stand for the information? Forty thousand pounds is a lot of money.“

„Not one farthing,“ replied the woman—„not one single farthing. The money is mine, and mine it shall remain.“

„In that case,“ said Slimm cheerfully, „my mission is at an end.—I wish you a very good-morning.“

„Stop! Do you mean to say you intend to hold the secret unless I agree to some terms?“

„Your powers of penetration do you credit, madam. That is precisely what I do mean.“

„And what, pray, is the price placed upon your secret?“

„Half!“

„Half!“ she echoed, with a bitter laugh. „Your are joking. Twenty thousand pounds! Oh, you have made a mistake. You should go to a millionaire, not come to me.“

„Do I understand you to decline?“

„Decline!“ she exclaimed in a fury. „Rather than pay that money to them, I would starve and rot! Rather than pay that, the money shall remain in its secret hiding-place till it is forgotten!—Do you take me for an idiot, a drivelling old woman with one foot in the grave? No, no, no! You do not know Selina Wakefield yet. Twenty thousand pounds. Ah, ah, ah! The fools, the fools, the miserable fools, to come and ask me this!“

„Perhaps you will be good enough to name a sum you consider to be equivalent to the service rendered,“ said the American, totally unmoved by this torrent of invective.

„Now you talk like a man of sense," she replied. „You are quite determined, I see, not to part with your secret until you have a return. Well, let me see. What do you say to a thousand pounds, or, to stretch a point, fifteen hundred?"

„Appalling generosity!" replied Mr Slimm, regarding the ceiling in rapture—„wasteful extravagance! I cannot accept it. My principals are so grasping, you know. Now, as a personal favor, and to settle this little difficulty, could not you add, say, another five pounds?"

„Not another farthing."

„Then I am afraid our interview is at an end," he said regretfully.—„Now, look here. My friends are in no need of money, and are a long way from the state you charitably hoped to find them in. You are getting on in life, and we can afford to wait. When you are no more—not to put too fine a point upon it—we shall lay hands on the treasure, and live happily ever after—yes, madam."

„What do you want me to do?" she said sulkily.

„Let me put it another way. Suppose we come to an agreement. It is highly probable that where the money is, a will is concealed. Now, it is very certain that this will is made in Mrs Seaton's favor. If we make an arrangement to divide the spoil, and that turns out to be so, what a good thing it will be for you! On the other hand, if there is no will, you still have a handsome sum of money, which without our aid you can never enjoy; and do not mistake me when I say that aid will never be accorded without some benefit to the parties I have the honor to represent."

„And suppose I refuse?"

„So much the worse for you. Then we have another course open, and one I decidedly advocate. We will at our own risk recover the money, trusting to our good fortune to find the will. If not, we will throw the money in Chancery, and fight you for it on the ground of undue influence and fraud."

„Fraud, sir! What do you mean?" exclaimed the lady, trembling with indignation and hatred.

Mr Slimm approached her more closely, and looking sternly into her eyes, said: „Mark me, madam!—the Seatons are not unfriended. I am by no means a poor man myself, and I will not leave a stone unturned to unravel this mystery. Do you think I am fool enough to believe that my old friend hid his money away in this strange manner unless he had some fear? and, if I mistake not, you are the cause of that fear. Had he intended his wealth for you, he would have left it openly. Nothing shall be left undone to fathom the matter; and if necessary"—here he lowered his voice to an impressive whisper—„the body shall be exhumed. Do you understand, madam?—exhumed?"

The pallor on the woman's face deepened to a ghastly ashen gray. „What would you have me do?" she exclaimed faintly.

„Come to our terms, and all will be well," Slimm said, pursuing the advantage he had gained; „otherwise—" here he paused—„however, we will say nothing about that. What I propose is this: that an agreement be drawn up and entered into upon the terms, that in case no will is found with the money, the property is divided; and if a will is found leaving the property to Mrs Seaton, you take five thousand pounds. That is my final offer."

„I—I consent," she faltered humbly, at the same time longing, in her passionate madness, to do her antagonist some deadly mischief, as he stood before her so calmly triumphant.

„Very good," he said quietly—„very, good. Then I presume our intercourse is at an end. You will he good enough to be at Mr Carver's office, in Bedford Row at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon."

„One moment. Are you in the secret?"

„Madam, I have that felicity. But why?"

„Perhaps now we have come to terms, you may be good enough to tell me where it is."

„Curiosity, thy name is woman," said Slimm sententiously. „I am sorry. I cannot gratify that little wish; but as you will doubtless be present at the opening ceremony, you will not object to restrain your curiosity for the present.—Good-morning."

Miss Wakefield watched our ambassador's cab leave the door, and then threw herself, in the abandonment of her passion, upon the floor. In the impotence of her rage and despair, she lay there, rolling like a mad dog, tearing at her long nails with the strong uneven teeth. „What does he know?" she hissed. „What can he know? Beaten, beaten at last!"

„What a woman!" soliloquised Slimm as he rolled back Londonwards. „I must have a cigar, to get the flavor out of my mouth."

When he arrived at Mr Carver's, he found Eleanor and her husband awaiting him with great impatience.

„What cheer, my comrade?" Edgar asked with assumed cheerfulness.

„Considering the circumstances of the case and the imminent risk I ran, you might at least have expressed a desire to weep upon this rugged bosom," Slimm answered reproachfully. „I found the evil, like most evils, not half so bad when it is properly faced."

„And Miss Wakefield?" asked Mr Carver anxiously.

„Gentle as a sucking-dove—only too anxious to meet our views. In fact, I so far tamed her that she has made an appointment to come here to-morrow to settle preliminaries."

„But what sort of terms did you come to?" Eleanor asked.

Slimm briefly related the result of his mission, and its unexpected and desirable consummation, to the mutual astonishment of his listeners; indeed, when he came to review the circumstances of the case, he was somewhat astonished at his own success.

„Wonderful!" exclaimed Mr Carver, gazing with intense admiration at his enemy. „I could not have believed it possible for one man single-handed to have accomplished so much.—My good friend, do I really understand that in any case we get half the money; and in one case, all but five thousand pounds."

„Precisely; and you get the agreement drawn up, and we will get away to Eastwood the day after to-morrow. I declare I feel as pleased as a schoolboy who has found the apple at hide-and-seek. I feel as if I was getting young again."

„Then you think it is really settled?" Edgar asked, with a sigh of pleasure and relief.

„Not the slightest doubt of it," said the American promptly. „And I think I may be allowed to observe, that of all the strange things I ever came across throughout my long and checkered career, this is about the strangest."

„It certainly beats anything I ever remember," said Mr Carver with a buoyant air.—„What, do you say, Bates?"

„Well, sir," Mr Bates admitted, „there certainly are some points about it one does not generally encounter in the ordinary run of business."

Chapter XIV

When the poet, in the pursuit of his fancy, eulogised the stately homes of England, he must have forgotten or totally ignored a class of dwelling dearer to my mind than all the marble halls the taste or vanity of man ever designed. The Duke of Stilton doubtless prefers his ancestral home, with its towers and turrets, its capacious stables—which, by-the-bye, seem the first consideration in the Brobdingnagian erections of the hour; he may wander with an air of pride through the Raphael hall, and the Teniers gallery or the Cuyp drawing-room. For me, he can have his art treasures, his Carrara marbles, his priceless Wedgwood, his Dresden. He may enjoy his drawing-room—blue, red, and every color in the universe. He may dine in the bosom of his family on every delicacy a cordon bleu can devise to tickle the palate and stimulate the appetite, with its accompaniment of rose-patterned silver and dainty china. Let him luxuriate in it all, if he will.

I have in my mind's eye a house far different from His Grace's, but which, nevertheless, if not rich in bric-a-brac, has an appearance of harmony and refinement refreshing beyond belief. It is the house, or, if you will, the villa of Eastwood. Against the main road is a rugged stone wall, moss-incrusted and lichen-strewn, and surmounted by dense laurel. Opening the old-fashioned wooden gate, a broad path leads to the door, which is some forty yards away, at the side of the house. It is a low, gray stone house, clustered with ivy and clematis, and climbing roses twisting round the long double row of windows. In front is the lawn, quite half an acre in extent, and shut off from a garden by a brick wall, covered with apricot and nectarine. On the right, leading towards the house, is a sloping bank, all white and fragrant in spring with violets; and above this bank, approached by an ancient horse-block, is the old-world garden. It is a large garden, with broad green paths, sheltered bowers of apple-trees, and the borders gay with wall-flowers, mignonette, stocks, pansies, London-pride, Tom Thumb, and here and there great bushes of lavender and old-man. Far down is a walk of filbert trees, where the wily squirrel makes merry in the harvest-time, and the cherry-trees all melodious with the song of the blackbird. There is a balmy smell here of thyme and sage and endive, and the variety of sweet herbs which our grandmothers were wont to cull in autumn, and suspend in muslin bags from the kitchen rafters.

Opening the heavy hall door with the licensed freedom of the novelist, we find ourselves in the hall, whence we reach the drawing-room. Here we find our friends, awaiting the arrival of Miss Wakefield. They have been talking and chatting gaily; but as the time for that lady's arrival draws near, conversation becomes flat, and there is an air of expectation and suppressed excitement about them, which would at once convince the observer that something important was on hand.

Mr Carver rose from his seat, and, for about the fiftieth time, walked to the window and looked out. It was amusing to note his easy air and debonair appearance, which was palpably assumed to impress the spectators with the

idea that he was by no means anxious. The only member of the party who really could be said to be at ease was Mr Bates. He wore his best clothes, and had an air of resigned settled melancholy, evidently expecting the worst, and prepared to have his cup of joy—representing in his case his partnership—dashed from his lips at the last moment.

Felix was discussing the affair with Edgar in a low voice, and Eleanor sat white and still, only showing her impatience ever and anon by a gentle tap upon the floor with her heel. Mr Slimm was whistling softly in a low key, and industriously engaged in whittling a stick in his hand. Mr Carver returned from his post of observation and threw himself back in his chair with an involuntary sigh. Slimm put up his knife.

„I vote we begin," said Edgar.

„No, no; it would not do—it really would not do," interposed Mr Carver, seeing the company generally inclined to this view. „The lady whom we wait is capable of anything. If we found a will in her absence, she would not be above saying we put it there."

„Judging from my limited experience of the lady, I calculate you are about right, sir," said Mr Slimm. „No; after so many years' patience, it would certainly be unwise to do anything rash now."

„It is the last few moments which seem so hard," Eleanor said. „Suppose, after all, we should find nothing!"

„For goodness' sake, don't think of such a thing!" Edgar exclaimed. „Fancy, after all this bother and anxiety!"

The party lapsed into silence again, and once more Mr Carver strolled towards the window. It is strange, when one is anxiously waiting for anything, how slowly time goes. Edgar took his watch out of his pocket every other minute, like a schoolboy who wears one for the first time.

„I think I will walk down the road and see if she is coming," Slimm observed. „It would look a little polite, I think."

Edgar murmured something touching love's young dream, and asked the American if the fascination was so strong.

„Well, no," he replied. „I don't deny she is fascinating; but it is not the sort of glamor that generally thrills the young bosom. One thing we all agree upon, I think, and that is, that we shall be all extremely pleased to see the lady."

„That is a strange thing in itself," Edgar replied drily. „The damsel is evidently coy. She is at present, doubtless, struggling with her emotion. I fancy she does not intend to come."

At this moment there was a sound of wheels, and a coach pulled up at the gate. After a moment, a tall black figure was seen approaching the house. A few seconds later, Miss Wakefield entered the room.

Miss Wakefield surveyed the group with an air of stony deliberation, and the sharkiness of her uneven teeth displayed itself with distinct unpleasantness. There was a cunning look in her eyes, a look of hate and greed strangely blended with avarice.

Mr Carver, after a premonitory cough, addressed her. „Pray, be seated, madam," he said with his severest professional manner. „The business which has brought us here to-day is not likely to be protracted, and I see no reason why we should not commence at once. I presume you would wish to get it over?"

„Certainly," she said; „I see nothing to detain us. I presume the thing is concealed somewhere in the house."

„On the contrary, madam; no. Had such been the case, doubtless it would have been discovered long since. I do not suppose you would have been behindhand in the search; and if I remember, at the time of my late client's decease, no pains were spared to find his effects. I think that is so?"

Miss Wakefield emitted a grim smile, and nodded.

„Very, good," the lawyer continued—„very good.—Mr Slimm, I suppose you have the implements at hand? Nothing remains now for it but immediately to set to work and accomplish our mission. I have seen some extraordinary things in the course of my professional career, but I must say that since I have had the honor to be on the rolls, I never encountered anything like this"

„How, did it come out?" asked Miss Wakefield acidly.

„Margaret Boulton—you remember her, of course—she was charged with a paper disclosing this secret. If I mistake not, it was given her on the day of Mr Morton's death."

Miss Wakefield drew her breath sharply. „Had I but known!" she said slowly—„ah, had I but known!"

There are spots, astronomers inform us, on the sun—a metaphorical expression, which, in the language of the day, implies that nothing is perfect. The expression used by Miss Wakefield therefore proved her to be after all but human, and, I am afraid, raised a feeling of gratulation in her listeners' breasts that she had not known.

„We are wasting time here," said Mr Carver shortly.

At this signal, every one rose, and made their way out of the house, and thence on to the lawn. They were secluded entirely from observation, and it was impossible for passers-by to see the operations. Mr Slimm presently appeared bearing a pick-axe and spade, and without delay commenced operations. He was an old miner, and went to work in a scientific manner, which could not fail to win the entire approval of the spectators. Miss Wakefield, who, be it remembered, was entirely in the dark, watched his proceedings with a thrilling interest entirely lost in contemplating the workman.

The spot where they were standing was in the centre of the lawn, and there stood the figure of Niobe in the centre. Truly, the last place to look for a fortune.

Mr Slimm's first act was to clear away the weeds and rubbish which had in time sprung up round Niobe's feet—a task in which he was heartily aided by the onlookers, Mr Carver doing great feats with the thistles; and even Bates joined in the task, covering himself with distinction by his desperate onslaught upon sundry dandelions which time had sown there. This task being accomplished, the real work commenced.

„I do not think we need move that ancient lady," said Mr Slimm, touching the Niobe. „We will break earth here in front of her."

By this time, excitement reigned supreme. Mr Carver hopped about like an animated cork, giving the most contrary directions, and sadly interfering with the task in hand by his well-meant interference. After narrowly escaping sudden death from a hearty swing of Mr Slimm's pick-axe, he retired to a safe distance, and there directed the work in safety, giving instructions which were totally ignored by the worker.

„I never calculated," said the American, as he worked, „to be prospecting for pay dirt on a gentleman's lawn. As an ordinary rule, such is not the place to

look for dust. The symptoms don‘t indicate gold,“ he continued, digging away with great heartiness; „but we never can tell what‘s going to turn up, as the philosopher said. Nothing like faith in these little operations. Faith, we are told will remove mountains. It isn‘t a mountain exactly that I want to move; but this is precious slow work. Perhaps I‘m out of practice, perhaps it‘s my impatience, but this heap don‘t seem to be increasing to any powerful extent. It can‘t be very much farther down, and that‘s a fact, or my old comrade must have been a much more powerful man than I took him for.“

By this time he had excavated the earth to some depth, but as yet nothing was visible. He resumed his task heartily, but as he got deeper and deeper, his anxiety increased.

„I hope we are not going to be sold,“ Mr Slimm said at length.

„Under the statue, remember,“ said Edgar; „you are going too deep.“

„I believe you are right,“ replied Mr Slimm, as he directed a few blows almost viciously at the side of the hole he had dug. At that moment the point of the pick struck on some hard surface. Expectation was on tiptoe, and the utmost point of excitement was reached: in other, words, every one became intensely quiet—if quiet can be intense—and watched the worker closely. A few more blows given with hearty good-will, and the spade plied with equal zest, brought to light a square box, directly beneath the statue, but only a few inches underground. A few touches of the spade completed its liberation, and Charles Morton‘s hiding place was no longer an uncertainty, but a pleasant reality.

There, after so long an interment, it lay. The treasure which had caused so much jealousy and scheming, disappointment and misery, care and sorrow, avarice and cunning, was there. For that money one life had been lost; for that treasure, two proud hearts had suffered four years‘ misery and deprivation. For that poor dross, one man‘s dying bed was imbittered and poisoned; for the loss of it, one woman had wept and raved in vain. Hidden from fear, found by that mysterious agency poor mortals call chance, let us hope at last that it is destined to work some good in a world of tears.

It was no dream. The contents were shaken out unceremoniously upon the grass, and certified by Mr Carver. Neat piles of papers and securities, chiefly American, were wrapped in water-proof, in a careful manner. Their previous estimate of Mr Morton‘s fortune was found not to have been far wrong; for when the amount of the securities came to be counted, the sum came to no less than thirty-eight thousand five hundred and ten pounds.

„Good!“ exclaimed Miss Wakefield, first to break the silence, and speaking in a voice as nearly approaching satisfaction as it was possible for that estimable female to reach. „I presume the rest is merely formal.—Mr Carver, I shall expect nineteen thousand two hundred and fifty-five pounds, free of costs, to be paid into my bankers at once. I certainly take credit for my generosity in this matter.“

No one answered this remark; the idea of Miss Wakefield‘s generosity being sufficient to provide every mind with abundance of speculation. But Mr Slimm‘s sharp eye had caught sight of an envelope, which the others, the anxiety to count the spoil, had entirely over-looked. With a quiet smile on his lips, he listened to the last speaker‘s gracious remark, and then handing the paper to Mr Carver, said: „I am afraid, madam, we shall have to tax your generosity still further. If a will was found in our favor, I think you were to be content with five

thousand pounds. If I don‘t mistake, the paper I have given to our estimable friend is that interesting document.“

Meanwhile, Mr Carver was fluttering about in a state of great jubilation. His first act, as soon as he had attracted the attention of the group, was to shake hands with Bates with great and elaborate ceremony. This gratifying operation being concluded, he put on his spectacles and said: „Bates, I owe you an apology. I spoke of your intellect disparagingly, I believe, not long since; and now, in the presence of this distinguished circle, I beg leave, in all due humility, to retract my words. It was I who had lost my wits.—No—no contradictions, please. I say it was I. The paper I hold in my hand is the last will and testament of my late client, Charles Morton, the owner of this house. After giving a few brief reasons for disposing of his money in this extraordinary manner, and after a few small legacies, he says: ‹And as to the rest, residue, and remainder of my estate both real and personal, and of what description or kind soever and of which I may die possessed, I give and bequeath to my niece, Eleanor Seaton, for her absolute use and benefit.› It is signed and witnessed by John Styles and Aaron Gray, both names being familiar to me.—Miss Wakefield, I congratulate you; I do, indeed. You have done really well.“

It was evident, from the expression of that lady‘s face, that she was very far from sharing this opinion. Her upper lip went up, and her saw-like teeth came down in a manner evil to see. „It is a conspiracy!“ she hissed, „a low, cunning conspiracy.—Oh, you shall pay for it. Do you think you are going to rob me with impunity, with your lawyer schemes? I will fight the will,“ she screamed, „if I am ruined for it. I will ruin you all! I will have you struck off the rolls! Oh, you hoary-headed, lying old reptile, you!“

„Madam,“ said Mr Slimm sternly, „you forget yourself. Do you not know it is in our power to count the money you have had into the sum we propose to give you? Have a care—have a care!“

These last words, uttered with peculiar emphasis, had a wonderful effect upon the „woman scorned.“ With a violent effort, she collected herself, and when she spoke again, it was without the slightest trace of her late abandoned, reckless manner.

„Be it so,“ she said slowly—„be it so. You are not likely to hear from me again.—Good-morning.—Mr Slimm, I see my cab is waiting. If you will be good enough to give me your arm, I shall be obliged to you.“

„One moment,“ said Mr Carver. „We do not propose to deduct the few hundreds you have from the stipulated sum to be paid to you. You shall hear from me in a few days.“

„Thank you,“ she replied with strange humility.—„Mr Slimm, are you ready?—Again, good-morning.“

When the American returned, his face was grave and stern. What passed between him and Miss Wakefield was never known. And so she passes from our history. Her cunning and deceit—if it was not something worse—had availed her nothing. Baffled and defeated, as vice should always be, she retired to her dingy lodging, and was never more seen by our friends. Whether there had been any foul-play was never known. If the shrewd American had any such suspicions, he kept them to himself. It was best, he thought, to let the past dead bury its dead, and not stir up bitterness and the shadow of a crime, where nought but peace and sunshine should be.

Mr Carver was still puzzled. Why his client should have taken such a strange course with his money, and why he had not come to him and made his last will in a straightforward manner, was a circumstance he could not fathom. But wiser men than the astute lawyer have been puzzled ere now by the idiosyncrasies of man, and Mr Carver was only pondering upon a subject which has been and will be a theme with philosophers for all time.

„Why could he not have come to me?“ he asked at length.

„I think it is easily understood,“ explained Felix; „and the principal reason was fear. According to your own showing, Mr Morton was moody and fanciful, possessing a highly-strung nervous system, and easily impressed. That woman‘s stronger will stifled his. I am under no obligation to her, but she possesses a mesmeric eye which has a peculiar effect upon me. Besides this, it is evident he never trusted her. He must have known, had he communicated with you, that she would sooner or later discover it, hence his strange conduct. The method, to me, savours strongly of a madman‘s cunning. It is proverbial that such men trust no one.“

„It is rather idle to speculate upon it now,“ Edgar said cheerfully. „Justice has been done at last, and we are satisfied.“

„We are all satisfied,“ exclaimed Mr Carver. „You have your money, and Bates has his partnership.—Eh, Bates?“ slapping that individual with great heartiness on the back—„eh, Bates?“

„I suppose so,“ replied that misanthrope gravely; „but the whole matter is highly unprofessional. There is a lack of business form about it.“

„Ah, ha!“ laughed Mr Carver—„just like Bates; no sentiment—no poetry——“

„And no romance,“ put in Edgar.

It was a merry group. Mr Slimm was talking to Eleanor, making her laugh at his quaint American saws, and she telling him of her strange dream, and how it had all come true. Edgar and Mr Carver were badgering Bates upon his gloomy state; and Felix was amusing and instructing little Nelly with a bewildering, awe-inspiring fairy tale—the little one, who had been a silent spectator of the proceedings, and knew by some childish instinct that some happy event had happened.

„Ring down the curtain—the thing is played out,“ Edgar said; „and now back again to London town, Nelly.“

„Papa,“ she said after a pause, „has some day come?“

„Yes, darling.“

„Really and truly?“

„Yes, darling. Some day has come at last, little one.“

* * * * *

Sunshine and laughter, mirth and joy, instead of misery and despair, gloom and smoke. Eastwood again two months later, and high revels are being held, for is it not little Nelly‘s birthday! The blue sky, flecked with little white clouds, smiles overhead, and the birds are making merry in the trees. Niobe still stands in the centre of the lawn, as ready to keep a secret as ever, and saying nothing either of the future or the past.

A pattering throng of little ones are trying to play at tennis, and Eleanor and her husband are watching them with amused eyes. Eleanor looks very sweet and fair to-day, with the light of happiness in her eyes; and there is an expression of peace on her face, as she leans upon her husband‘s chair, which is good and pleasant to see. Mr Bates is looking on at the group with meditative

looks, speculating, no doubt, upon marriage settlements, which these little chatterers will want some day. Jolly Mr Carver is in the midst of a group of little ones, making himself an object of ridicule and contempt on account of his lack of knowledge touching the mysteries of „hunt the slipper." „Fancy an old gentleman like that knowing nothing of the game!"—an opinion which one golden-haired fairy tenders him without hesitation, and to which he listens with becoming humility and contriteness. Noble-hearted Felix has established a court, where he is doing his best to emulate the wonders of the Eastern story-tellers, and, to judge from the rapt attention of his audience and the extreme roundness of their eyes, his imagination is by no means faulty. Lying full length on the grass, watching the various groups, is Mr Slimm. There is a depth of sadness in his eyes to-day, for he is thinking of another home—that was—thousands of miles away, and the echo of other voices than those rings in his ears.

„I did hope," he said, rising up, „that I should spend my old age with my own children; but I suppose it was not to be."

„Do not think of that now," Eleanor said with womanly tenderness.

„Perhaps it is selfish," he replied, with a great heave of his chest. „It is all for the best, and I have my happiness in yours. Had I not lost my dear ones, I should never have brought you your joy."

„Dear old fellow!" Edgar said, pressing his hand warmly. „Try and forget that for to-day. How good providence has been to us!"

„It is not every man who has a wife like yours, Seaton," said the American, heedless of the blushing Eleanor.

„True for you, old friend," Edgar replied, looking at his wife lovingly. „I have one in a million"; and he kissed her fondly.

The American regarded them for a moment with something in his eyes suspiciously like tears. „It was not to be," he said at length—„it was not to be!"

Eleanor came forward, and took his hands in her own. „Why not?" she said. „You have always a home and welcome here. Stay with us, and we will give to you what we can. Now, promise."

And he promised.