

John Ovington Returns

by Max Brand, 1892-1944

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I.

THE old servant stopped and faced him. The light from the candle he carried flickered across his bald head as he nodded wonderingly, and John Ovington hardly repressed a smile.

“You are quite sure you were never in the house before?” asked Hillton.

“No,” said Ovington, “I was never here before, but somehow it seems to me that a big amber-coloured vase with black figures tracing down the sides should stand by that window. It’s just a fancy, but rather unusual in its clearness.”

“The Ovingtons are an unusual family, sir,” said Hillton, and he raised his candle so that its light fell more fully on the sternly graven face of his new master. After his moment’s scrutiny he shook his head as one who gives up a problem.

“A vase like the one you speak of stood there ever since the house was built, but last week Mrs Worth broke it while she was cleaning the room. Every week I have the rooms cleaned, sir, but for the past year they have never been used, none except the kitchen and Mr Ovington’s bedroom where he lay sick for so long.”

“And died?” said Ovington.

“And died, sir. He wouldn’t trust any one save me. I wrote the letter which brought you here, and I signed it for him.”

“I shall never forget that letter,” said Ovington. “And that is the room where I sleep now?”

“The master has always slept in that room since the family came here to live,” he answered. “Now I think you have seen the whole house, Mr Ovington.”

“But isn’t there a room behind those folding doors?” asked Ovington.

“That is the library, and it hasn’t been opened these past fifteen years. Fifteen dreary years, sir. It must be fearful thick with dust.”

“And why has it been closed all this time?”

“That was the time when young Master Ovington died, and since then the master couldn’t bear to go into that room. For the family pictures hang there, and he couldn’t stand to look on them, he having lost his heir. The family name ended with him, as he thought. It was only through the lawyers that we traced the line to you, sir, through your great-grandfather, John Ovington, the man who disappeared.”

“So I understand,” said Ovington. “But let’s have a look at the room.”

Hillton drew in his wrinkled lips anxiously.

“Tonight, sir?”

“Why not?”

“It’s a fearsome place to go into at night with all the great, stern old Ovingtons painted and hanging on the wall. It’s most like a graveyard, sir, with the ghosts up and sitting on their tombs. I’m sure you will not like it to be there at night, Mr Ovington.”

“Tut!” smiled Ovington, and he laid a reassuring hand on the old man’s shoulder. “We’ll risk the dust and the family pictures.”

It was only after much reluctant fumbling and many sidewise glances as if in hope that Ovington’s resolution would die away that Hillton finally produced the key. The lock had set so fast that it required a great effort for Ovington to send it gritting back. He swung the door wide and stepped into the high, dark room. The wavering of the light behind him made him turn to Hillton, who stood outside the door, the candle fairly shaking in his hand.

“Come, come!” laughed Ovington. “After all, it’s only a room with nothing more dangerous in it than shadows.”

“No, sir,” said Hillton, “I’m not afraid. But it’s a strange house and a strange people.”

He entered slowly, the candle held high above his head, and he peered about at every step.

Into the highest shadows of the raftered ceiling the wavering candle-light hardly reached, but it shone on the ponderous table, thickly dusted, and into the black throat of the fireplace, and picked out the long row of portraits receding dimly on either side of the room. Among them were a few dressed in the ruffs of the Tudor

period. Others appeared in sombre Puritan grey, straight faces under tall hats. Among these one caught Ovington's eye.

He took the candle from Hillton and held it close to the portrait. He almost thought for a moment that he was dressed for a fancy ball and stood before a mirror, for it was his own face which returned his gaze with a half scowl and a half sneer, the same strong nose, thin cheeks, and unflinching eyes. He blinded himself with his hand and looked again, but the resemblance persisted. He felt that his forehead had grown very cold.

"And who is this, Hillton?" he asked, wondering if the servant would notice the resemblance.

"That is your great-grandfather, whose name was John Ovington, like your name," said Hillton, forgetting his uneasiness as he talked. "He was the strangest of all the Ovingtons, for he rode away one day and never came back, and that is the last people ever heard of him. And all that was many and many years ago. So long that my father could not remember."

He led the way to the window and drew aside the curtain, loosing a cloud of choking dust. Outside the moon glimmered on the garden terraces, which stepped down to a tree-covered hollow, but the other side of the valley rose dark and steep, with a great square house topping it.

"That is the Jervan house," said Hillton, and his pointing hand trembled in the moonlight. "That is the house where Beatrice Jervan lived, who was the sweetheart of our John Ovington in those old days, but John Ovington went across the seas and fought in France. So when he came back Beatrice Jervan loved him no longer, and they say that he would have forced her to marry him, for he was a stark fierce man, but she fled away in the night with another man. And John Ovington waited for them at a forking of the Newbury Road as they fled on their horses. He stopped them and would have made them turn back, but the man drew a horse-pistol and shot him through the shoulder and rode on with Beatrice Jervan, and God knows what became of them both. We only know that a granddaughter of that couple married back into the Jervan family, and now there is a Beatrice Jervan over there again in that house; and over here"—he laughed tremulously in the moonlight—"is a John Ovington again.

"Well, when the man rode on with Beatrice that other John Ovington rose up from the road where he had fallen and called after them: 'I have failed this time, but I shall not fail twice. I shall come again. I shall wait for you in this place, Beatrice Jervan, and carry you away with me forever.'

"But that he never did, for shortly afterwards he went and took ship in Boston Harbour and went across the sea to other countries. And he was your great-grandfather. All that he left was this picture on the wall and a little cedar chest of his papers which sits on that shelf next to the brass-bound Bible. He was the last of the old family, for after him his cousin took the name and the inheritance."

Through a long moment Ovington stood staring at the opposite house.

"I am going to stay here and read some of those papers," said he at last, "so you can leave the candle, Hillton."

"Will you sit here all alone, sir, on your first night?"

He folded his hands in his anxiety, and when Ovington nodded he turned and went falteringly from the room, shaking his head solemnly as he walked.

II.

ON top of the papers in the small chest lay a miniature of a girl. It had evidently at one time been a bust painted by an artist of some skill, but the lower part of the picture was rubbed and faded beyond recognition of any form. Only the face remained clear. The hair drew back from the forehead in the severe lines which pleased those grim old New Englanders, and the eyes drooped demurely downwards, but no moral preceptor could lessen the curve and the lure of the red lips. It seemed to Ovington that the eyes might at any moment flash up and yield him unknown depths of light and mockery.

He dropped the miniature to his knee and sat for a long time looking straight before him. When he had rallied his thoughts he commenced to turn over the papers. They were all letters written in a woman's hand, and despite the yellowing of time and the fading of the ink, he could make out the words with little effort. Arranged in the order of their receipt the letters told their own story of the love between Beatrice Jervan and John Ovington.

There was a long group covering the period of the wooing, and then came the time when Ovington decided to go to the war, and her letter:

I could not say it last night. I needed quiet so that I could think it all out clearly, and now I know what I wanted to say. You must not go to the war, John dear.

I know that glory is a wonderful thing, but a good wife is a wonderful thing, too, John, and would you care to win glory and lose a wife? Not that I am sure you would lose me; but I love happiness, dear, and I am afraid of pain; and if you were thousands and thousands of miles away, what would I have to remember you by? It is so hard to remember a man by his silences, John!

Dear, will you try to please me in this? And then I will try to please you all the days of my life. But the sea is so broad, and the French shoot so straight—and I do so love laughter, John! Come to me tonight, and I know I can change your mind.

He rose and walked with the candle until he faced the picture of John Ovington. Yes, that was the face of a man able to defy the charm of sudden glances and slow smiles. He went back to the letters. They diminished rapidly in length, and then came this:

If you want me, you must come and fight for me, Captain John Ovington. There may be dreadful fighting on the plains of France, but I think you will find enough war here on the hills of Connecticut. He has yellow, curling hair, John, and wide, blue eyes, and a gentle voice and a ringing laugh, and he's as much of a man as you are, almost. If you want me, you must come for me. It may be too late. I can't tell.

Then came a short note:

You need not come. It is too late!

But John Ovington had decided to come back and try, and after his return were two letters, the last:

If you will not come to see me, John Ovington, I shall come to see you; though if I do that I know that mother will faint.

I think I have never seen so grave a man as the John Ovington I met on the bridge the other day. Have you truly forgotten me? All grave men are not silent, John Ovington. I have a plan to discover if you can really smile.

I will be by the fountain in the garden tonight if it is not too cold.

And John Ovington had evidently changed his mind that night and gone to the garden and made desperate love, hoping against hope, for the last letter said:

Vincent Colvin has been with me all this morning. I am going to ride away with him tonight. I have not forgotten, but I promised myself to him long ago, and now I shall keep the promise. My father objects, so we are going to go out for a ride from which we shall never come back, and we will take the Newbury Road.

Oh, my dear, it breaks my heart to ride out of your life. It has all been so strange, so maddeningly dear and painful. Must this be good-bye?

He read no more that night, but he sat a long time at the window watching the night mist creep up the valley, tangling among the trees, and at last setting a grey veil across the window pane.

THE next morning the challenge of the keen October air drew him out into the open. In the stables he found a great black charger and had him saddled. The groom eyed him dubiously as he lengthened his stirrups to suit his western fashion of riding, but when he swung into the saddle and started down the path with his broad hat curling up in front to the wind and his cloak fluttering behind him, while his powerful pull on the reins held down the horse to an uneasy prance, the groom grinned with open admiration.

"I reckon an Ovington," he said, "is always an Ovington."

But as he took the road down the valley Ovington could not forget the adventure of the previous evening, for the Connecticut hills rolled up on either side, a remembered beauty of yellowing browns, gold, and crimson running riotously together, and all the trees still shining with the touch of the night mist. And the great lift and sway of the gallop set his heart singing in unison with the hoof-beats. He could not tell how far he had ridden, for every bend invited him on and on down flaming vistas.

He passed from the main road on to a narrow path which, after a quarter of a mile, surged to the left, and around a quick turn he thundered across a stream on a narrow foot-bridge, a frail structure which tottered and shook under him. At the

same time he heard the clatter of hoofs coming towards him down the same path and in a moment a racing brown horse flashed about the curve and dashed on to the bridge.

It was far too narrow for two horses to edge by each other. He brought his mount to a rearing stop.

When he looked again the brown horse stood head to head with his black, and he was face to face with the loveliest girl he had ever seen, but a remembered beauty—yes, the face of the miniature, a spray of autumn leaves at her breast stirring as she panted.

“This is a real escape, isn’t it?” she cried, and her voice carried more mirth than fear.

“I guess it’s an escape,” he said quietly, after another moment of staring. “Here, there is not room for two to pass. I’ll back off the bridge.”

But when he drew on the reins the black horse reared straight up, and when he came down stiff-legged the little bridge wavered and groaned.

“Don’t do that!” she cried, truly frightened by this time. “I’ll back off.”

She moved her horse back cautiously, step and step, and he followed, but when they came on to the path again he still blocked the way and the puzzled searching of the eyes made her flush slightly.

“Your name is Beatrice Jervan,” he stated.

“Yes,” she said.

“And mine is John Ovington.”

She clapped her hands in delighted discovery.

“Are you really the new John Ovington? Let’s shake hands and be friends. We’re neighbours, you know.”

He rode beside her and took her hand. He knew that she was saying:

“But you are a stranger here. How did you know my name?”

He smiled vaguely on her. “Can you tell me how old this bridge is?”

“Yes,” she said, wondering. “It is said to be a hundred and fifty years old. But I doubt it.”

“Well,” he said, “I feel as if I had known you for one hundred and fifty years.”

“With that soft hat and that riding-cloak,” she laughed, “you look as if you might be a bandit of that period.”

“With that smile,” he said, “you look as if you might be a woman of almost any period. May I ride with you?” he continued. “If I may I’ll try not to say any more foolish things like that last one.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, “it’s the October air that makes one happy without knowing just why. Of course you may ride with me if you care to.”

They made back across the bridge again and up on to the road. As they broke into a canter he fell back a little to watch the lilt of her perfect horsemanship.

“If you ride so far back I can’t talk to you,” she complained, “and then you’ll think I’m stupid.”

“You don’t have to talk,” he said. “I’m quite perfectly entertained, and besides—”

But she spurred her horse to a wild gallop and the rest of his sentence was jolted from his mind as he pursued. The long stride of the black brought him beside her in a few seconds.

“You ride well,” he shouted as he reined in to her pace, “but you see you can’t escape me.”

She slowed down rather sullenly.

“I have never been passed before on these roads,” she said.

“Not passed,” he corrected; “merely caught.”

She accepted the comment with a cold glance. He rode a little behind her, perfectly happy and perfectly silent. A keen wind rose and whirled down the valley to meet them. Sometimes the force of the gust seemed to sway her back in her saddle. From stirrup to head she gave the graceful lines to the sway and lunge of the gallop, and Ovington ground his teeth to keep from singing aloud. It seemed hardly a moment before she checked her horse.

“Our ways part here,” she said, then smiling: “Are you always silent, Mr Ovington?”

He raised his hat without replying, wheeled, and spurred up the hill, and she remained for a breathing space watching the play of his broad shoulders as he rode.

III.

THROUGH the next ten days he wandered about the place uneasily. He could hardly define his own mood. He felt vaguely that he was waiting, but he had not the slightest idea for what. But on the tenth day a letter came and he knew. He recognized the handwriting, but before he dared to tear it open he went first to the little cedar chest and compared the two scripts.

They were identical.

The letter began without prelude just as that other letter came to that other John Ovington a hundred and fifty years before:

If you will not come to see me, John Ovington, I shall come to see you.

A red mist came before him. He felt himself trembling like a child, and it was some time before he could resume the reading. Without a single variation the letter repeated the time-yellowed manuscript of the cedar chest.

I think I have never seen so grave a man. All grave men are not silent, John Ovington. I have a plan to discover if you can really smile. I will be in the garden tonight if it is not too cold.

“I will not go,” he said aloud, as if to convince himself against himself. “I will not let this damned riddle ruin me as it ruined a John Ovington four generations before me.”

He commenced to pace up and down the room. According to the old story he should go to that garden tonight and make desperate love to her. And according to that story he was lost in the end, fate played against him.

Ovington tried to rally his reason. He tried to convince himself that this was all a weird dream, but the two letters lay convincingly side by side. Had the spirit of the old John Ovington truly come back to try the old task again? Would there be for him the same agony of heart and mind? He covered his face with his hands and groaned aloud, for he saw again the spray of autumn leaves stirring at her breast.

After supper he went into the library to fight out the night there, but the old portraits leered down at him, the little cedar chest loomed like a silent oracle of sorrow. He rose at last and went out to pace the terraces of the garden.

His foot sounded hollowly over the little bridge across the river, but he did not notice it. Unconsciously he wandered up the path on the other side of the valley, through the opening of the hedge of evergreen, and on to the velvet lawns of the Jervan estate.

A light laugh only a few feet away startled him. He found that he stood near a circle of shrubbery, in the center of which a fountain splashed and showered, and through the light falling of the spray he heard the thrilling velvet of Beatrice Jervan's voice:

"Go away now, Vincent. I so want to be alone."

And a pleasant voice answered:

"Have I wearied you, dear?"

"No," she answered, "but I am tired of saying pretty things and hearing them, just for a little while. I am hungry for the quiet and the chill of this air. Please go back to the house and tell them that I am taking a walk through the garden. They will understand."

"And I shall see you later? And you are not cold?"

"You will see me later. I am not the least cold."

"*Au revoir* a little while. Dear, I am full of strange thoughts tonight. It is almost as if you were slipping away from me... I have reached out to you a hundred times, and my heart has closed on nothing. What does it mean?"

"Fantasy!" she said, and as she laughed the sound broke and ran trilling down like the musical chuckle of a bird. "Adieu. You need not fear. I shall stay true to our plan. Adieu."

Ovington heard the man's lightly treading step pass away over the lawn, the shrubbery brushed against him noisily, and then the silence slipped back over the place and the faintly moving air shook the fountain into light showerings of spray, felt rather than heard, like the pulse of a heart. And a great yellow moon floated up through the branches of the eastern trees, took the changing tracery of the black limbs, and now drifted abroad into the pathless heaven, so her light, peering aslant over the shrubbery, looked on the silver nodding head of the fountain.

And deeper and deeper slanted the light until he saw it glimmer like a dark star in the hair of Beatrice.

She raised her head up to meet that light. It fell upon her face like a sculptured smile, and Ovington stood breathless watching, waiting, with a musical dread in his heart. Then the dark fur which clung against her throat shifted and the shadow of the lifted eyes changed. He stepped into the circle of the shrubbery and stood before her, and she, looking up, saw the black outline of his head against the rolling moon.

"You are for all the world like a man come down from the moon," she said, and her voice was so low that she seemed to be talking to herself rather than to him.

He stood for a long moment before he could speak.

"And who," he asked, "is dear Vincent?"

"Vincent is a very nice boy," she answered, "who has yellow curling hair and wide blue eyes and is as much of a man as you are, John Ovington."

He dropped into the stone seat beside her and leaned forward, his hands clasped and his eyes on the ground. He was so perilously near her that she could make out the tensed lips, the frowning forehead of his profile, but the wide brim of his hat put all the rest of his face in shadow. She watched his strongly interlaced fingers.

"So you are a silent man, John Ovington?"

"I am thinking very hard," he answered.

"Yes, you are troubled about something?" He felt the perfume and the touch of her breath as she leaned swiftly towards him. And as she leaned she saw the interlacing fingers grind together. A tremor shook her that was half fear and half delight.

"I suppose," he began at last, "that you have watched the sun glinting in Vincent's yellow hair?"

"Of course," she said.

"And your fingers have touched it where the sun has fallen?"

"That," she said, "is a secret."

"I am quite sure I have no use for Vincent," he said.

In the pause the wind went rushing past them and ran on through the far-off tree-tops, whispering and muttering.

"And I suppose," he went on, "that you could not begin to count the moments you have spent looking into Vincent's wide, blue eyes?"

"I am sure that would be hard to reckon," she said gravely.

"I think I could hate Vincent," he mused. "Do you like him a great deal?"

"I'm sure I dislike confessionals."

"It is rather hard," he said at last.

"What is hard?"

"To play against fate, and to come into the play with the stage set against me."

"I don't understand!"

But watching those gripping fingers she did understand, and the shaking of the fountain counted out the waiting seconds until he spoke again.

"It would have been so easy in any other setting," he said. "For instance I might have seen you first at a teatable, saying the silly things that go with tea."

"I hate tea," she said fervently.

"Or I might have seen you at the end of a long ride instead of the beginning. I might have seen you with your hair tumbling roughly and your hat askew, and your figure slumping wearily at every stride of the horse. You would not have mattered then, very much."

She looked up to the moon, but it seemed too bright, too searching, now, and she dropped her eyes hastily back to his hands.

“But even as it was,” he said, “I could have stood out against you if it had not been for the spray of autumn leaves at your breast.” He nodded solemnly. “That was what did the harm. It was hardly fair, do you think?”

“They were only autumn leaves,” she said, “and anyway I don’t understand why you are so solemn.”

“That is fibbing,” he remarked unemotionally, “and it is not even a white fib. You know perfectly well that the stage was set, and that I had not a chance when I came blundering on to the boards, a mere supernumerary in the last act. But, knowing all this, why did you send me the note? I don’t like bear-baiting when I am the bear.”

She looked away from him suddenly into the shadows of the shrubbery. Then, almost desperately:

“Is this mere neighborliness, John Ovington? Can a man meet a girl once and then talk as you are talking?”

“Does it seem impossible to you, Beatrice?” he muttered.

“Does it really seem so strange to you? Tell me frankly.”

“I don’t know,” her lips framed, but without sound.

“Your face is so in the shadow,” she said in a very low voice, “that I cannot tell whether or not you are smiling to yourself.”

“I don’t dare to look up to you for fear that you would understand too clearly. But tell me truly, why did you write that note?”

“I cannot tell. I sat down before a piece of paper and the words came of themselves. I don’t know what I wrote. I am sorry if I hurt you.”

“And I cannot tell why I came here tonight,” he answered, “for I determined to stay away, but my steps guided themselves. Here I am. It is not you or I who speak here tonight, Beatrice, but old forces greater than we. We are puppets in the game. We are the guests of chance. Do you not feel it?”

“I cannot say,” she said, “but everything seems changed. It is as if I knew you for a long time. When you speak I remember your words from long ago. And my heart is cold and strange. And—and—I wish you would go, John Ovington. I am afraid of you.”

“I cannot go yet,” he answered bitterly, “for I sit here and see as plainly as if I were looking at you, the stir of your breast, and the moonlight white and cold along your throat, and the unconscious smiling of your lips, and the unsearchable shadows of your eyes.”

He turned to her fiercely and his left hand gripped the back of the stone seat as he leaned over her.

“Can’t you make them clear and plain and readable? Can’t you make me feel that I have no hope? That you are completely lost to me? That I have no share in your soul? Why do you torment me with this damnable ghost of hope, Beatrice?”

She made no answer to the compelling whisper, but through a long moment she met his eyes and into the silence once more the shaking of the fountain beat like a pulse. Then she shrank a little away with a musical tremor of sound, and her hand fell palm up across her eyes. He drew her to him, rich with the soft warmth of her body.

His lips touched her throat. A sob formed there. He kissed the tremulous hollow of her hand. At once it fell away helplessly. He crushed the parted lips. At once her

breath came brokenly and moaning to his ear, and while the thunder of his heart shook both their spirits, she whispered:

“God help me! God help me!”

Thereat he rose suddenly and turned away with bowed head, for at the moan of her voice the thought of the yellow, rustling papers of the cedar box came upon him like a drift of the last leaves of dead autumn. Then he knew that she was by his side.

“It is not ended yet,” she was saying. “If we are the guests of chance now, oh, be strong and become the master of it all! Find out the way. There is always one road home, John, I trust in you.”

When he was able to raise his head she was gone, and a mist that drew across the moon made all the play grey and cold.

He reached his house again and stood a long time before the picture of John Ovington until it seemed that the hard half sneer of the pictured smile was meant for him, and when he slept that night the mockery of the smile followed him.

IV.

But when he rose the next morning and looked over the shimmer of color running on the hills, a new hope swelled in him and a confidence of power. But as the day drew on the thought of the papers in the cedar box depressed him.

In the middle of the afternoon Hillton brought him a letter. Once more he knew the contents before he broke the seal, but as he read the expected words a sick feeling of suspense came over him.

Vincent Colvin has been with me all this morning. I am going to ride away with him tonight. I have not forgotten, but I promised myself to him long ago, and now I shall keep the promise. My father objects, so we are going out for a ride from which we shall never come back. We will take the Newbury Road. Oh, my dear, it breaks my heart to ride out of your life! It has all been so strange, so maddingly dear and painful. Must this be good-bye?

Once the letter was finished the suspense left him. Automatically he ordered his trunk packed and arranged his affairs as if he were about to go on a long journey. At sunset he went for the last time to look at the picture of the other John Ovington.

The smile twitched the lips and the sneer was doubly bitter.

After that he rode the black horse down the Newbury Road. He hardly knew what position to take, but when he came to a branching of the road the black horse of his own accord drew down to a walk. He had ridden him under the black shadow of an oak by the roadside before he remembered Hillton's story:

“And John Ovington waited for them at a forking of the Newbury Road.”

He would have ridden out and found some other waiting-place as he remembered, but a grim determination came up in him and he sat his horse

motionless. He remained there for perhaps an hour. The moon came up and ran white along the road. Then a clatter of hoofs beat far away.

Colvin came first as they rounded the last run, a large man riding strongly on a grey horse. They were a hundred yards away when Ovington rode out from beneath the tree, his hand raised.

Colvin brought his horse to a stop on grinding hoofs.

"Who the devil are you, sir?" he shouted. "What do you mean by stopping me?"

"I haven't the least wish to stop you," said Ovington calmly, "but I intend to stop Beatrice Jervan tonight. As for you, you may ride to hell, for all of me."

He could see Colvin's face set with fury.

"What authority have you for this?" he demanded, still partially controlling his voice.

"The authority of good sense," smiled Ovington, "which says that it is both too late and far too cold for a girl to be out riding."

"Damn your impertinence," cried Colvin. "Get out of the road or I'll ride you down like a dog!"

"Ah," said Ovington, "you talk well, Colvin. But there is an older score to settle between us than you dream of. You must ride this way alone tonight."

"You fool," shouted Colvin, "if you must have it, take it!"

As he spoke a revolver flashed in his hand, but as it dropped to the level Ovington spurred his black suddenly forward.

With his left hand he struck up Colvin's arm, and the revolver roared past his ear. With his right arm he seized Colvin about the waist and drew him bodily from the saddle.

As he swayed a moment struggling on the saddle-bow, Ovington swung his right hand free and struck. The blow fell behind Colvin's ear and he collapsed without a sound.

Ovington flung his limp body to the ground.

"You have killed him!" whispered Beatrice. "Flee! Flee!"

"He is merely stunned," said Ovington. "Turn your horse. We ride another way this night."

She reined her horse away and raised her riding-crop.

"Keep away," she cried in a choked voice. "I am afraid! Keep away. He has my promise—I shall never leave him!"

He laughed short and hard.

"Promise?" he said. "Do you think that words will stop me tonight after I have conquered destiny at last? Do you dream that words will stop me? Then one way with both!"

As he spoke he rode upon her. The riding-crop fell upon his shoulder, but he did not notice it. He swept her from the saddle into his arms and crushed the parted lips fiercely against his own.

"Dearest," he said, "after four generations of waiting, I have returned for you and won you away from fate."

Suddenly her straining body gave to him, he heard a murmuring and changed voice in his ear:

"Ride! Ride! He is stirring on the road. He is awakening!"

And as they spurred up the road he turned his head and saw the grey horse and the brown fleeing side by side far away with loose shaken bridle-reins and empty saddles.

