

The Old Secretaire

by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935

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Chapter I

THERE had been a Secretan at Woodside Manor for three hundred years, from the time of Norman Secretan the Catholic, down to that of Myles Secretan, the present representative of the race, who thought as a man of the world of the family dignity, and scoffed openly at the family ghost. A wing of the great house, now fallen partly into disuse, contained the Haunted Chamber, a wing which Myles Secretan vowed to have restored to its pristine glory some day when the fortunes of Woodside should mend; for, three generations of wild Secretans—Walter, with a taste for gambling; Arundel, friend and boon-companion of Edgar Warren of Normanton Grange, a neighbouring great house, for the Warrens and Secretans had ever been closest of friends; and lastly, Clive, who had been one of the Pavilion intimates, and a prime favourite with ‘the first gentleman in Europe’—had brought the resources of Woodside to a very low ebb indeed. The favour of kings is proverbially a fickle thing, unless one happens to be a Brummell, as Clive Secretan had found to his cost; and thus it was that the west wing remained in its half-dismantled state, and the ghost walked o’ nights, to the awe and terror of the neighbourhood.

It was not such a very old story, or a very ancient spectre either, as it only dated back as far as the present possessor’s grandfather. There was one old servant in the house—a dreadful man, nearly ninety years of age, with white bushy eyebrows and keen black eyes—who remembered the tragedy—Silas Brookes, the unfortunate Arundel Secretan’s valet. But even he never spoke about it, and only listened when the story was mentioned with suspicion and hatred glowering out of his evil dark eyes. The servants said he was mad—that the recollection had turned his brain. Once, years ago, he had told the story, and was never heard to mention it again.

He was perhaps the wildest of them all, this friend of Edgar Warren’s, with his handsome face and soft effeminate manner; his carefully paraded vices, and mad love of gambling. For a time, Walter Secretan, the father, had been proud to hear of his son’s social success, of his conquests and his gaming exploits in connection with the most famous men in Europe; of the tales which came down to the world-worn old roué in the peaceful Kentish village, and reflected, as it were, a lustre upon himself. There was some one else, too, who heard these tales, and went over them in secret—pretty Mistress Alice Mayford, the vicar’s daughter, who wore on her finger a rose diamond in a quaint setting, and something warmer in her heart. She heard all these things, watching and praying for the time when such vicious pleasures should pall and ‘the king come home again,’ which he did at length; and the stalled ox was killed, and presently there was a quiet wedding at the little church under the hill.

But Arundel Secretan had too much of the swashbuckler in his blood to settle down at twenty-six, even with a beautiful wife to bear him company, and a doting father at his beck and call. For hardly had the cherry orchards bloomed again, ere Warren, fresh from a continental tour, was in town, hunting high and low for his *fidus Achates*, and at last found him out. There was a new actress to see, he

wrote, a score of new amusements; for the sake of old times, a week, only a short week, and then he might return to his peaches and Ashford ale for ever. Arundel hesitated, and finally fell. For three whole years they saw nothing of him, but they heard much—tales from the Levant came, filtered through gossips from town; sad stories from Rome, and Venice, and Florence, yet nothing from the wanderer save the constant cry for money. Old Walter Secretan grew grayer and grimmer; he was harsh and hard to all save Alice, and what they suffered together, no one ever knew. The master of Woodside wrote at length refusing to send further funds; and then the heir came home—home one night when they least expected him, clanking with whip and spur into the great dining-hall, where injured father and outraged wife were seated, as if his absence had only been for an hour. Oh, but he was changed—three years of vice and unbridled license had set their mark upon his face, had clouded the open forehead and bleared the eye. His wife, poor child, would have risen and fallen at his feet for very joy, but that Walter Secretan motioned her back, and called for another cover with a coolness that astonished the trembling old seneschal, and struck him with a presentiment of coming evil. It was a strange meal, with no word spoken on either side.

‘On my honour, your modern husband but a strange fashion of showing love and devotion to his bride,’ said Walter Secretan, when the cloth had been drawn, and the wine set in great coolers, and Mistress Alice had gone tremblingly to her chamber. ‘Odds-fish, but you take the matter coolly. In my time it would have gone hard if—’

‘In your time,’ Secretan the younger answered languidly, as he brushed a crumb from his velvet skirts. ‘You kept your vices closer at home. With our greater regard for the proprieties, we take them abroad—not quite so dutiful, perhaps, but a great deal more wholesome—for Woodside.’

‘And now, forsooth, that my patience is exhausted, the supplies have stopped, you come home to “eschew sack and live cleanly?”’

‘We both seem to be labouring under a mistake, sir; and I will be perfectly candid with you. I have no intention of assuming the part of the prodigal son—a character which, pardon me, would as ill become your unworthy servant as the other character would befit you.’

‘Fore George, your elegant tropes go clean over my head,’ the father said with some show of anger. ‘Leave your fine phrases where you seem to have left your heart and your manhood. You come down here neither to seek forgiveness nor to be forgiven. Why do you come at all?’

Arundel helped himself to another glass of claret, and crossed his elegant legs in an attitude of utter nonchalance. ‘Most honoured sir, what is the one thing that should bring me from the sweet shady side of Pall Mall to such an *inferno* as Woodside?’

‘And that one thing? omitting such trifling circumstances as love and duty, for which I humbly ask your pardon for recalling to your mind,’ said Walter Secretan sardonically. ‘I am all ears.’

‘Need I say that I am alluding to money?’

For the first time during the interview, a smile broke out upon the listener’s dark handsome features. ‘I am heartily glad to hear it,’ he returned; ‘and all the more so that you will not get it. No, if you go down on your knees to me and swear

reformation by all the saints in the calendar, not another guinea do you get from me; no, not even if it would save you from starvation. If my son is a heartless profligate, I will take care that yours does not suffer for his father's sins.'

For the first time the younger man showed signs of agitation and alarm. 'There is more than one way of suffering for a father's sins,' he said.

'I know it—who better?—as well as I know by your manner that you have brought dishonour on the house. And so yonder innocent lad's patrimony is to be the price of your absolution. Why not go to your fine friends for money? Is it a greater sin to rob them than rob an indulgent father? Go to your faithful friend from Normanton yonder, the immaculate Edgar, who would prate of love and honour, whilst the doors of all honest men are shut in his face—ask *him* for the money.'

'This is vulgar prejudice,' Arundel exclaimed, stung into retort by these bitter words. 'If the man you speak of was in England, I should not be here to ask this favour of you now.'

'I believe that,' said Secretan. 'You would not come unless you were forced to do so.'

'Edgar would help me cheerfully enough, only he is away, no one knows where, upon one of his mad expeditions. It is a matter of life and death with me—a debt of honour to be met—a debt so large that I have arranged for three months in which to raise the money.'

'On my honour, you have been sustaining the family reputation! And who is the fortunate individual who has been astute enough to get the better of so accomplished a dicer and card-player as Arundel Secretan?'

'Lord St Devereux—a name, I believe, known to you.'

'Known to me in years gone by as a disgraced blackleg and notorious roué. By the blood of my ancestors, but you have been figuring in noble company!—And the amount?'

'Nearly thirty thousand pounds, so far as I can recollect.'

'And which the immaculate St Devereux will never get,' returned Secretan with the same grim quietness. 'I have done enough, and more than enough. St Devereux and a son of mine together! Borrow this money—beg it—steal it if you like, but never mention it to me again, or I shall forget our ties of blood and strike you where you stand.'

The younger man rose quietly, a ghastly pallor on his cheeks. He hesitated for a moment ere he spoke again. 'You will not deny me a night's shelter?' he said.

'No; Woodside will hold us both. Stay here while you may; come and go at your pleasure. My penance will be the contemplation of my own handiwork. Your penance has yet to come.'

Arundel Secretan walked up the open staircase, past the frowning ancestors he had dishonoured, with white set face and glittering eyes; past his wife's room, to the apartment they had prepared for him. His social excommunication had come—he had read the death-warrant in his sire's determined aspect. For more than an hour he sat in silent thought. There were pens, ink, and paper on the table, and as his troubled gaze fell upon them, his brow cleared a little and he began to write. The writing lasted till nearly midnight, till at length the broad sheets were folded and addressed to the friend whom his father had just maligned so bitterly. Then

the writer rang his bell, and told the servant to send his man, Silas Brookes, to him. He came, silent and lynx-eyed, listening respectfully to his instructions. He was to start on the morrow for Italy; walk, ride, fly, or crawl, anything so long as the precious packet was delivered into Edgar Warren's hands without an hour's unnecessary delay. Silas Brookes took the packet and the accompanying purse of gold without a word, and saddling a horse in the stable, rode out into the night upon his errand.

So this rarely faithful servant turned his face eastward, and nothing was heard of him for many days. Arundel Secretan meanwhile lived a quiet retired life, rarely appearing at meals, and when he did so, the set frown was on his brow, the haunting anxiety in his eyes. He seemed to shun society, even that of his wife and child, though Alice's love was not of the kind to be killed by any coldness or neglect; but he had so strangely changed, so hard and cynical, that her gentle nature turned from the politely sarcastic phrase as from a blow. Two months went by; the leaves had fallen from the trees, the earth was bound in iron bonds, a thick sheet of snow lay in the forest drives and over the desolate lawns. The Yule-log was trimmed and placed outside the great hall door; the red holly-berries and sickly white mistletoe hung on picture and spear and armour. There was a sound of joyous revelry in the servants' hall, echoing faintly in the great dining-room, where the silent two sat over their weary repast—a Christmas Eve without love or harmony, but a moody silence, till the sharp ring of a horse's hoofs outside roused a little languid attention. Arundel Secretan heard the sound, and rose to his feet a great shout bursting from his lips.

Silas Brookes stood in the hall, a fine white powder upon the cape of his riding-coat, and sternly silent, as if his absence had only been for an hour. He bowed his head to his master's glance of interrogation, and signified that the latter should lead the way. Once up-stairs in Secretan's chamber, his natural reserve gave way.

'I saw Mr Warren,' he said, still standing, and speaking mechanically, as if repeating a lesson. 'He has been, nay, he is very ill, sir; but he was pleased to hear from you, the more that he has a presentiment you will never meet again. And then he read your letter.'

The listener laid his hand upon his heart, as if to check the violence of its beating—there seemed to be a band of iron round his forehead, crushing into the heated brain. 'Get to the point!' he exclaimed. 'The answer—the answer!'

'I saw him read every line, and smiling in the way he used to smile when anything amused him. "Give my compliments to your master," he said, "and tell him that even I cannot make bricks without straw. It is a lesson I have been trying to learn from the Jews without much advantage to me, but considerable profit to them."'

'And that was all he said?' asked Secretan calmly, though the reply was so like the man, he knew it must be so. 'Nothing more?'

'Nothing more, sir—not a word.'

'And that man was my friend and my debtor!' These were the last words Arundel Secretan ever spoke. Without further hesitation, he drew his rapier from its sheath, and turning the point towards his heart, threw himself full upon it. And there they found him in the morning—dead, with a great pool of blood upon the floor; and in due course he was buried with his fathers. But every Christmas Eve a

light is seen in the dormer window in the west wing, and a shadowy form paces the passages with a stain upon its breast. This was the tale Silas Brookes had to tell, only once, with a strange agitation and restlessness, for he had loved his master in his own strange method, and grieved for him to this day. And so, year after year, the ghost walked on Christmas Eve, though Myles Secretan would have none of it, vowing that Arundel, his ancestor, disliked home too much to make a permanent habitation of the half-ruined west wing.

Chapter II

MORE than half a century had passed since Arundel Secretan had been found with the rapier in his heart, and the west wing had still remained tenanted by the rats and mice and the shade of the unfortunate gambler. Again the Yule-log stood without the door; there was a pleasant sound of laughter in the great hall, for the snow was falling thickly on the bare oaks and pines and dashing against the casement. Inside, all was light and warmth, a huge fire burning on the tiled hearth, rugs and skin-mats scattered about with all kinds of comfortable lounges, from a settee, borrowed from the drawing-room, to the beehive straw-chair, purloined for the moment from the kitchen. Holly and mistletoe gleamed everywhere, from ancient pictures and chain-mail, to the seventeenth-century clock ticking on the stairs. For some moments the merry party were silent, listening cosily to the snow beating on the lattice. Presently, Ada Secretan, sole daughter of the house, roused herself from the contemplation of the cheery blaze to give a fresh turn to the conversation.

'We are here for a whole fortnight,' she said. 'In my limited recollection, I distinctly remember being snow-bound here for fifteen days. Suppose this should happen again, my sisters, cousins, and aunts!'

A golden head shimmered in the light for a moment, and a low rapturous voice was heard to ejaculate the single monosyllable 'Jolly!' But the rest of the party became suddenly grave at the bare idea of such a calamity.

'Don't imagine it's slow,' came another mysterious voice out of the gloom, 'because it isn't. I was snowed up in Scotland for nearly a week, once. I never enjoyed myself so much in my life.'

'What did you do, Connie?' asked golden-head from her corner, sleepily.

'Heaps of things, my dear. First of all, we ransacked the place from top to bottom—such a deliciously quaint old house, with old cupboards in all sorts of queer places, and ghostly passages—oh! Then, of course, we had charades and theatricals.'

'We might have theatricals here, Ada,' suggested the girl addressed as Connie, though better known to the world of fashion as the Hon. Constance Lumley, 'if any of the gentlemen are equal to writing a farce.'

'I have been expecting this,' said a man's voice resignedly, apparently belonging to a pair of knickerbockers and homespun hose, half hidden in the beehive chair. 'Of course, you have all forgotten my existence utterly, and equally, of course. I am expected to volunteer my services as author and stage-manager.'

‘Oh, Mr Warren, how delightful!’ cried a grateful chorus. ‘After writing for the London stage, it will be child’s-play to make us a little play.’

‘Amateurs are so easily satisfied!’ continued the dramatist dryly, the hero of more than one successful comedy. ‘All you have to do is to give them all leading parts, and there you are, you know!’

‘And pretty dresses,’ murmured golden-head, intensely interested.

‘And pretty frocks, Miss Wynne.—What do you say to attempting something of the Rivals and School for Scandal type? It would save a vast amount of stagework; and surely, in a jolly old house like this, we might hunt up picturesque costumes enough.’

In spite of his affected cynicism, Frank Warren was by this time as much in love with his own scheme as the bevy of fair listeners. With a dexterity born of long practice, he sketched out rapidly the outline of a plot, which he submitted to his hearers, and which they accepted with fervent if subdued applause. Though the snow beat upon the casement, drifting higher round the laurel and barberry in the drive, there was no repining at the weather in the ancient hall, where the firelight fell fitfully upon a ring of fair flushed faces gathered round the oracle.

‘Your brother is expected this evening, Miss Secretan?’—Ada nodded assent.—‘And with myself, not forgetting our host and Colonel Lucas, will be enough. Of course, we shall not all be able to play in this piece; but those who don’t, can take a part in the *tableaux vivants* afterwards.’

‘*Tableaux vivants*, and a play afterwards!’ exclaimed Miss Lumley, throwing herself back in a pretended ecstasy of admiration. ‘Glorious!—Ada, my dear child, with all your picturesque ancestors and lovely ancestresses, you must have some splendid dresses somewhere.’

‘Tradition says there are some in the west wing,’ Ada Secretan replied; ‘though, candidly, I have never had courage to go there and look for myself. The Haunted Chamber is there.’

‘Do you boast a Haunted Chamber?’ Warren asked with some curiosity.

As the outer shadows fell, the wind gathered strength in the pines; it grew dark inside in the early gloaming, till nothing but the firelight remained. It was the hour and season for a romantic legend, fresh to some of them, and they gathered closer round the ruddy blaze while Ada Secretan told the story. By the time she had finished, darkness had fallen, and the listeners were very silent. ‘And all this happened,’ concluded the narrator, ‘not sixty years ago.’

‘Was the west wing habitable then?’ Warren asked presently. ‘You can understand the interest I take in this pitiful story. For,’ continued the speaker, in a higher key, ‘Edgar Warren of the story is my ancestor. Indeed, I am the first Warren who has crossed this threshold since that fatal night.’

‘The wing was falling into decay; but still it must have been a pleasant place in the summertime; and in it were the suite of rooms set aside for the eldest son of the house from time immemorial. Since that night, I don’t think any of us have set foot in the wing.’

‘It seems a pity to let such lovely old rooms lie idle,’ mused Miss Wynne. ‘Though I can understand how little your great-grandfather cared for them.’

‘He cared a great deal more than people thought,’ Ada replied. ‘In spite of his apparent harshness and severity, he was very fond of his son, and bitterly

disappointed by his dishonourable conduct. He did not live very long afterwards, when Alice Secretan died; and before his decease, he had the entrance to the west wing nailed up; and not a soul has ever set foot in the building since his death.'

'Well, that's a strange way of showing grief,' Warren exclaimed irreverently.—'And what about Clive, the young son and heir?'

'He was taken in good hands, and the estate carefully nursed during his long minority—a fortunate thing for us, as it turned out afterwards. He married at twenty-one that foreign-looking lady who hangs up over the staircase there; and broke his neck at twenty-three over some foolish wager, just in time to save everything from utter ruin; and,' concluded the fair narrator candidly, 'that is really the reason why the west wing has never been restored to its pristine glory.'

'In that case, Mr Secretan has no foolish—that is, no reverence for his ancestor's strange taste,' Warren remarked. 'If your grandfather had not been a friend of *the first gentleman in Europe*, that part of Woodside would have been restored long ago! Would he mind some of us exploring it?'

The questioner, at someone's instigation, emptied a bucket of pine-knots on the sullen wood-ashes, and roused up a ruddy blaze, roaring and spluttering up the wide open chimney. Rugs and chairs were brought closer round, and a little gipsy table set in the midst. A solemn footman deposited a tray containing gleaming silver and fragile china on the wicker-stand, and vanished. For a time at least, the spell cast over them all by the legend was broken, and a babel of nimble tongues broke loose. Warren raised himself with a great show of reluctance from his shadowy retreat and stood waiting at Ada Secretan's right hand; for at these cosy afternoon teas they had voted the presence of servants a restraint, and the feeling in favour of self-help was unanimous and voluntary. Presently, when every fair one had been supplied according to her needs, the dramatist drew a chair closer to the youthful chatelaine's side, speaking in a low key. 'You don't know how your little romance has interested me,' said he, 'especially the recollection of my ancestor, Edgar Warren. Talk about having no poetry in real life, with a Haunted Chamber, and a mysterious mansion sealed and barred for nearly sixty years! Miss Secretan, I must have a ramble through these rooms, if I commit burglary to do it.'

'So far as that goes, I do not see why all of us should not go. It will certainly have the merit of being a novel Christmas amusement.'

'Then you really think Mr Secretan will consent?'

'Consent to what?' cried a voice behind, bringing with the owner a gust of cold moist air and a general sense of snow and discomfort.—'What is the last mad scheme I am to consent to, eh! pussy?'

Warren looked up with serio-comic disgust into Mr Secretan's face, or at least as much as could be seen of it under a shooting-cap with the flaps carefully tied under the ears, and a mackintosh from foot to collar. A little snow collected on his boots and gaiters melted in the warmer atmosphere, and trickled across the polished oak floor.

'You have been sitting over the fire, you lazy young people, till you are all of you half asleep. If you really won't have lamps, ring for some more wood, so that I can see where the mischievous ones are.'

Warren rang the bell, and politely offered to relieve his host of hat and coat; an offer declined at once, on the plea of more outdoor work to be done. As the latter still lingered, Warren hastened to press his request.

‘Of course, if you like to run wild amongst the dust and black beetles, I have no objection,’ said the cheery Squire. ‘It will do the place no harm to have a little air let in. Only, don’t get frightening any of my pretty visitors; I want nothing but Christmas roses here on Christmas morning.’

‘The thing is done!’ cried Warren theatrically, as the outer door banged behind the Squire. ‘Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors, the mystic west wing is about to be reopened, after an interlude of sixty years—’

But any further declamation was checked by a violent ring at the hall bell; a throwing open of doors, and the entry of three people: one an elegant-looking girl, draped and shawled; the second, a tall military figure; and lastly, a young man in a rough tweed ulster—none other than Walter Secretan of Woodside Manor and Pump Court, Temple; and the before-mentioned Colonel Lucas, and Miss Edith Lucas, his daughter.

Warren stopped in the midst of his florid utterance, and would have come forward, but that he felt a hand laid upon his arm. Looking down, he saw an old man bearing some logs of wood, a bent decrepit man, with heavy overhanging brows, and dark, evil-looking eyes. Somewhat surprised, he would have asked the meaning of this strange conduct, save that the ancient servitor held up a warning hand, and said: ‘Sixty years, you say—ay, sixty sorrowful, bitter years.—And you would come, another of your hated race, prying into family secrets.—Listen to me, sir; take an old man’s advice, and keep away from yonder wing, or your life, perhaps more than that, will pay the forfeit.’ And so saying, he was gone.

It was later in the evening before the astonished hearer found an opportunity of discovering the identity of his strange friend. Without disclosing what he had heard, he drew Walter Secretan out somewhat cautiously. That gentleman was tying his white cravat at the time, a matter just then of more importance to him than anything so mundane as a family servant. ‘That? Oh, that old fellow was my great-grandfather’s valet—Silas Brookes, who went on that mad excursion you have heard of. An excellent servant in his day, but getting a little imbecile, you understand.’

Warren did understand, and held his peace. But all the same he felt that the words he had heard were the outcome of neither imbecility nor madness. Was he hiding some dark secret, or was it merely rancorous hatred of a Warren that dictated the outburst of bitter spleen?

Chapter III

LIKE most men of his profession, Warren was a keen observer of character; a mystery delighted him equally from a business or an analytical point of view. Here, then, were all the elements for a seasonable romance—a Haunted Chamber; a mysterious servitor of the good old orthodox type, moreover the only living historian of the tragedy—a trusted servant, who had actually a personal

acquaintance, so to speak, with Edgar Warren, and who alone—Warren was sure of that—could solve a dark and blood-stained catastrophe.

Morning broke with snow knee-deep in the drive, huge drifts half-way up the windows, and no prospect of any outdoor amusement. Even the rural postman had not succeeded in forcing his way through. It was, as Constance Lumley observed, when the parliament had gathered round the hall fire, a Christmas evidently to be spent quite magazine-artically. With nothing whatever to do, and no immediate prospect of amusement, conversation began to languish, till one of the party entered with the startling news that the ghost-light had been seen burning in the haunted wing all the previous night. Thereupon, the listeners began to thrill, and a new zest was given to the flagging flow of talk.

‘Christmas Eve, the anniversary of the tragedy,’ Ada Secretan exclaimed. ‘I had forgotten that. To-night, the ghost walks, rapier in hand, down the dusky passage. Shall we interview him?’

But in spite of nineteenth-century civilisation and the boldness of numbers and daylight, there was no enthusiastic response to this appeal, for each looked at his neighbour, waiting for him to speak.

‘Haunted Chamber or not, this is the very morning to explore those old rooms,’ Walter Secretan remarked. ‘What do you say to us all going?—only you girls had better put on some wraps, for it is sure to be dirty enough. Those in favour of my motion, please hold up their hands.’

Immediately, a host of fair fingers were extended; and the proposal being carried *nem con*, the ladies trooped away to prepare themselves for the coming excursion. As they began to reappear one by one, cloaked and hooded, Warren and Walter Secretan returned in rough laced jackets, bearing between them a gigantic bunch of rusty keys, a small but powerful crowbar, and a dark-lantern.

A short walk along a broad flagged passage brought the sightseers to a flight of steps surmounted by a wide oak door, fitted with long iron hinges, rusty and timeworn, but still forming a powerful barrier against intruders. After some difficulty, a key was found to fit, and the creaking lock forced back by the united strength of Secretan and Warren. The bolts were drawn; but the great iron hinges held, till the crowbar being brought into requisition, finally the great door flew open with a sullen bang that seemed to re-echo moodily down the dim reverberating passages.

A low corridor was before them, hung with ancient tapestry, torn and moth-eaten, and swaying in ghostly fashion before the cold air. Thick dust lay upon the tiled floor, deadening the sound of footsteps. Still the light of the lantern was enough to guide their somewhat hesitating steps, till at length a hall was reached, in the centre of which was a noble staircase, lighted from the roof by a glass dome, though the accumulated dust of more than half a century made daylight dim and pallid. Here every step echoed loudly; every vibration of the voice seemed to ring as if the place was filled with mocking spirits. With some difficulty they flung back the ponderous iron-lined shutters, and a stream of light poured in. There were rusty-armour figures in dim corners; pictures peeling slowly from their panels on the walls; a colony of rats scudded noisily across the floor under the rotting wainscot. There were three rooms leading out of the hall, the doors of which they had no difficulty in opening—rooms in which old oak furniture had been placed,

though the damask had mouldered and left the frames bare. There was nothing of interest in any of these apartments, save one or two curious ornaments; and upon one dusty table, a pack of cards lay strewn, with a decanter and glass, the former containing a pungent sediment.

Up-stairs was a long corridor containing many rooms, all of which they explored; and here the girls found themselves in their element. There were wardrobes and huge linen-chests containing lace in abundance; tarnished silver buckles and rich brocades; lustrings stiff as cardboard; a rich treasure of silk and velvet enough, more than enough, of dresses from the time of the 'merrie monarch' downwards, to furnish material for a hundred ancient comedies. The fair bevy of connoisseurs drew a breath of mingled delight and envy, when this rich harvest had been gathered into a shimmering heap.

They had drawn apart by ones and twos, each of the party pouring over some newly discovered treasure, as the boxes were turned out promiscuously on the floor. Point-lace collars and paste buckles, a heavy garnet signet ring, some delicate cameos, silken hose, and claret-coloured full-bottomed coats slashed with silk—every article of clothing affected by a lost generation was there.

'You don't deserve a shred of these beautiful things, Ada,' exclaimed Althea Wynne, drawing a long breath of unalloyed admiration. 'Fancy allowing all these treasures to moulder here for years and years!'

"O'er all, there hung the shadow of a fear," Warren quoted.—'Miss Wynne, I am afraid you are a Radical—you cannot understand the reverence due to one's ancestors.—And now, confess, Miss Secretan, have you not been just a little afraid to ransack these sacred apartments?'

'A little, perhaps,' Ada confessed. 'I almost feel guilty of sacrilege now. What do you say to carrying our spoils away? I think we have done enough.'

'Without invading the sanctity of the ghostly chamber!' cried Miss Lumley. 'Perish the thought!—Mr Secretan, lead the way!'

But Secretan did not know which room was the ghostly chamber, though he knew sufficiently the geography of the rooms, to point out the mystic apartment. All Secretan knew was, that the chamber looked out upon a green courtyard facing the east wing, and that it was lighted by an oriel window. At the end of the corridor the explorers found another room facing them, which, after a little cogitation and some speculation as to their exact latitude, Warren declared must be the place of their search. To their surprise, they found this door barred with iron let into the solid masonry, so strongly, indeed, that half an hour's exertion at least was required before they could wrench away sufficient of the barriers to try the key. At this critical moment, swift footsteps came unheeded towards the eager group, and Warren felt himself dashed aside with a force scarcely credible in the feeble frame of the intruder. 'Hold, hold, I say! Have you no reverence for the dead?'

Silas Brookes was standing with his back to the door, a flashing rapier in his hand. He seemed to have thrown off half a century of years; his figure, no longer bent and halting, was drawn up to its full height; a bright colour gave an air of youth to the shrivelled cheek; his keen eyes flashed with all the fire and brilliancy of perfect manhood. For a few moments the group started back in some alarm, and not a little fright amongst the girls, who clung to each other in unaffected fear.

‘What is the meaning of this folly?’ Secretan demanded, the first to recover himself. ‘Brookes, you forget yourself. Go back into the house immediately, or we shall know how to treat you. You are alarming the ladies by this conduct.’

But the words might have fallen on ears of stone. The old man stood with one hand behind him, as if protecting some unseen treasure, the other held forward the rapier, prepared to pierce the first intruder.

‘Shall we make a rush for him?’ Warren whispered, his blood up by this time. ‘We could easily overpower him between us.’

‘Think of the girls,’ Secretan replied between his teeth. ‘I am afraid we shall have to beat an ignominious retreat. Confound it! this comes of keeping a madman on the premises; and yet I don’t like to give in.’

Warren for reply was about to advocate extreme measures, when a happy thought struck him. After all, the situation had its ludicrous aspect; but he was too intent on his new plan to see this now. He whispered a few words in his friend’s ear to the effect that he was to get the party away, and leave him to face the strange custodian of the Haunted Chamber.

‘You have some scheme in your head?’ Walter asked.

Warren nodded. He had a scheme, though it had scarcely taken shape as yet. Nevertheless, it was with a certain feeling of relief that he heard the echoing footsteps of his party dying away in the distance. Then he turned a pair of fearless gray eyes full upon the guardian, standing in the same watching attitude, and commanded him to lay aside his weapon. Brookes threw the rapier on the stone floor with a resounding crash.

It was an hour later before Warren stepped into the hall again, where he found the late adventure seekers waiting in a group for him. But, if they expected any story of wild adventure, to hear the history of some gruesome tragedy or hidden treasure, they were mistaken. He simply pointed out to them the fact that the old servant was not so much to blame for his conduct as they thought; but that it was more their fault, the simple fact being that the faithful valet was aghast at the idea of the room sacred to his beloved and revered master being given over to ruthless plunderers. Indeed, so smoothly did the wily dramatist put the case, that public opinion, which had been strongly against the obstreperous Brookes, rapidly veered round in his favour, till some of the actors in this affecting little comedy began to feel somewhat ashamed of the part they had played.

‘Poor old man!’ said Edith Lucas pityingly; ‘and all this time we have been accounting him a dangerous madman. I’m so glad!’

Warren smiled under his moustache; and Walter Secretan, turning towards him, caught the look of amusement in his friend’s eyes. Presently, under cover of the conversation, he got alongside him, and in a cautious whisper, demanded an account of the interview.

‘Too long to tell you now,’ Warren murmured. ‘Only, if that old gentleman is mad, there is method in his madness.—Wait in the dining-room after dinner till the rest have gone, and I will tell you my plan.’

They had some time to wait, for it being Christmas Eve, the meal was a lone and elaborate affair. It was nearly ten before the last *frou-frou* of skirts announced the disappearance of the ladies, and nearly half an hour later before the Squire and Colonel Lucas sought the drawing-room with many a sly allusion and bald

platitude concerning the want of gallantry of the present generation. Walter closed the door behind them with a parting shot, and taking a cigarette from his case, composed himself to listen to Warren's plan of campaign.

'Did it ever strike you what a fine place this west wing would be for a gang of smugglers or coiners?' Warren commenced. 'You are not far from the high-road, within easy walking distance from the sea, and not a single servant in the house dare be near the haunted part of the house after dark. Why, they would be safer there than in London!'

'What are you driving at?' asked Walter

'Simply this—that your faithful old servitor knows something about those rooms he is in mortal fear some one else should discover. I need not tell you that my pretty little romance touching his lifetime's devotion was a pleasant fiction. Walter, there is something going on here, and we must find it out.'

'I am afraid I don't quite follow you,' Secretan returned. 'You see, if there had been anything going on, as you suggest, all these years, we must have heard something of it. Depend upon it, poor old Brookes's brain is giving way. Remember, he isn't far short of ninety.'

'No more mad than I am. I convinced him diplomatically that there would be no further interference on our part, and you should have seen the look of relief on his face—it was a study for an artist. Now, in the next place, as to these ghostly lights they talk about—'

'They certainly do exist,' said Secretan with quiet conviction. 'I have seen them myself many a time when I was a boy.'

'That exactly confirms what I say!' Warren exclaimed triumphantly. 'Now, look at it from a common-sense point of view. Can you believe for a moment that these lights are the work of supernatural agency?'

'It certainly seems contrary to common-sense.'

'It's contrary to all kinds of sense.—Now, listen here. After I had smoothed the old rascal down this morning, we fell into conversation, and by degrees I learnt a good deal of the life of your ghostly ancestor; and, with all due deference to your family pride, I must say a more thorough-paced scoundrel seldom existed. Though, perhaps, the less I say about rascally ancestors the better. Under pretence of wanting a window open, I lured Brookes away, and while his back was turned, I opened bluebeard's chamber with the key.'

'Did you go in?' Secretan asked interestedly, for by this time he had caught some of his companion's enthusiasm.

'It was too risky, especially after I had soothed the old boy's feelings so nicely. All I wanted was to know if the key would fit. It will fit. Now, on every Christmas Eve at midnight that light is seen; so the legend runs. If you are game for a little healthy excitement, you and I will know before morning the origin of this mysterious illumination.'

'You can count on me,' Secretan returned, rising and walking up and down the room, to conceal his excitement—'How do you propose to do it?'

'I propose to do it now, and in this way. It's past eleven; all the others are safe in the drawing-room, and we shan't be missed for an hour. They'll think we are in the billiard-room. A couple of peacoats, a dark-lantern, and a brace of revolvers, and our preparations are complete. Is it a bargain?'

A burst of merry laughter as they passed the drawing-room door, mingled with the sound of a piano and someone singing, told the conspirators they had not been missed. As they crept silently along the quiet passages, feeling their way—for they dared not show a light from the dark-lantern—the stable clock chimed the three-quarters after eleven. A few minutes later, after a cautious walk along the unaccustomed corridors, they found themselves at length on the threshold of the chamber where, fifty-six years ago that very night, Arundel Secretan had ended his wasted life in his last hour of despair. Cautiously turning the key with many a creak and groan, the great door swung slowly open, and a second later, the conspirators found themselves safely inside.

Despite the fact of undoubted courage and resolution, each of them was conscious of a certain quickening of the heart and tightness of breath, which came as near fear as it was possible. A feeble moon was trying to struggle through a rushing mass of pendulous cloud, lighting the great oriel window; there was a cold icy draught in the apartment, chilling the adventurers in spite of their additional clothing. As their eyes gradually became accustomed to the gloom, they noticed a funereal bed to the right of the window, with sombre trappings shaking in the wind; and placed in the centre of the window an ancient secretaire with a high carved back, and countless drawers down either side. Had the place been kept sweet and clean, the rats and mice and all-destroying moths driven away, the apartment might have been termed luxuriously furnished. As Warren and his friend noted these things, the stable clock gave out the hour of twelve with mournful cadence as the notes were borne away on the breast of the wind.

‘Now for the family ghost,’ Warren whispered eagerly—‘the witching hour has come.—Is your revolver all right, Walter?’

‘I hope you won’t do anything rash,’ said Secretan cautiously. ‘Mind, no firing, it is possible to avoid extremities.—Hist! what was that noise? Verily, we are going to see something, after all.’

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth, when the apartment began to be filled by a faint luminous light under the window, throwing the rest of the chamber into deepest shade. The illumination growing stronger, appeared to come from behind the old secretaire. Presently, above it rose two small points of flame, two wax candles in ancient silver candlesticks, and something which gratified the watchers’ curiosity indeed. The holder of these lights—a man in the prime of life, with handsome features and full-bottomed wig, was dressed in plush knee-breeches and white silk hose; his feet clad in shoes, latched with heavy silver buckles. He wore also a peach-coloured velvet coat, slashed with pearl-gray silk, and ornamented with gold basket buttons. By his side, as was the fashion of the period, he carried a long rapier in an ornamental leather scabbard. For a moment he stood with his back to the secretaire, gazing earnestly around, then apparently satisfied with his scrutiny, turned to the desk, on which he placed the candles, and took out a bundle of papers. At this grave moment, the watchers, engrossed by this sudden apparition, with its pale deathlike features, were so startled that Warren burst into a sudden exclamation. Immediately the figure rose and confronted them; they saw the rapier flash from its sheath, as the shade of Arundel Secretan arose and started forward. But at this moment a gust of wind blew out the candles, leaving the apartment in darkness; there was a short

mocking laugh; and by the time Warren had sufficiently recovered himself to swing round the slide of his lantern, the figure had vanished, leaving not the semblance of a trace behind.

There was the bundle of papers, but where was the spectre? That he could not have left by the door was clear, for that was fast shut, and search as they might they could find no other exit. It seemed almost like a dream—the sudden entrance, the wonderful disappearance of the lights, and, last of all, the still more wonderful spiriting away of the figure.

Secretan sat down trembling in every limb; his face was white and set, while great beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead. 'Come away from this,' he said hoarsely. 'It is like tampering with a dead man's secret. Warren, as sure as I am a living man, I have seen my ancestor, Arundel Secretan, to-night!'

'Arundel Secretan be hanged!' said Warren contemptuously, as he placed the packet of papers in his pocket for future and closer reference. 'Your nerves are all unstrung. It was that cunning old scoundrel Brookes, man! I could swear to those sinister eyes among a thousand.'

Chapter IV

FRANK WARREN'S practical solution of the apparently thrilling mystery had the desired effect. By one touch of common-sense the ancient tale was dissolved—in an instant the revered family ghost of the Secretans reduced to the level of a vulgar every-day fraud. When the adventurers reached the hall, they had barely time to remove their rough clothing ere they became aware that their absence had at length been noticed. In the hall, which was quite dark, someone had set a huge bowl of 'snapdragon,' the burning spirit casting a curious blue glare upon the ring of surrounding faces. Warren was not too much unnerved by his late adventure to miss the opportunity which presented itself of taking the vacant place by Miss Secretan's side.

'Pretty conduct indeed!' said she. 'Give an account of yourselves. We have been seeking for you high and low, till we almost anticipated for you the fate of the unfortunate bride of *The Mistletoe Bough*.—Where have you been?'

'Hunting the *snark*,' quoth Warren lightly. 'You shall have all my confidence directly.—Dare you snatch a raisin for me? I am afraid.'

'Certainly not. I have burned my fingers sufficiently already.—Won't you tell me what you have discovered? You must have found something.'

'We have actually had an interview with the family ghost,' Warren commenced; and then drawing her aside, he told her everything under the seal of inviolate secrecy. And, indeed, he must have told his fair listener more than that, for when the last blue flicker in the witches' caldron had burned away, and the lamps were turned up, there was a touch of colour in her cheeks, and a new brightness in her eyes, only lighted by the tale that is never old.

Meanwhile, another conversation equally interesting had engrossed the attention of Edith Lucas and Walter Secretan. They, too, had withdrawn from the rest, and striking unobserved through the dining-room, made their way into the

conservatory. There was the soft light from a pair of bronze lamps shining dimly through the ferns, behind which was placed a rustic seat entirely out of observation. For a moment they regarded it in some doubt, much as if such a thing was a new object to both of them, then they sat down. For some time there was silence between them, Miss Lucas engaged in rapt contemplation of her fan. Walter stole out a hand presently and laid it upon the white wrist of his companion, unreprieved.

‘Don’t you feel horribly mean?’ asked the girl at length.

‘Certainly not,’ said her companion coolly. ‘Who was it who said that all’s fair in love and war? Anyway, he was right.—My dear Edith, put it to yourself. Would you rather be here as you are, or still in London, enduring the lover-like gallantry of our gouty friend Ramsden?’

‘But General Ramsden ought to be here too,’ said Edith demurely.

‘I am overwhelmed with grief by that officer’s defection. I promised Colonel Lucas he would come; and the colonel—being desirous to sacrifice his daughter to an elderly cripple, whose only recommendation is, five thousand a year and his Order of the Bath—jumped at the chance of visiting his old friend Myles Secretan.’

‘But you have not told me why the general failed at the last moment.’

‘No? Then I will tell you. I had to exercise a little diplomacy, such as information to the effect that Woodside was a capital place for skating, in consequence of its being in the eye of the east—“Ah, I suppose you use hot-water pipes in the house, then?” said the general uneasily.—“My dear sir,” I replied, “my father would not hear of such a thing; and even if he would, the draughts are so prevalent that they would be useless. But of course an old soldier does not mind that.”—All the same, as you know, the old soldier did mind that; hence his lamentable absence on this occasion, to my great grief, as you know.’

Edith Lucas laughed and shook her head reprovingly. ‘Of course, it makes a capital subject for amusement; but I could never marry him, Walter. But seriously, I do not like this; I do not like to be engaged without my father knowing. Perhaps he would be angry at first; but in the end I am sure he would consent. O, Walter, why, why, don’t you ask him and get it over?’

Secretan pulled his moustache and bit his lip uneasily. He was honourable enough, as young men go; but it had never struck him till now that there was anything wrong or underhand in this secret understanding. ‘I was going to tell you,’ he said. ‘You must understand that I am beginning to earn a living by my profession—three hundred a year, perhaps; and another three which my father allows me, for I will not take any more. And I had made up my mind not to broach the subject nearest my heart to your father till I could show him a thousand a year from every source. We have a small outlying estate called Oatlands, which has usually been the portion of the eldest son on his coming of age, and which used to—does now, in fact—produce some fifteen hundred a year. But, unfortunately, my grandfather found his income insufficient for him, and, amongst other places, he mortgaged Oatlands for twenty thousand pounds. The strangest thing of all is that the mortgage is held by General Ramsden.’

‘But what has all this to do with us!’ asked Edith, somewhat puzzled.

‘Simply this—that any reduction of the amount of this mortgage increases my income. The surplus over the interest thereon, to put it quite legally, has been

saved since I came of age, with that intention.—But of course you cannot understand all this professional jargon. However, it shall be as you wish, darling, only let it remain for the few days you are here, and then I will speak. Don't spoil our holiday.'

'I wonder what your father will think of it, Walter?'

The lover's face brightened again. 'The dear old governor will be delighted; and so will Ada, I know. Who would not be proud to welcome you as a daughter, when—'

'Oh, here you are at last!' cried Warren, bursting in upon the tête-à-tête with affected unconcern, and looking at everything besides the blushing lovers before him. 'We have been searching for you everywhere. Come and indulge in the seductive game of blind man's buff.'

'Won't something less energetic suit them?' asked Secretan lazily. 'Why is it that all Christmas games must be noisy, not to say dangerous? However, if I must, I must.'

So they all joined in that simple game with a zest and gaiety and simplicity of heart that Christmas time brings to us all, when there seems to be an unseen kindly influence in the air—a deeper, holier feeling of good-will and friendship to all—when distinctions are forgotten, and high and low mingle together, forgetful of rank and class, for a few hours all too brief. When they had exhausted that amusement, Christmas carols were started, after which every one trooped into the servants' hall to wish a happy Christmas to one and all. Whereupon the butler arose with a glittering eye and proposed the health of his master and the visitors; after which the Squire mixed a huge bowl of punch with his own hands, out of which they all drank, including Silas Brookes, whom they insisted upon dragging out from his solitary retreat to pledge King Christmas in a flowing glass. As he glanced over the rim of his tumbler, his eyes fell upon Warren's face with a glance so full of significant warning, that Walter noticed it and drew his friend's attention thereto. But Warren merely shrugged his shoulders, mentally resolving that come what may, the next trick played should be his.

'Is there a fire in the smoking-room still?' he asked, when the last good-night had been said, and quietness reigned supreme. 'It isn't three o'clock yet, and I should like one cigar before turning in. What do you say?'

As a rule, youth wants but scant excuse for stealing a few hours from the night. Moreover, it had been an evening of pleasant excitement, over and above the seasonable festivities in which they had indulged. Walter wanted no second bidding; and changing their dress-coats for something lighter and more comfortable, they selected a couple of the cosiest armchairs and commenced a somewhat confidential conversation. Presently, the discussion worked round to the visit to the Haunted Chamber.

'Frank, you are perfectly right about that rascal Brookes,' Walter said energetically. 'I didn't think so at the time; but I am certain of it now. The look he gave you over his glass, the scowl upon his face, were identical with the aspect of my counterfeit ancestor. We can't let it stop here.'

'If you think I am the man to give a thing up directly it begins to assume an interesting aspect, you are vastly mistaken,' Warren remarked grimly. 'That there is some rascality on foot here, I am certain. Hang it! a man can carry devotion to

his master up to a certain point; but it does not rise to the extent of working out this ghost business for over half a century, and denying rightful owners the privilege of looking over their own premises.'

'I must confess the mysterious disappearance most alarmed me. Where the fellow could have got to, utterly passes my comprehension. That he did not leave by the door, I am prepared to swear.'

'And so am I, for the simple reason that I had my back against it all the time,' said Warren dryly. 'But you must remember that your west wing is much more antiquated than the rest of the house; and both from old association and constant habitation in the place, Brookes knows more about it than any living being.—Now, do you remember ever hearing of a secret passage connecting any one part of the house with another?'

'So that is your theory, then?—No; I can't say that I have; and what is more, I don't think that any such thing exists.'

'And, on the contrary, I feel perfectly certain there does. To-morrow afternoon, if we can get that wicked old scoundrel out of the way for a time, we shall soon solve the question. Lombard Street to a China orange, that we find a secret passage from Arundel Secretan's chamber to another part of the house.'

Walter continued to smoke in meditative silence, watching the wreaths of smoke curling round his head. Over all the house there reigned a deadly stillness; the wind outside had fallen, a bright moon shone upon the drawn blinds.

'What makes you think there is a mystery here?' he asked.

'Isn't there mystery written on the face of it? Here is an old servant so deeply versed in his master's secrets that he can be trusted on a confidential important mission, and not only that, trusted to be the bearer of a large sum of money. He alone knew the real cause of his master's death; he told the story after his own fashion. Before it could be proved, the only other man who could throw any light upon the strange affair was dead too. Need I say that I am alluding to Edgar Warren? How do we know, you and I, that, after all, this money was not actually sent?'

Warren had dropped his voice almost to a whisper. For a few moments, nothing was heard save the monotonous click-clack of the great hall clock and the soft sobbing of a dying fire. There was, moreover, such an earnestness in the speaker's tones, that Secretan fell in unconsciously with his humour.

'You mean, that he brought the money home with him? In that case, what reason was there for Brookes, after telling my great-grandfather that his mission was unsuccessful, to mention the reason of his errand to a soul? And if he had the money, why remain here?'

'Who can follow the workings of the human mind? But, for the sake of argument, let me try. Brookes, from his close connection with his master must have known my esteemed relative well. When he found him at Venice in the autumn of 1823, he must have seen—as other people saw—death in Edgar Warren's face. Fletcher, the valet, told him his master was dying; that, Brookes admitted to me after that dramatic episode in the west wing. Now, here was temptation placed in his way. He would probably reason thus: "If I receive the money, and deny having received it, and my master's friend dies, I am safe. If he lives, then I must make my escape." But fortune favoured him strangely; for in a

short time they were both dead. Brookes is a man suffering from some secret remorse; he has lying on his conscience a crime he dare not disclose. Some day, perhaps, you will know. But I am going to force his hand, if I can; and, not to put too fine a point upon it, I should like to clear my family name—for more reasons than one.'

Walter had followed this close reasoning carefully, not a little struck by the force of his companions logic. For a moment he wavered; a little colour crept into his face as he replied: 'Strange things do happen—things we cannot explain. Is it not just possible that we have seen a supernatural visitor—that the figure you took for Brookes might be, after all, the shade of Arundel Secretan?'

'My dear fellow, I am not mistaken. And besides, ghosts do not handle bundles of papers in that business-like fashion.'

The speaker drew the packet from his breast-pocket and broke the string. There were a heterogeneous mass of papers, smelling strongly of damp and mould, the ink upon them faded to a dull, lustreless red: invitations to rout and ball, a batch of unpaid bills, and small notes in more than one feminine handwriting. One there was, sealed with a coronet, unopened, and bearing the superscription, '*To Arundel Secretan, Esquire, of Woodside, Kent.*' With an air of faint curiosity, Warren tore it open and commenced to read. When he had finished, he laid the letter down with a calm air of triumph. 'When was Brookes sent to Italy?' he asked.

'Early in the autumn or late summer of 1823.—But why?'

Without deigning any reply, Warren read as follows:

'Venice, October 1823.

'Without my fostering care, 'twas but natural for trouble to overtake you. But your sore strait, as you call it humorously, is but a rosy plight; for, hearing of your indebtedness to St Devereux, at Venice (you were both at Rome, remember) I wrote to that nobleman a letter reminding him, quite good-naturedly, of certain little indiscretions of his youth known to me; also, that I had heard of his wonderful luck(?) at cards with you, and demanding from him a receipt for the money, which he was to take as paid. This I now enclose.—That I am your debtor both in money and kind, I own; and it is fortunate that I am at present in a position to aid you—a consummation not always equally possible. All you want, I lack; but in coin and current security, by Brookes's trusty hand I forward you nearly seventeen thousand pounds, leaving just enough for my needs; also a little jewelry, the gift of certain foolish admirers of mine, worth something to you in your trouble. Had you not quitted Venice so hastily, I would have repaid you then all I owed. May it serve you better than it has served me.

Edgar Warren.'

'And now,' Warren said, when he had concluded this strange letter—'and now, to find out where the cunning scoundrel has hidden the money.'

Chapter V

AFTER a long and earnest consultation, lasting almost till daylight, it was finally decided to make another expedition to the Haunted Chamber, with the object of discovering, if possible, any secret passage existing thence to another part of the house; only Warren stipulated that nothing further should be done until he should have completed his little domestic drama, the main portion of which had been written, only a few finishing touches being required to make it ready for distribution among the actors. And so far his prognostications having proved correct, Walter Secretan was content to leave the matter in his friend's able hands.

It was, of course, impossible to do anything on Christmas Day, even to get out to church, for the weather had taken a change in the night, and morning dawned with a strong wind and snow falling heavily. A kind of informal service was held in the drawing-room; and afterwards, for lack of other amusement, the party assembled one and all in the hall to listen to Warren's comedy, which was declared to be, with one or two trifling alterations, exactly the thing required.

'There is one thing we want now,' Warren observed, when parts had been chosen and the manuscript had been given into willing hands to copy—the suggestions for the *tableaux vivants*. Can't some of you ladies suggest something original? We are all tired of Lady Jane Grey, Mary Queen of Scots, and Joan of Arc.'

'When are we to be ready for the first rehearsal?' Althea Wynne demanded. 'It will take me quite a week to learn my part.'

'In that case, we shall be reluctantly compelled to cut you out,' said Warren firmly, 'because the first rehearsal—of which I propose to have three—will take place in this hall to-morrow night at eight. Why, the great charm of private theatricals is in half-knowing your part, and finding your fellow-performers worse than yourself.'

'Mr Warren is quite right,' said Constance Lumley promptly; 'and so far as utter ignorance of the book-part is concerned, he shall not find me wanting. Besides, is there not an individual known as the prompter?'

'Most admirable of amateur actors, being least seen and most heard!' Warren laughed.—'I suppose that is settled then.—And now for the *tableaux*.'

'What about Queen Eleanor and Fair Rosamond?' Edith Lucas suggested. 'Or perhaps—'

'The Eve of St Bartholomew, as interpreted by Millais,' suggested a demure voice in the background—an inspiration treated with contemptuous silence.

'What you want to do is to show off your dresses and look nice,' Warren observed. 'We seem to have everything to hand; only there is a plentiful lack of ideas, as Mrs Malaprop would say.—Now, do make up your minds.'

Finally, the choice fell upon three—the trial scene from the *Merchant of Venice*, after a struggle for the part of Portia; one founded upon the most pathetic scene in *Enoch Arden*; and finally, the play-scene from *Hamlet*—with, as Warren observed, the full strength of the company. Once decided, there was a general exodus on the artistes' part to make selection out of the rifled treasures of the west wing as apparel on the eventful night.

'Now is our time!' exclaimed Warren, when the last of the fair performers had disappeared. 'Old Brookes is safe in the billiard-room for the next half-hour,

marking a game between the colonel and your father.—Get a couple of helpers out of the stable. I want that old secretaire out of the Haunted Chamber—it will be useful as an article of stage-furniture.’

‘Have you made up your mind what is to be done?’ Secretan asked, when he had despatched a messenger for the desired assistance.

‘Almost. I am going to try and frighten the man—work upon his fears, if possible.—Mind you, not a word of this; I want it, if possible, kept a secret. I do not want anything we know, or what we are going to do, to be guessed even by the other players. I suppose you intend to have the servants in to see the performance?’

‘Of course.—Where else should we get our audience?’

‘That’s exactly what I wanted to know. “The play’s the thing wherein to catch the conscience of the king”—only, in our case the drama will play quite a secondary part in bringing that wicked old rascal to book.—Allons.’

‘I suppose you know what you are talking about?’ Secretan observed. ‘For the life of me, I don’t.’

‘If you knew a little more of the divine bard, you would,’ Warren observed airily. ‘Perhaps it will dawn upon you presently.—However, here we are.’

Daylight made but little difference to the apartment. Upon everything lay the melancholy of decay—the carpet torn, and faded by the rust and dust of half a century. In the large open grate, a handful of wood-ashes still remained, with some charred embers, the remains of papers partially destroyed. Over the handsome cornices, once gay with gilt, a fine powder had settled, and great spiders had spun their nets.

With the assistance of the two stout helpers, they raised the old secretaire, though a lever had to be employed. As it gradually slid along, Warren’s foot slipped through an open space. He recovered himself with a great shout, for, as the desk gradually moved away, an open trapdoor stood revealed.

‘The ghostly passage!’ he exclaimed, whilst Secretan and the helpers looked on open-mouthed.—‘This is the way he must have gone. You see, it is exactly behind the secretaire, and protected by this movable back. Look!’

He pointed to the opening, where, at that moment, a head and shoulders had appeared. It was Silas Brookes, a look of deadly hate and vengeance upon his face, in the eyes fixed upon Warren with such rancour. As he stepped into the apartment in profound silence, they saw that he wore the masquerade dress of Arundel Secretan. The trembling hand was laid upon the rapier; but ere he could draw it, Warren, reading the mischief in his eyes, was upon him, and bore him to the ground.

‘You two go and fetch your master and Colonel Lucas,’ he said to the dazed helpers. ‘You need not trouble to return again;’ and the half-stupefied servants hurried off to obey the stern command.

There was not a word spoken till the host and his guest entered. Brookes’s eyes wandered from one to the other in a defiant, hunted fashion; he knew that he was found out. But with his iron nerve, he was not the man to cry out for either mercy or forgiveness. Utterly amazed, the Squire looked to Warren for an explanation.

‘Allow me to introduce you to the family ghost,’ commenced the triumphant dramatist, ‘as interpreted by this faithful servant.—But I forgot that you are

entirely in the dark as to what has transpired. Call to mind, in the first place, your family legend, and the part one of my family played in it. You gave me permission to search these rooms, and thereby hangs a tale.' So saying, Warren related all he had seen and heard, ending his narrative by placing in the Squire's hand the fateful letter dropped by the ghost in his flight on the eventful preceding evening. As he read, his usually benign features became stern and hard. To the end he perused it, and then turned to Brookes, speaking in a voice clear and metallic, such as the ancient servitor had never heard before.

'Where have you hidden this money, you scoundrel?' he demanded.

There was no answer to the thrice repeated query. By this time the news had spread through the house, and one by one the visitors had joined them. Mr Warren threw the letter to Brookes, who read it slowly, ponderously to the end. His face turned to a pale ashen gray; he clutched at his throat, then the words burst from him, as he threw himself upon his knees at his master's feet, covering his face with trembling hands: 'I never meant to wrong my master—never! never! But the temptation. I found out Mr Edgar Warren; I got the money. It was when his valet told me that he was dying, the temptation overcame me. In London, I changed the notes into gold. I brought it down here. Then I saw my dear master. I lied to him, and he died by his own hand. Oh! if I could have only known—if I could have only guessed! I thought myself safe.—After my master's death, I was afraid to speak. The servants talked about his ghost. That was my opportunity. I had hidden the gold. Bit by bit I carried it here into this very room. I knew I should not be interrupted, so gradually I got it here—hidden, all of it safe. To keep it safe, I have played the ghost for all these years. But I have not been dishonest—it is all there. I intended to confess before I died; I intended to be honest. I am no thief, so help me heaven!'

'Where?' Warren demanded impatiently—'where, man?'

'In the desk behind you, in the old secretaire—every penny of it. And now perhaps you will be content.' He rose to his feet, as if to quit the room. The Squire signified to Warren to let him pass; and so he went without another word.

The ancient piece of furniture, now such an object of interest, was speedily prised open, and a breathless knot of spectators gathered round. The head of the desk had a circular top, which, upon being opened, disclosed a nest of drawers, each full of papers and memoranda, the drawers down either side being filled with a mass of odds and ends, but no signs of money. It was certainly strange. Apparently, there was no space to be accounted for, till a rule was applied to the side, and it was discovered that, behind the nest of drawers, a considerable space yet remained. They drew out every one of the tiny drawers, but no sign of an opening could be seen. Walter Secretan, in a fit of impatience, jammed the head of a hammer against the frail wood, and as he did so, the fabric gave way. Placing his hand in the aperture thus formed, he drew out one by one seven leather bags, each fastened with a small padlock, and a flat shabby-looking case, which he opened.

There was a cry of delight from the ladies, as a magnificent diamond necklace flashed and shimmered in the light, a quivering fire of stones in a tarnished gold setting; but no damp and decay could pale the gleaming jewels. As they passed from hand to hand admiringly, Secretan employed himself in cutting the top off

one of the leather bags; and plunging his hand in, he drew out a score or two of English gold coins. When they came to count it, it contained two thousand four hundred pounds. A careful addition of the remaining bags brought up the total to sixteen thousand two hundred and eighty pounds in good English money, which, including the necklace, must have represented close upon, if not quite, the sum of twenty thousand pounds.

There was a kind of stupefied silence for a few moments; then every one seemed to find his voice at once, speaking in a clamorous din.

‘Warren, I thank you,’ said the Squire warmly. ‘I owe you a deep debt of gratitude, so deep that I scarcely know how to repay you.’

‘I shall soon put you to the test,’ Warren replied, significantly.

* * * * *

‘WELL, of all the callous scoundrels!’ cried the colonel, when he had sufficiently recovered to speak. ‘Fancy having a man like that under your roof! I would soon make short work of him.’

‘Gently, gently,’ cried the Squire good-humouredly. ‘Remember the poor fellow has suffered terribly; and remember Christmas time, colonel. Peace and good-will to men. If he has repented, truly we must not withhold our forgiveness.’

‘Well, if he hadn’t been a rogue, you would be some thousands worse off,’ was the practical reply. ‘It’s an ill wind that blows nobody luck, Secretan.—Eh, Warren?’

‘It shall blow some one luck,’ said the Squire, turning to Warren significantly. ‘Come into the smoking-room and talk it over.—So, this is what a snowy Christmas comes to, is it? They say no snow no matrimony, and in this case—’

‘History repeats itself,’ said Warren calmly, indicating Walter and Edith Lucas.

They had the hall to themselves, both gazing out over the snowy landscape, her head upon his shoulder, his arm wound round her slender waist.

‘Why, bless me!’ exclaimed the colonel, staring through his eyeglass, ‘it’s my daughter, and your son, Secretan.—And all this time I was under the impression she was in love with somebody else.’

‘A mistake, sir,’ said Walter lightly, ‘as I hope to convince you presently. You see, General Ramsden is all very well; only, unfortunately, Edith does not love him.’

‘Unfortunately! you ungrateful young rascal! Why, bless me! in that case, why didn’t she say so at once? I am sure it was no wish of mine.—But you young people always delight in making mysteries of things, and we have had mystery enough for one day.’

‘Well out of that, darling!’ said Walter, as the elders disappeared. ‘But I am just cynical enough to believe that he would not have been quite so amiable, if it had not been for the discovery in the Old Secretaire.’

