

Allen Grant

The Beckoning Hand, and Other Stories



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and Other Stories**

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PREFACE

Of the thirteen stories included in this volume, "The Gold Wulfric," "The Two Carnegies," and "John Cann's Treasure" originally appeared in the pages of the *Cornhill*; "The Third Time" and "The Search Party's Find" are from *Longman's Magazine*; "Harry's Inheritance" first saw the light in the *English Illustrated*; and "Lucretia," "My Uncle's Will," "Olga Davidoff's Husband," "Isaline and I," "Professor Milliter's Dilemma," and "In Strict Confidence," obtained hospitable shelter between the friendly covers of *Belgravia*. My title-piece, "The Beckoning Hand," is practically new, having only been published before as the Christmas supplement of a provincial newspaper. My thanks are due to Messrs. Smith and Elder, Longmans, Macmillan, and Chatto and Windus for kind permission to reprint most of the stories here. If anybody reads them and likes them, let me take this opportunity (as an unprejudiced person) of recommending to him my other volume of "Strange Stories," which I consider every bit as gruesome as this one. Should I succeed in attaining the pious ambition of the Fat Boy, and "making your flesh creep," then, as somebody once remarked before, "this work will not have been written in vain."

G. A.

The Nook, Dorking,
Christmas Day, 1886.

THE BECKONING HAND

I

I first met Césarine Vivian in the stalls at the Ambiguities Theatre.

I had promised to take Mrs. Latham and Irene to see the French plays which were then being acted by Marie Leroux's celebrated Palais Royal company. I wasn't at the time exactly engaged to poor Irene: it has always been a comfort to me that I wasn't engaged to her, though I knew Irene herself considered it practically equivalent to an understood engagement. We had known one another intimately from childhood upward, for the Lathams were a sort of second cousins of ours, three times removed: and we had always called one another by our Christian names, and been very fond of one another in a simple girlish and boyish fashion as long as we could either of us remember. Still, I maintain, there was no definite understanding between us; and if Mrs. Latham thought I had been paying Irene attentions, she must have known that a young man of two and twenty, with a decent fortune and a nice estate down in Devonshire, was likely to look about him for a while before he thought of settling down and marrying quietly.

I had brought the yacht up to London Bridge, and was living on board in picnic style, and running about town casually, when I took Irene and her mother to see "Faustine," at the Ambiguities. As soon as we had got in and taken our places, Irene whispered to me, touching my hand lightly with her fan, "Just look at the very dark girl on the other side of you, Harry! Did you ever in your life see anybody so perfectly beautiful?"

It has always been a great comfort to me, too, that Irene herself was the first person to call my attention to Césarine Vivian's extraordinary beauty.

I turned round, as if by accident, and gave a passing glance, where Irene waved her fan, at the girl beside me. She was beautiful, certainly, in a terrible, grand, statuesque style of beauty; and I saw at a glimpse that she had Southern blood in her veins, perhaps Negro, perhaps Moorish, perhaps only Spanish, or Italian, or Provençal. Her features were proud and somewhat Jewish-looking; her eyes large, dark, and haughty; her black hair waved slightly in sinuous undulations as it passed across her high, broad forehead; her complexion, though a dusky olive in tone, was clear and rich, and daintily transparent; and her lips were thin and very slightly curled at the delicate corners, with a peculiarly imperious and almost scornful expression of fixed disdain. I had never before beheld anywhere such a magnificently repellent specimen of womanhood. For a second or so, as I looked, her eyes met mine with a defiant inquiry, and I was conscious that moment of some strange and weird fascination in her glance that seemed to draw me irresistibly towards her, at the same time that I hardly dared to fix my gaze steadily upon the piercing eyes that looked through and through me with their keen penetration.

"She's very beautiful, no doubt," I whispered back to Irene in a low undertone, "though I must confess I don't exactly like the look of her. She's a trifle too much of a tragedy queen for my taste: a Lady Macbeth, or a Beatrice Cenci, or a Clytemnestra. I prefer our simple little English prettiness to this southern splendour. It's more to our English liking than these tall and stately Italian enchantresses. Besides, I fancy the girl looks as if she had a drop or two of black blood somewhere about her."

"Oh, no," Irene cried warmly. "Impossible, Harry. She's exquisite: exquisite. Italian, you know, or something of that sort. Italian girls have always got that peculiar gipsy-like type of beauty."

Low as we spoke, the girl seemed to know by instinct we were talking about her; for she drew away the ends of her light wrap coldly, in a significant fashion, and turned with her opera-glass in the opposite direction, as if on purpose to avoid looking towards us.

A minute later the curtain rose, and the first act of Halévy's "Faustine" distracted my attention for the moment from the beautiful stranger.

Marie Leroux took the part of the great empress. She was grand, stately, imposing, no doubt, but somehow it seemed to me she didn't come up quite so well as usual that evening to one's ideal picture of the terrible, audacious, superb Roman woman. I leant over and murmured so to Irene. "Don't you know why?" Irene whispered back to me with a faint movement of the play-bill toward the beautiful stranger.

"No," I answered; "I haven't really the slightest conception."

"Why," she whispered, smiling; "just look beside you. Could anybody bear comparison for a moment as a Faustine with that splendid creature in the stall next to you?"

I stole a glance sideways as she spoke. It was quite true. The girl by my side was the real Faustine, the exact embodiment of the dramatist's creation; and Marie Leroux, with her stagey effects and her actress's pretences, could not in any way stand the contrast with the genuine empress who sat there eagerly watching her.

The girl saw me glance quickly from her towards the actress and from the actress back to her, and shrank aside, not with coquettish timidity, but half angrily and half as if flattered and pleased at the implied compliment. "Papa," she said to the very English-looking gentleman who sat beyond her, "ce monsieur-ci..." I couldn't catch the end of the sentence.

She was French, then, not Italian or Spanish; yet a more perfect Englishman than the man she called "papa" it would be difficult to discover on a long summer's day in all London.

"My dear," her father whispered back in English, "if I were you..." and the rest of that sentence also was quite inaudible to me.

My interest was now fully roused in the beautiful stranger, who sat evidently with her father and sister, and drank in every word of the play as it proceeded with the intensest interest. As for me, I hardly cared to look at the actors, so absorbed was I in my queenly neighbour. I made a bare pretence of watching the stage every five minutes, and saying a few words now and again to Irene or her mother; but my real attention was all the time furtively directed to the girl beside me. Not that I was taken with her; quite the contrary; she distinctly repelled me; but she seemed to exercise over me for all that the same strange and indescribable fascination which is often possessed by some horrible sight that you would give worlds to avoid, and yet cannot for your life help intently gazing upon.

Between the third and fourth acts Irene whispered to me again, "I can't keep my eyes off her, Harry. She's wonderfully beautiful. Confess now: aren't you over head and ears in love with her?"

I looked at Irene's sweet little peaceful English face, and I answered truthfully, "No, Irene. If I wanted to fall in love, I should find somebody –"

"Nonsense, Harry," Irene cried, blushing a little, and holding up her fan before her nervously. "She's a thousand times prettier and handsomer in every way –"

"Prettier?"

"Than I am."

At that moment the curtain rose, and Marie Leroux came forward once more with her imperial diadem, in the very act of defying and bearding the enraged emperor.

It was a great scene. The whole theatre hung upon her words for twenty minutes. The effect was sublime. Even I myself felt my interest aroused at last in the consummate spectacle. I glanced round to observe my neighbour. She sat there, straining her gaze upon the stage, and heaving her bosom with suppressed emotion. In a second, the spell was broken again. Beside that tall, dark southern girl, in her queenly beauty, with her flashing eyes and quivering nostrils, intensely moved by the passion of the play, the mere actress who mouthed and gesticulated before us by the footlights was as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. My companion in the stalls was the genuine Faustine: the player on the stage was but a false pretender.

As I looked a cry arose from the wings: a hushed cry at first, a buzz or hum; rising louder and ever louder still, as a red glare burst upon the scene from the background. Then a voice from the side boxes rang out suddenly above the confused murmur and the ranting of the actors "Fire! Fire!"

Almost before I knew what had happened, the mob in the stalls, like the mob in the gallery, was surging and swaying wildly towards the exits, in a general struggle for life of the fierce old selfish barbaric pattern. Dense clouds of smoke rolled from the stage and filled the length and breadth of the auditorium; tongues of flame licked up the pasteboard scenes and hangings, like so much paper; women screamed, and fought, and fainted; men pushed one another aside and hustled and elbowed, in one wild effort to make for the doors at all hazards to the lives of their neighbours. Never before had I so vividly realized how near the savage lies to the surface in our best and highest civilized society. I had to realize it still more vividly and more terribly afterwards.

One person alone I observed calm and erect, resisting quietly all pushes and thrusts, and moving with slow deliberateness to the door, as if wholly unconcerned at the universal noise and hubbub and tumult around her. It was the dark girl from the stalls beside me.

For myself, my one thought of course was for poor Irene and Mrs. Latham. Fortunately, I am a strong and well-built man, and by keeping the two women in front of me, and thrusting hard with my elbows on either side to keep off the crush, I managed to make a tolerably clear road for them down the central row of stalls and out on to the big external staircase. The dark girl, now separated from her father and sister by the rush, was close in front of me. By a careful side movement, I managed to include her also in our party. She looked up to me gratefully with her big eyes, and her mouth broke into a charming smile as she turned and said in perfect English, "I am much obliged to you for your kind assistance." Irene's cheek was pale as death; but through the strange young lady's olive skin the bright blood still burned and glowed amid that frantic panic as calmly as ever.

We had reached the bottom of the steps, and were out into the front, when suddenly the strange lady turned around and gave a little cry of disappointment. "Mes lorgnettes! Mes lorgnettes!" she said. Then glancing round carelessly to me she went on in English: "I have left my opera-glasses inside on the vacant seat. I think, if you will excuse me, I'll go back and fetch them."

"It's impossible," I cried, "my dear madam. Utterly impossible. They'll crush you underfoot. They'll tear you to pieces."

She smiled a strange haughty smile, as if amused at the idea, but merely answered, "I think not," and tried to pass lightly by me.

I held her arm. I didn't know then she was as strong as I was. "Don't go," I said imploringly. "They will certainly kill you. It would be impossible to stem a mob like this one."

She smiled again, and darted back in silence before I could stop her.

Irene and Mrs. Latham were now fairly out of all danger. "Go on, Irene," I said loosing her arm. "Policeman, get these ladies safely out. I must go back and take care of that mad woman."

"Go, go quick," Irene cried. "If you don't go, she'll be killed, Harry."

I rushed back wildly after her, battling as well as I was able against the frantic rush of panic-stricken fugitives, and found my companion struggling still upon the main staircase. I helped her to make her way back into the burning theatre, and she ran lightly through the dense smoke to the stall she had occupied, and took the opera-glasses from the vacant place. Then she turned to me once more with a smile of triumph. "People lose their heads so," she said, "in all these crushes. I came back on purpose to show papa I wasn't going to be frightened into leaving my opera-glasses. I should have been eternally ashamed of myself if I had come away and left them in the theatre."

"Quick," I answered, gasping for breath. "If you don't make haste, we shall be choked to death, or the roof itself will fall in upon us and crush us!"

She looked up where I pointed with a hasty glance, and then made her way back again quickly to the staircase. As we hurried out, the timbers of the stage were beginning to fall in, and the engines were already playing fiercely upon the raging flames. I took her hand and almost dragged her out

into the open. When we reached the Strand, we were both wet through, and terribly blackened with smoke and ashes. Pushing our way through the dense crowd, I called a hansom. She jumped in lightly. "Thank you so much," she said, quite carelessly. "Will you kindly tell him where to drive? Twenty-seven, Seymour Crescent."

"I'll see you home, if you'll allow me," I answered. "Under these circumstances, I trust I may be permitted."

"As you like," she said, smiling enchantingly. "You are very good. My name is Cézarine Vivian. Papa will be very much obliged to you for your kind assistance."

I drove round to the Lathams' after dropping Miss Vivian at her father's door, to assure myself of Irene's safety, and to let them know of my own return unhurt from my perilous adventure. Irene met me on the doorstep, pale as death still. "Thank heaven," she cried, "Harry, you're safe back again! And that poor girl? What has become of her?"

"I left her," I said, "at Seymour Crescent."

Irene burst into a flood of tears. "Oh, Harry," she cried, "I thought she would have been killed there. It was brave of you, indeed, to help her through with it."

II

Next day, Mr. Vivian called on me at the Oxford and Cambridge, the address on the card I had given his daughter. I was in the club when he called, and I found him a pleasant, good-natured Cornishman, with very little that was strange or romantic in any way about him. He thanked me heartily, but not too effusively, for the care I had taken of Miss Vivian overnight; and he was not so overcome with parental emotion as not to smoke a very good Havana, or to refuse my offer of a brandy and seltzer. We got on very well together, and I soon gathered from what my new acquaintance said that, though he belonged to one of the best families in Cornwall, he had been an English merchant in Haiti, and had made his money chiefly in the coffee trade. He was a widower, I learned incidentally, and his daughters had been brought up for some years in England, though at their mother's request they had also passed part of their lives in convent schools in Paris and Rouen. "Mrs. Vivian was a Haitian, you know," he said casually: "Catholic of course. The girls are Catholics. They're good girls, though they're my own daughters; and Césarine, your friend of last night, is supposed to be clever. I'm no judge myself: I don't know about it. Oh, by the way, Césarine said she hadn't thanked you half enough herself yesterday, and I was to be sure and bring you round this afternoon to a cup of tea with us at Seymour Crescent."

In spite of the impression Mdlle. Césarine had made upon me the night before, I somehow didn't feel at all desirous of meeting her again. I was impressed, it is true, but not favourably. There seemed to me something uncanny and weird about her which made me shrink from seeing anything more of her if I could possibly avoid it. And as it happened, I was luckily engaged that very afternoon to tea at Irene's. I made the excuse, and added somewhat pointedly – on purpose that it might be repeated to Mdlle. Césarine – "Miss Latham is a very old and particular friend of mine – a friend whom I couldn't for worlds think of disappointing."

Mr. Vivian laughed the matter off. "I shall catch it from Césarine," he said good-humouredly, "for not bringing her cavalier to receive her formal thanks in person. Our West-Indian born girls, you know, are very imperious. But if you can't, you can't, of course, so there's an end of it, and it's no use talking any more about it."

I can't say why, but at that moment, in spite of my intense desire not to meet Césarine again, I felt I would have given whole worlds if he would have pressed me to come in spite of myself. But, as it happened, he didn't.

At five o'clock, I drove round in a hansom as arranged, to Irene's, having almost made up my mind, if I found her alone, to come to a definite understanding with her and call it an engagement. She wasn't alone, however. As I entered the drawing-room, I saw a tall and graceful lady sitting opposite her, holding a cup of tea, and with her back towards me. The lady rose, moved round, and bowed. To my immense surprise, I found it was Césarine.

I noted to myself at the moment, too, that in my heart, though I had seen her but once before, I thought of her already simply as Césarine. And I was pleased to see her: fascinated: spell-bound.

Césarine smiled at my evident surprise. "Papa and I met Miss Latham this afternoon in Bond Street," she said gaily, in answer to my mute inquiry, "and we stopped and spoke to one another, of course, about last night; and papa said you couldn't come round to tea with us in the Crescent, because you were engaged already to Miss Latham. And Miss Latham very kindly asked me to drive over and take tea with her, as I was so anxious to thank you once more for your great kindness to me yesterday."

"And Miss Vivian was good enough to waive all ceremony," Irene put in, "and come round to us as you see, without further introduction."

I stopped and talked all the time I was there to Irene; but, somehow, whatever I said, Césarine managed to intercept it, and I caught myself quite guiltily looking at her from time to time, with an inexpressible attraction that I could not account for.

By-and-by, Mr. Vivian's carriage called for Césarine, and I was left a few minutes alone with Irene.

"Well, what do you think of her?" Irene asked me simply.

I turned my eyes away: I dare not meet hers. "I think she's very handsome," I replied evasively.

"Handsome! I should think so. She's wonderful. She's splendid. And doesn't she talk magnificently, too, Harry?"

"She's clever, certainly," I answered shuffling. "But I don't know why, I mistrust her, Irene."

I rose and stood by the door with my hat in my hand, hesitating and trembling. I felt as if I had something to say to Irene, and yet I was half afraid to venture upon saying it. My fingers quivered, a thing very unusual with me. At last I came closer to her, after a long pause, and said, "Irene."

Irene started, and the colour flushed suddenly into her cheeks. "Yes, Harry," she answered tremulously.

I don't know why, but I couldn't utter it. It was but to say "I love you," yet I hadn't the courage. I stood there like a fool, looking at her irresolutely, and then —

The door opened suddenly, and Mrs. Latham entered and interrupted us.

III

I didn't speak again to Irene. The reason was that three days later I received a little note of invitation to lunch at Seymour Crescent from C sarine Vivian.

I didn't want to accept it, and yet I didn't know how to help myself. I went, determined beforehand as soon as ever lunch was over to take away the yacht to the Scotch islands, and leave C sarine and all her enchantments for ever behind me. I was afraid of her, that's the fact, positively afraid of her. I couldn't look her in the face without feeling at once that she exerted a terrible influence over me.

The lunch went off quietly enough, however. We talked about Haiti and the West Indies; about the beautiful foliage and the lovely flowers; about the moonlight nights and the tropical sunsets; and C sarine grew quite enthusiastic over them all. "You should take your yacht out there some day, Mr. Tristram," she said softly. "There is no place on earth so wild and glorious as our own beautiful neglected Haiti."

She lifted her eyes full upon me as she spoke. I stammered out, like one spell-bound, "I must certainly go, on your recommendation, Mdlle. C sarine."

"Why Mademoiselle?" she asked quickly. Then, perceiving I misunderstood her by the start I gave, she added with a blush, "I mean, why not 'Miss Vivian' in plain English?"

"Because you aren't English," I said confusedly. "You're Haitian, in reality. Nobody could ever for a moment take you for a mere Englishwoman."

I meant it for a compliment, but C sarine frowned. I saw I had hurt her, and why; but I did not apologize. Yet I was conscious of having done something very wrong, and I knew I must try my best at once to regain my lost favour with her.

"You will take some coffee after lunch?" C sarine said, as the dishes were removed.

"Oh, certainly, my dear," her father put in. "You must show Mr. Tristram how we make coffee in the West Indian fashion."

C sarine smiled, and poured it out – black coffee, very strong, and into each cup she poured a little glass of excellent pale neat cognac. It seemed to me that she poured the cognac like a conjuror's trick; but everything about her was so strange and lurid that I took very little notice of the matter at that particular moment. It certainly was delicious coffee: I never tasted anything like it.

After lunch, we went into the drawing-room, and thence C sarine took me alone into the pretty conservatory. She wanted to show me some of her beautiful Haitian orchids, she said; she had brought the orchids herself years ago from Haiti. How long we stood there I could never tell. I seemed as if intoxicated with her presence. I had forgotten now all about my distrust of her: I had forgotten all about Irene and what I wished to say to her: I was conscious only of C sarine's great dark eyes, looking through and through me with their piercing glance, and C sarine's figure, tall and stately, but very voluptuous, standing close beside me, and heaving regularly as we looked at the orchids. She talked to me in a low and dreamy voice; and whether the Ch teau Larose at lunch had got into my head, or whatever it might be, I felt only dimly and faintly aware of what was passing around me. I was unmanned with love, I suppose: but, however it may have been, I certainly moved and spoke that afternoon like a man in a trance from which he cannot by any effort of his own possibly awake himself.

"Yes, yes," I overheard C sarine saying at last, as through a mist of emotion, "you must go some day and see our beautiful mountainous Haiti. I must go myself. I long to go again. I don't care for this gloomy, dull, sunless England. A hand seems always to be beckoning me there. I shall obey it some day, for Haiti – our lovely Haiti, is too beautiful."

Her voice was low and marvellously musical. "Mademoiselle C sarine," I began timidly.

She pouted and looked at me. "Mademoiselle again," she said in a pettish way. "I told you not to call me so, didn't I?"

"Well, then, Césarine," I went on boldly. She laughed low, a little laugh of triumph, but did not correct or check me in any way.

"Césarine," I continued, lingering I know not why over the syllables of the name, "I will go, as you say. I shall see Haiti. Why should we not both go together?"

She looked up at me eagerly with a sudden look of hushed inquiry. "You mean it?" she asked, trembling visibly. "You mean it, Mr. Tristram? You know what you are saying?"

"Césarine," I answered, "I mean it. I know it. I cannot go away from you and leave you. Something seems to tie me. I am not my own master... Césarine, I love you."

My head whirled as I said the words, but I meant them at the time, and heaven knows I tried ever after to live up to them.

She clutched my arm convulsively for a moment. Her face was aglow with a wonderful light, and her eyes burned like a pair of diamonds. "But the other girl!" she cried. "Her! Miss Latham! The one you call Irene! You are ... in love with her! Are you not? Tell me!"

"I have never proposed to Irene," I replied slowly. "I have never asked any other woman but you to marry me, Césarine."

She answered me nothing, but my face was very near hers, and I bent forward and kissed her suddenly. To my immense surprise, instead of struggling or drawing away, she kissed me back a fervent kiss, with lips hard pressed to mine, and the tears trickled slowly down her cheeks in a strange fashion. "You are mine," she cried. "Mine for ever. I have won you. She shall not have you. I knew you were mine the moment I looked upon you. The hand beckoned me. I knew I should get you."

"Come up into my den, Mr. Tristram, and have a smoke," my host interrupted in his bluff voice, putting his head in unexpectedly at the conservatory door. "I think I can offer you a capital Manilla."

The sound woke me as if from some terrible dream, and I followed him still in a sort of stupor up to the smoking room.

IV

That very evening I went to see Irene. My brain was whirling even yet, and I hardly knew what I was doing; but the cool air revived me a little, and by the time I reached the Lathams' I almost felt myself again.

Irene came down to the drawing-room to see me alone. I saw what she expected, and the shame of my duplicity overcame me utterly.

I took both her hands in mine and stood opposite her, ashamed to look her in the face, and with the terrible confession weighing me down like a burden of guilt. "Irene," I blurted out, without preface or comment, "I have just proposed to Césarine Vivian."

Irene drew back a moment and took a long breath. Then she said, with a tremor in her voice, but without a tear or a cry, "I expected it, Harry. I thought you meant it. I saw you were terribly, horribly in love with her."

"Irene," I cried, passionately and remorsefully flinging myself upon the sofa in an agony of repentance, "I do not love her. I have never cared for her. I'm afraid of her, fascinated by her. I love you, Irene, you and you only. The moment I'm away from her, I hate her, I hate her. For heaven's sake, tell me what am I to do! I do not love her. I hate her, Irene."

Irene came up to me and soothed my hair tenderly with her hand. "Don't, Harry," she said, with sisterly kindness. "Don't speak so. Don't give way to it. I know what you feel. I know what you think. But I am not angry with you. You mustn't talk like that. If she has accepted you, you must go and marry her. I have nothing to reproach you with: nothing, nothing. Never say such words to me again. Let us be as we have always been, friends only."

"Irene," I cried, lifting up my head and looking at her wildly, "it is the truth: I do not love her, except when I am with her: and then, some strange enchantment seems to come over me. I don't know what it is, but I can't escape it. In my heart, Irene, in my heart of hearts, I love you, and you only. I can never love her as I love you, Irene. My darling, my darling, tell me how to get myself away from her."

"Hush," Irene said, laying her hand on mine persuasively. "You're excited to-night, Harry. You are flushed and feverish. You don't know what you're saying. You mustn't talk so. If you do, you'll make me hate you and despise you. You must keep your word now, and marry Miss Vivian."

V

The next six weeks seem to me still like a vague dream: everything happened so hastily and strangely. I got a note next day from Irene. It was very short. "Dearest Harry, – Mamma and I think, under the circumstances, it would be best for us to leave London for a few weeks. I am not angry with you. With best love, ever yours affectionately, Irene."

I was wild when I received it. I couldn't bear to part so with Irene. I would find out where they were going and follow them immediately. I would write a note and break off my mad engagement with Césarine. I must have been drunk or insane when I made it. I couldn't imagine what I could have been doing.

On my way round to inquire at the Latham's, a carriage came suddenly upon me at a sharp corner. A lady bowed to me from it. It was Césarine with her father. They pulled up and spoke to me. From that moment my doom was sealed. The old fascination came back at once, and I followed Césarine blindly home to her house to luncheon, her accepted lover.

In six weeks more we were really married.

The first seven or eight months of our married life passed away happily enough. As soon as I was actually married to Césarine, that strange feeling I had at first experienced about her slowly wore off in the closer, commonplace, daily intercourse of married life. I almost smiled at myself for ever having felt it. Césarine was so beautiful and so queenly a person, that when I took her down home to Devonshire, and introduced her to the old manor, I really found myself immensely proud of her. Everybody at Teignbury was delighted and struck with her; and, what was a great deal more to the point, I began to discover that I was positively in love with her myself, into the bargain. She softened and melted immensely on nearer acquaintance; the Faustina air faded slowly away, when one saw her in her own home among her own occupations; and I came to look on her as a beautiful, simple, innocent girl, delighted with all our country pleasures, fond of a breezy canter on the slopes of Dartmoor, and taking an affectionate interest in the ducks and chickens, which I could hardly ever have conceived even as possible when I first saw her in Seymour Crescent. The imperious, mysterious, terrible Césarine disappeared entirely, and I found in her place, to my immense relief, that I had married a graceful, gentle, tender-hearted English girl, with just a pleasant occasional touch of southern fire and impetuosity.

As winter came round again, however, Césarine's cheeks began to look a little thinner than usual, and she had such a constant, troublesome cough, that I began to be a trifle alarmed at her strange symptoms. Césarine herself laughed off my fears. "It's nothing, Harry," she would say; "nothing at all, I assure you, dear. A few good rides on the moor will set me right again. It's all the result of that horrid London. I'm a country-born girl, and I hate big towns. I never want to live in town again, Harry."

I called in our best Exeter doctor, and he largely confirmed Césarine's own simple view of the situation. "There's nothing organically wrong with Mrs. Tristram's constitution," he said confidently. "No weakness of the lungs or heart in any way. She has merely run down – outlived her strength a little. A winter in some warm, genial climate would set her up again, I haven't the least hesitation in saying."

"Let us go to Algeria with the yacht, Reeney," I suggested, much reassured.

"Why Algeria?" Césarine replied, with brightening eyes. "Oh, Harry, why not dear old Haiti? You said once you would go there with me – you remember when, darling; why not keep your promise now, and go there? I want to go there, Harry: I'm longing to go there." And she held out her delicately moulded hand in front of her, as if beckoning me, and drawing me on to Haiti after her.

"Ah, yes; why not the West Indies?" the Exeter doctor answered meditatively. "I think I understood you that Mrs. Tristram is West Indian born. Quite so. Quite so. Her native air. Depend upon it, that's the best place for her. By all means, I should say, try Haiti."

I don't know why, but the notion for some reason displeased me immensely. There was something about Césarine's eyes, somehow, when she beckoned with her hand in that strange fashion, which reminded me exactly of the weird, uncanny, indescribable impression she had made upon me when I first knew her. Still I was very fond of Césarine, and if she and the doctor were both agreed that Haiti would be the very best place for her, it would be foolish and wrong for me to interfere with their joint wisdom. Depend upon it, a woman often knows what is the matter with her better than any man, even her husband, can possibly tell her.

The end of it all was, that in less than a month from that day, we were out in the yacht on the broad Atlantic, with the cliffs of Falmouth and the Lizard Point fading slowly behind us in the distance, and the white spray dashing in front of us, like fingers beckoning us on to Haiti.

VI

The bay of Port-au-Prince is hot and simmering, a deep basin enclosed in a ringing semicircle of mountains, with scarce a breath blowing on the harbour, and with tall cocoa-nut palms rising unmoved into the still air above on the low sand-spits that close it in to seaward. The town itself is wretched, squalid, and hopelessly ramshackled, a despondent collection of tumbledown wooden houses, interspersed with indescribable negro huts, mere human rabbit-hutches, where parents and children herd together, in one higgledy-piggledy, tropical confusion. I had never in my days seen anything more painfully desolate and dreary, and I feared that Césarine, who had not been here since she was a girl of fourteen, would be somewhat depressed at the horrid actuality, after her exalted fanciful ideals of the remembered Haiti. But, to my immense surprise, as it turned out, Césarine did not appear at all shocked or taken aback at the squalor and wretchedness all around her. On the contrary, the very air of the place seemed to inspire her from the first with fresh vigour; her cough disappeared at once as if by magic; and the colour returned forthwith to her cheeks, almost as soon as we had fairly cast anchor in Haitian waters.

The very first day we arrived at Port-au-Prince, Césarine said to me, with more shyness than I had ever yet seen her exhibit, "If you wouldn't mind it, Harry, I should like to go at once, this morning – and see my grandmother."

I started with astonishment. "Your grandmother, Césarine!" I cried incredulously. "My darling! I didn't know you had a grandmother living."

"Yes, I have," she answered, with some slight hesitation, "and I think if you wouldn't object to it, Harry, I'd rather go and see her alone, the first time at least, please dearest."

In a moment, the obvious truth, which I had always known in a vague sort of fashion, but never thoroughly realized, flashed across my mind in its full vividness, and I merely bowed my head in silence. It was natural she should not wish me to see her meeting with her Haitian grandmother.

She went alone through the streets of Port-au-Prince, without inquiry, like one who knew them familiarly of old, and I dogged her footsteps at a distance unperceived, impelled by the same strange fascination which had so often driven me to follow Césarine wherever she led me. After a few hundred yards, she turned out of the chief business place, and down a tumbledown alley of scattered negro cottages, till she came at last to a rather better house that stood by itself in a little dusty garden of guava-trees and cocoa-nuts. A rude paling, built negro-wise of broken barrel-staves, nailed rudely together, separated the garden from the compound next to it. I slipped into the compound before Césarine observed me, beckoned the lazy negro from the door of the hut, with one finger placed as a token of silence upon my lips, dropped a dollar into his open palm, and stood behind the paling, looking out into the garden beside me through a hole made by a knot in one of the barrel staves.

Césarine knocked with her hand at the door, and in a moment was answered by an old negress, tall and bony, dressed in a loose sack-like gown of coarse cotton print, with a big red bandanna tied around her short grey hair, and a huge silver cross dangling carelessly upon her bare and wrinkled black neck. She wore no sleeves, and bracelets of strange beads hung loosely around her shrunken and skinny wrists. A more hideous old hag I had never in my life beheld before; and yet I saw, without waiting to observe it, that she had Césarine's great dark eyes and even white teeth, and something of Césarine's figure lingered still in her lithe and sinuous yet erect carriage.

"Grand'mère!" Césarine said convulsively, flinging her arms with wild delight around that grim and withered gaunt black woman. It seemed to me she had never since our marriage embraced me with half the fervour she bestowed upon this hideous old African witch creature.

"Hé, Césarine, it is thee, then, my little one," the old negress cried out suddenly, in her thin high voice and her muffled Haitian *patois*. "I did not expect thee so soon, my cabbage. Thou hast come early. Be the welcome one, my granddaughter."

I reeled with horror as I saw the wrinkled and haggard African kissing once more my beautiful Césarine. It seemed to me a horrible desecration. I had always known, of course, since Césarine was a quadroon, that her grandmother on one side must necessarily have been a full-blooded negress, but I had never yet suspected the reality could be so hideous, so terrible as this.

I crouched down speechless against the paling in my disgust and astonishment, and motioned with my hand to the negro in the hut to remain perfectly quiet. The door of the house closed, and Césarine disappeared: but I waited there, as if chained to the spot, under a hot and burning tropical sun, for fully an hour, unconscious of anything in heaven or earth, save the shock and surprise of that unexpected disclosure.

At last the door opened again, and Césarine apparently came out once more into the neighbouring garden. The gaunt negress followed her close, with one arm thrown caressingly about her beautiful neck and shoulders. In London, Césarine would not have permitted anybody but a great lady to take such a liberty with her; but here in Haiti, she submitted to the old negress's horrid embraces with perfect calmness. Why should she not, indeed! It was her own grandmother.

They came close up to the spot where I was crouching in the thick drifted dust behind the low fence, and then I heard rather than saw that Césarine had flung herself passionately down upon her knees on the ground, and was pouring forth a muttered prayer, in a tongue unknown to me, and full of harsh and uncouth gutturals. It was not Latin; it was not even the coarse Creole French, the negro *patois* in which I heard the people jabbering to one another loudly in the streets around me: it was some still more hideous and barbaric language, a mass of clicks and inarticulate noises, such as I could never have believed might possibly proceed from Césarine's thin and scornful lips.

At last she finished, and I heard her speaking again to her grandmother in the Creole dialect. "Grandmother, you will pray and get me one. You will not forget me. A boy. A pretty one; an heir to my husband!" It was said wistfully, with an infinite longing. I knew then why she had grown so pale and thin and haggard before we sailed away from England.

The old hag answered in the same tongue, but in her shrill withered note, "You will bring him up to the religion, my little one, will you?"

Césarine seemed to bow her head. "I will," she said. "He shall follow the religion. Mr. Tristram shall never know anything about it."

They went back once more into the house, and I crept away, afraid of being discovered, and returned to the yacht, sick at heart, not knowing how I should ever venture again to meet Césarine.

But when I got back, and had helped myself to a glass of sherry to steady my nerves, from the little flask on Césarine's dressing-table, I thought to myself, hideous as it all seemed, it was very natural Césarine should wish to see her grandmother. After all, was it not better, that proud and haughty as she was, she should not disown her own flesh and blood? And yet, the memory of my beautiful Césarine wrapped in that hideous old black woman's arms made the blood curdle in my very veins.

As soon as Césarine returned, however, gayer and brighter than I had ever seen her, the old fascination overcame me once more, and I determined in my heart to stifle the horror I could not possibly help feeling. And that evening, as I sat alone in the cabin with my wife, I said to her, "Césarine, we have never spoken about the religious question before: but if it should be ordained we are ever to have any little ones of our own, I should wish them to be brought up in their mother's creed. You could make them better Catholics, I take it, than I could ever make them Christians of any sort."

Césarine answered never a word, but to my intense surprise she burst suddenly into a flood of tears, and flung herself sobbing on the cabin floor at my feet in an agony of tempestuous cries and writhings.

VII

A few days later, when we had settled down for a three months' stay at a little bungalow on the green hills behind Port-au-Prince, Césarine said to me early in the day, "I want to go away to-day, Harry, up into the mountains, to the chapel of Notre Dame de Bon Secours."

I bowed my head in acquiescence. "I can guess why you want to go, Reeney," I answered gently. "You want to pray there about something that's troubling you. And if I'm not mistaken, it's the same thing that made you cry the other evening when I spoke to you down yonder in the cabin."

The tears rose hastily once more into Césarine's eyes, and she cried in a low distressed voice, "Harry, Harry, don't talk to me so. You are too good to me. You will kill me. You will kill me."

I lifted her head from the table, where she had buried it in her arms, and kissed her tenderly. "Reeney," I said, "I know how you feel, and I hope Notre Dame will listen to your prayers, and send you what you ask of her. But if not, you need never be afraid that I shall love you any the less than I do at present."

Césarine burst into a fresh flood of tears. "No, Harry," she said, "you don't know about it. You can't imagine it. To us, you know, who have the blood of Africa running in our veins, it is not a mere matter of fancy. It is an eternal disgrace for any woman of our race and descent not to be a mother. I cannot help it. It is the instinct of my people. We are all born so: we cannot feel otherwise."

It was the only time either of us ever alluded in speaking with one another to the sinister half of Césarine's pedigree.

"You will let me go with you to the mountains, Reeney?" I asked, ignoring her remark. "You mustn't go so far by yourself, darling."

"No, Harry, you can't come with me. It would make my prayers ineffectual, dearest. You are a heretic, you know, Harry. You are not Catholic. Notre Dame won't listen to my prayer if I take you with me on my pilgrimage, my darling."

I saw her mind was set upon it, and I didn't interfere. She would be away all night, she said. There was a rest-house for pilgrims attached to the chapel, and she would be back again at Maisonette (our bungalow) the morning after.

That afternoon she started on her way on a mountain pony I had just bought for her, accompanied only by a negro maid. I couldn't let her go quite unattended through those lawless paths, beset by cottages of half savage Africans; so I followed at a distance, aided by a black groom, and tracked her road along the endless hill-sides up to a fork in the way where the narrow bridle-path divided into two, one of which bore away to leftward, leading, my guide told me, to the chapel of Notre Dame de Bon Secours.

At that point the guide halted. He peered with hand across his eyebrows among the tangled brake of tree-ferns with a terrified look; then he shook his woolly black head ominously. "I can't go on, Monsieur," he said, turning to me with an unfeigned shudder. "Madame has not taken the path of Our Lady. She has gone to the left along the other road, which leads at last to the Vaudoux temple."

I looked at him incredulously. I had heard before of Vaudoux. It is the hideous African cannibalistic witchcraft of the relapsing half-heathen Haitian negroes. But Césarine a Vaudoux worshipper! It was too ridiculous. The man must be mistaken: or else Césarine had taken the wrong road by some slight accident.

Next moment, a horrible unspeakable doubt seized upon me irresistibly. What was the unknown shrine in her grandmother's garden at which Césarine had prayed in those awful gutturals? Whatever it was, I would probe this mystery to the very bottom. I would know the truth, come what might of it.

"Go, you coward!" I said to the negro. "I have no further need of you. I will make my way alone to the Vaudoux temple."

"Monsieur," the man cried, trembling visibly in every limb, "they will tear you to pieces. If they ever discover you near the temple, they will offer you up as a victim to the Vaudoux."

"Pooh," I answered, contemptuous of the fellow's slavish terror. "Where Madame, a woman, dares to go, I, her husband, am certainly not afraid to follow her."

"Monsieur," he replied, throwing himself submissively in the dust on the path before me, "Madame is Creole; she has the blood of the Vaudoux worshippers flowing in her veins. Nobody will hurt her. She is free of the craft. But Monsieur is a pure white and uninitiated... If the Vaudoux people catch him at their rites, they will rend him in pieces, and offer his blood as an expiation to the Unspeakable One."

"Go," I said, with a smile, turning my horse's head up the right-hand path toward the Vaudoux temple. "I am not afraid. I will come back again to Maisonette to-morrow."

I followed the path through a tortuous maze, beset with prickly cactus, agave, and fern-brake, till I came at last to a spur of the hill, where a white wooden building gleamed in front of me, in the full slanting rays of tropical sunset. A skull was fastened to the lintel of the door. I knew at once it was the Vaudoux temple.

I dismounted at once, and led my horse aside into the brake, though I tore his legs and my own as I went with the spines of the cactus plants; and tying him by the bridle to a mountain cabbage palm, in a spot where the thick underbrush completely hid us from view, I lay down and waited patiently for the shades of evening.

It was a moonless night, according to the Vaudoux fashion; and I knew from what I had already read in West Indian books that the orgies would not commence till midnight.

From time to time, I rubbed a fusee against my hand without lighting it, and by the faint glimmer of the phosphorus on my palm, I was able to read the figures of my watch dial without exciting the attention of the neighbouring Vaudoux worshippers.

Hour after hour went slowly by, and I crouched there still unseen among the agave thicket. At last, as the hands of the watch reached together the point of twelve, I heard a low but deep rumbling noise coming ominously from the Vaudoux temple. I recognized at once the familiar sound. It was the note of the bull-roarer, that mystic instrument of pointed wood, whirled by a string round the head of the hierophant, by whose aid savages in their secret rites summon to their shrines their gods and spirits. I had often made one myself for a toy when I was a boy in England.

I crept out through the tangled brake, and cautiously approached the back of the building. A sentinel was standing by the door in front, a powerful negro, armed with revolver and cutlas. I skulked round noiselessly to the rear, and lifting myself by my hands to the level of the one tiny window, I peered in through a slight scratch on the white paint, with which the glass was covered internally.

I only saw the sight within for a second. Then my brain reeled, and my fingers refused any longer to hold me. But in that second, I had read the whole terrible, incredible truth: I knew what sort of a woman she really was whom I had blindly taken as the wife of my bosom.

Before a rude stone altar covered with stuffed alligator skins, human bones, live snakes, and hideous sorts of African superstition, a tall and withered black woman stood erect, naked as she came from her mother's womb, one skinny arm raised aloft, and the other holding below some dark object, that writhed and struggled awfully in her hand on the slab of the altar, even as she held it. I saw in a flash of the torches behind it was the black hag I had watched before at the Port-au-Prince cottage.

Beside her, whiter of skin, and faultless of figure, stood a younger woman, beautiful to behold, imperious and haughty still, like a Greek statue, unmoved before that surging horrid background of naked black and cringing savages. Her head was bent, and her hand pressed convulsively against the swollen veins in her throbbing brow; and I saw at once it was my own wife – a Vaudoux worshipper – Césarine Tristram.

In another flash, I knew the black woman had a sharp flint knife in her uplifted hand; and the dark object in the other hand I recognized with a thrill of unspeakable horror as a negro girl of four years old or thereabouts, gagged and bound, and lying on the altar.

Before I could see the sharp flint descend upon the naked breast of the writhing victim, my fingers in mercy refused to bear me, and I fell half fainting on the ground below, too shocked and unmanned even to crawl away at once out of reach of the awful unrealizable horror.

But by the sounds within, I knew they had completed their hideous sacrifice, and that they were smearing over Césarine – my own wife – the woman of my choice – with the warm blood of the human victim.

Sick and faint, I crept away slowly through the tangled underbrush, tearing my skin as I went with the piercing cactus spines; untied my horse from the spot where I had fastened him; and rode him down without drawing rein, cantering round sharp angles and down horrible ledges, till he stood at last, white with foam, by the grey dawn, in front of the little piazza at Maisonette.

VIII

That night, the thunder roared and the lightning played with tropical fierceness round the tall hilltops away in the direction of the Vaudoux temple. The rain came down in fearful sheets, and the torrents roared and foamed in cataracts, and tore away great gaps in the rough paths on the steep hill-sides. But at eight o'clock in the morning Césarine returned, drenched with wet, and with a strange frown upon her haughty forehead.

I did not know how to look at her or how to meet her.

"My prayers are useless," she muttered angrily as she entered. "Some heretic must have followed me unseen to the chapel of Notre Dame de Bon Secours. The pilgrimage is a failure."

"You are wet," I said, trembling. "Change your things, Césarine." I could not pretend to speak gently to her.

She turned upon me with a fierce look in her big black eyes. Her instinct showed her at once I had discovered her secret. "Tell them, and hang me," she cried fiercely.

It was what the law required me to do. I was otherwise the accomplice of murder and cannibalism. But I could not do it. Profoundly as I loathed her and hated her presence, now, I couldn't find it in my heart to give her up to justice, as I knew I ought to do.

I turned away and answered nothing.

Presently, she came out again from her bedroom, with her wet things still dripping around her. "Smoke that," she said, handing me a tiny cigarette rolled round in a leaf of fresh tobacco.

"I will not," I answered with a vague surmise, taking it from her fingers. "I know the smell. It is manchineal. You cannot any longer deceive me."

She went back to her bedroom once more. I sat, dazed and stupefied, in the bamboo chair on the front piazza. What to do, I knew not, and cared not. I was tied to her for life, and there was no help for it, save by denouncing her to the rude Haitian justice.

In an hour or more, our English maid came out to speak to me. "I'm afraid, sir," she said, "Mrs. Tristram is getting delirious. She seems to be in a high fever. Shall I ask one of these poor black bodies to go out and get the English doctor?"

I went into my wife's bedroom. Césarine lay moaning piteously on the bed, in her wet clothes still; her cheeks were hot, and her pulse was high and thin and feverish. I knew without asking what was the matter with her. It was yellow fever.

The night's exposure in that terrible climate, and the ghastly scene she had gone through so intrepidly, had broken down even Césarine's iron constitution.

I sent for the doctor and had her put to bed immediately. The black nurse and I undressed her between us. We found next her bosom, tied by a small red silken thread, a tiny bone, fresh and ruddy-looking. I knew what it was, and so did the negress. It was a human finger-bone – the last joint of a small child's fourth finger. The negress shuddered and hid her head. "It is Vaudoux, Monsieur!" she said. "I have seen it on others. Madame has been paying a visit, I suppose, to her grandmother."

For six long endless days and nights I watched and nursed that doomed criminal, doing everything for her that skill could direct or care could suggest to me: yet all the time fearing and dreading that she might yet recover, and not knowing in my heart what either of our lives could ever be like if she did live through it.

A merciful Providence willed it otherwise.

On the sixth day, the fatal *vomito negro* set in – the symptom of the last incurable stage of yellow fever – and I knew for certain that Césarine would die. She had brought her own punishment upon her. At midnight that evening she died delirious.

Thank God, she had left no child of mine behind her to inherit the curse her mother's blood had handed down to her!

IX

On my return to London, whither I went by mail direct, leaving the yacht to follow after me, I drove straight to the Lathams' from Waterloo Station. Mrs. Latham was out, the servant said, but Miss Irene was in the drawing-room.

Irene was sitting at the window by herself, working quietly at a piece of crewel work. She rose to meet me with her sweet simple little English smile. I took her hand and pressed it like a brother.

"I got your telegram," she said simply. "Harry, I know she is dead; but I know something terrible besides has happened. Tell me all. Don't be afraid to speak of it before me. I am not afraid, for my part, to listen."

I sat down on the sofa beside her, and told her all, without one word of excuse or concealment, from our last parting to the day of C sarine's death in Haiti: and she held my hand and listened all the while with breathless wonderment to my strange story.

At the end I said, "Irene, it has all come and gone between us like a hideous nightmare. I cannot imagine even now how that terrible woman, with all her power, could ever for one moment have bewitched me away from you, my beloved, my queen, my own heart's darling."

Irene did not try to hush me or to stop me in any way. She merely sat and looked at me steadily, and said nothing.

"It was fascination," I cried. "Infatuation, madness, delirium, enchantment."

"It was worse than that, Harry," Irene answered, rising quietly. "It was poison; it was witchcraft; it was sheer African devilry."

In a flash of thought, I remembered the cup of coffee at Seymour Crescent, the curious sherry at Port-au-Prince, the cigarette with the manchineal she had given me on the mountains, and I saw forthwith that Irene with her woman's quickness had divined rightly. It was more than infatuation; it was intoxication with African charms and West Indian poisons.

"What a man does in such a woman's hands is not his own doing," Irene said slowly. "He has no more control of himself in such circumstances than if she had drugged him with chloroform or opium."

"Then you forgive me, Irene?"

"I have nothing to forgive, Harry. I am grieved for you. I am frightened." Then bursting into tears, "My darling, my darling; I love you, I love you!"

LUCRETIA

I will acknowledge that I was certainly a very young man in the year '67; indeed, I was only just turned of twenty, and was inordinately proud of a slight downy fringe on my upper lip, which I was pleased to speak of as my moustache. Still, I was a sturdy young fellow enough, in spite of my consumptive tendencies, and not given to groundless fears in a general way; but I must allow that I was decidedly frightened by my adventure in the Richmond Hotel on the Christmas Eve of that aforesaid year of grace. It may be a foolish reminiscence, yet I dare say you won't mind listening to it.

When I say the Richmond Hotel, you must not understand me to speak of the Star and Garter in the town of that ilk situated in the county of Surrey, England. The Richmond where I passed my uncomfortable Christmas Eve stands on the banks of the pretty St. Francis River in Lower Canada. I had gone out to the colony in the autumn of that year, to look after a small property of my mother's near Kamouraska; and I originally intended to spend the winter in Quebec. But as November and December wore away, and the snow grew deeper and deeper upon the plains of Abraham, I became gradually aware that a Canadian winter was not the best adapted tonic in the world for a hearty young man with a slight hereditary predisposition to consumption. I had seen enough of Arctic life in Quebec during those two initial months to give me a good idea of its pleasures and its drawbacks. I had steered by taboggan down the ice-cone at the Falls of Montmorenci; I had driven a sleigh, *tête-à-tête* with a French Canadian belle, to a surprise picnic in a house at Sainte Anne; I had skated, snow-shoed, and curled to my heart's content; and I had caught my death of cold on the frozen St. Lawrence, not to mention such minor misfortunes as getting my nose, ears, and feet frostbitten during a driving party up the banks of the Chaudière. So a few days before Christmas, I determined to strike south. I would go for a tour through Virginia and the Carolinas, to escape the cold weather, waiting for the return of the summer sun to catch a glimpse of Niagara and the great lakes.

For this purpose I must first go to Montreal; and, that being the case, what could be more convenient than to spend Christmas Day itself with the rector at Richmond, to whom I had letters of introduction, his wife being in fact a first cousin of my mother's? Richmond lies half-way on the Grand Trunk line between Quebec and Montreal, and it would be more pleasant, by breaking my journey there, to eat my turkey and plum-pudding in a friend's family than in that somewhat cheerless hotel, the Dominion Hall. So off I started from the Point Levy station, at four o'clock on the twenty-fourth of December, hoping to arrive at my journey's end about one o'clock on Christmas morning.

Now, those were the days, just after the great American civil war, when gold was almost unknown either in the States or Canada, and everybody used greasy dollar notes of uncertain and purely local value. Hence I was compelled to take the money for expenses on my projected tour in the only form of specie which was available, that of solid silver. A hundred and fifty pounds in silver dollars amounts to a larger bulk and a heavier weight than you would suppose; and I thought it safer to carry the sum in my own hands, loosely bundled into a large leather reticule. *Hinc illæ lacrimæ*: – that was the real cause of my night's adventure and of the present story.

When I got into the long open American railway-carriage, with its comfortable stove and warm foot-bricks, I found only one seat vacant, and that was a red velvet sofa, opposite to another occupied by a girl of singular beauty. I can remember to this day exactly how she was dressed. I dare say my lady readers will think it horribly old-fashioned at the present time, but it was the very latest and most enchanting style in the year '67. On her head was a coquettish little cheese-plate bonnet, bound round with one of those warm, soft, fleecy woollen veils or head-wraps which Canadian girls know as Nubias. Her dress was a short winter walking costume of the period, trimmed with fur, and vandyked at the bottom so as to show a glimpse of the quilted down petticoat underneath.

Her little high-heeled boots, displayed by the short costume, were buttoned far above the ankle, and bound with fur to match the dress; while a tiny tassel at the side added just a suspicion of Parisian coquetry. Her cloak was lined with sable, or what seemed so to my indiscriminating eyes; and her rug was a splendid piece of wolverine skins. As to her eyes, her lips, her figure, I had rather not attempt them. I can manage clothes, but not goddesses. Altogether, quite a dream of Canadian beauty, not devoid of that indefinable grace which goes only with the French blood.

I was not bold in '67, and I would have preferred to take any other seat rather than face this divine apparition; but there was no help for it, since all the others were filled: so I sat down a little sheepishly, I dare say. Almost before we were well out of the station we had got into a conversation, and it was she who began it.

"You are an Englishman, I think?" she said, looking at me with a frank and pleasant smile.

"Yes," I answered, colouring, though why I should have been ashamed of my nationality for that solitary moment of my life I cannot imagine, – unless, perhaps, because *she* was a Canadian; "but how on earth did you discover it?"

"You would have been more warmly wrapped up if you had lived long in Canada," she replied. "In spite of our stoves and hot bricks, you'll find yourself very cold before you get to your journey's end."

"Yes," I said; "I suppose it's rather chilly late at night in these big cars."

"Dreadfully; oh, quite terribly. You ought to have a rug, you really ought. Won't you let me lend you one? I have another under the seat here."

"But you brought that for yourself," I interposed. "You will want it by-and-by, when it gets a little colder."

"Oh no, I shan't. This is warm enough for me; it's wolverine. You have a mother?"

What an extraordinary question, I thought, and what an unusually friendly girl! Was she really quite as simple-minded as she seemed, or could she be the "designing woman" of the novels? Yes, I admitted to her cautiously that I possessed a maternal parent, who was at that moment safely drinking her tea in a terrace at South Kensington.

"I have none," she said, with an emphasis on the personal pronoun, and a sort of appealing look in her big eyes. "But you should take care of yourself, for her sake. You really *must* take my rug. *Hundreds*, oh, *thousands* of young Englishmen come out here, and kill themselves their first winter by imprudence."

Thus adjured, I accepted the rug with many thanks and apologies, and wrapped myself warmly up in the corner, with a splendid view of my *vis-à-vis*.

Exactly at that moment, the ticket collector came round upon his official tour. Now, on American and Canadian railways, you do not take your ticket beforehand, but pay your fare to the collector, who walks up and down through the open cars from end to end, between every station. I lifted up my bag of silver, which lay on the seat beside me, and imprudently opened it to take out a few dollars full in sight of my enchanting neighbour. I saw her look with unaffected curiosity at the heap of coin within, and I was proud at being able to give such an unequivocal proof of my high respectability – for what better guarantee of all the noblest moral qualities can any man produce all the world over than a bag of dollars?

"What a lot of money!" she said, as the collector passed on. "What can you want with it all in coin?"

"I'm going on a tour in the Southern States," I confided in reply, "and I thought it better to take specie." (I was very proud ten or twelve years ago of that word *specie*.)

"And I suppose those are your initials on the reticule? What a pretty monogram! Your mother gave you that for a birthday present."

"You must be a conjurer or a clairvoyant," I said, smiling. "So she did;" and I added that the initials represented my humble patronymic and baptismal designations.

"My name's Lucretia," said my neighbour artlessly, as a child might have said it, without a word as to surname or qualifying circumstances; and from that moment she became to me simply Lucretia. I think of her as Lucretia to the present day. As she spoke, she pointed to the word engraved in tiny letters on her pretty silver locket.

I suppose she thought my confidence required a little more confidence in return, for after a slight pause she repeated once more, "My name's Lucretia, and I live at Richmond."

"Richmond!" I cried. "Why, that's just where I'm going. Do you know the rector?"

"Mr. Pritchard? Oh yes, intimately. He's our greatest friend. Are you going to stop with him?"

"For a day or two at least, on my way to Montreal. Mrs. Pritchard is my mother's cousin."

"How delightful! Then we may consider ourselves acquaintances. But you don't mean to knock them up to-night? They'll all be in bed long before one o'clock."

"No, I haven't even written to tell them I was coming," I answered. "They gave me a general invitation, and said I might drop in whenever I pleased."

"Then you must stop at the hotel to-night. I'm going there myself. My people keep the hotel."

Was it possible! I was thunderstruck. I had pictured Lucretia to myself as at least a countess of the *ancien régime*, a few of whom still linger on in Montreal and elsewhere. Her locket, her rugs, her eyes, her chiselled features, all of them seemed to me redolent of the old French *noblesse*. And here it turned out that this living angel was only the daughter of an inn-keeper! But in that primitive and pleasant Canadian society such things, I thought, can easily be. No doubt she is the petted child of the house, the one heiress of the old man's savings; and after spending a winter holiday among the gaieties of Quebec, she is now returning to pass the Christmas season with her own family. I will not conceal the fact that I had already fallen over head and ears in love with Lucretia at first sight, and that frank avowal made me love her all the more. Besides, these Canadian hotel-keepers are often very rich; and was not her manner perfect, and was she not an intimate friend of the rector and his wife? All these things showed at least that she was accustomed to refined society. I caught myself already speculating as to what my mother would think of such a match.

In five minutes it was all arranged about the hotel, and I had got into the midst of a swimming conversation with Lucretia. She told me about herself and her past; how she had been educated at a convent in Montreal, and loved the nuns, oh so dearly, though she was a Protestant herself, and only French on her mother's side. (This, I thought, was well, as a safeguard against parental prejudice.) She told me all the gossip of Richmond, and whom I should meet at the rector's, and what a dull little town it was. But Quebec was delightful, and Montreal – oh, if she could only live in Montreal, it would be perfect bliss. And so I thought myself, if only Lucretia would live there with me; but I prudently refrained from saying so, as I thought it rather premature. Or perhaps I blushed and stammered too much to get the words out. "Had she ever been in Europe?" No, never, but she would so like it. "Ah, it would be delightful to spend a month or two in Paris," I suggested, with internal pictures of a honeymoon floating through my brain. "Yes, that would be most enjoyable," she answered. Altogether, Lucretia and I kept chatting uninterruptedly the whole way to Richmond, and the other passengers must have voted us most unconscionable bores; for they evidently could not sleep by reason of our incessant talking. *We* did not sleep, nor wish to sleep. And I am bound to say that a more frankly enchanting or seemingly guileless girl than Lucretia I have never met from that day to this.

At last we reached Richmond Dépôt (as the Canadians call the stations), very cold and tired externally, but lively enough as regards the internal fires. We got out, and looked after our luggage. A sleepy porter promised to bring it next morning to the hotel. There were no sleighs in waiting – Richmond is too much of a country station for that – so I took my reticule in my hand, threw Lucretia's rug across her shoulders, and proceeded to walk with her to the hotel.

Now, the "Dépôt" is in a suburb known as Melbourne, while Richmond itself lies on the other side of the river St. Francis, here crossed by a long covered bridge, a sort of rough wooden

counterpart of the famous one at Lucerne. As we passed out into the cold night, it was snowing heavily, and the frost was very bitter. Lucretia took my arm without a word of prelude, as naturally as if she were my sister, and guided me through the snow-covered path to the bridge. When we got under the shelter of the wooden covering, we had to pass through the long dark gallery, as black as night, heading only for the dim square of moonlight at the other end. But Lucretia walked and chatted on as unconcernedly as if she had always been in the habit of traversing that lonely tunnel-like bridge with a total stranger every evening of her life. I confess I was surprised. I fancied a prim English girl in a similar situation, and I began to wonder whether all this artlessness was really as genuine as it looked.

At the opposite end of the bridge we emerged upon a street of wooden frame houses. In one of them only was there a light. "That's the hotel!" said Lucretia, nodding towards it, and again I suffered a thrill of disappointment. I had pictured to myself a great solid building like the St. Lawrence Hall at Montreal, forgetting that Richmond was a mere country village; and here I found a bit of a frame cottage as the whole domain of Lucretia's supposed father. It was too awful!

We reached the door and entered. Fresh surprises were in store for me. The passage led into a bar, where half-a-dozen French Canadians were sitting with bottles and glasses, playing some game of cards. One rather rough-looking young man jumped up in astonishment as we entered, and exclaimed, "Why, Lucretia, we didn't expect you for another hour. I meant to take the sleigh for you." I could have knocked him down for calling her by her Christian name, but the conviction flashed upon me that this was Lucretia's brother. He glanced up at the big Yankee clock on the mantelpiece, which pointed to a quarter past twelve, then pulled out his watch and whistled. "Stopped three quarters of an hour ago, by Jingo," was his comment. "Why, I forgot to wind it up. Upon my word, Lucretia, I'm awfully sorry. But who is the gentleman?"

"A friend of the Pritchards, Tom dear, who wants a bed here to-night. I couldn't imagine why the sleigh didn't come for me. It's so unlike you not to remember it." And she gave him a look to melt adamant.

Tom was profuse in his apologies, and made it quite clear that his intentions at least had been most excellent; besides, he kissed Lucretia with so much brotherly tenderness that I relented of my desire to knock him down. Then brother and sister retired for a while, apparently to see after my bedroom, and I was left alone in the bar.

I cannot say I liked the look of it. The men were drinking whiskey and playing *écarté*—two bad things, I thought in my twenty-year-old propriety. My dear mother hated gambling, which hatred she had instilled into my youthful mind, and this was evidently a backwoods gambling-house. Moreover, I carried a bag of silver coin, quite large enough to make it well worth while, to rob me. The appearances were clearly against Lucretia's home; but surely Lucretia herself was a guarantee for anything.

Presently Tom returned, and told me my room was ready. I followed him up the stairs with a beating heart and a heavy reticule. At the top of the landing Lucretia stood smiling, my candle in her hand, and showed me into the room. Tom and she looked around to see that all was comfortable, and then they both shook hands with me, which certainly seemed a curious thing for an inn-keeper and his sister. As soon as they were gone, I began to look about me and consider the situation. The room had two doors, but the key was gone from both. I opened one towards the passage, but found no key outside; the other, which probably communicated with a neighbouring bedroom, was locked from the opposite side. Moreover, there had once been a common bolt on this second door, but it had been removed. I looked close at the screw-holes, and was sure they were quite fresh. Could the bolt have been taken off while I was waiting in the bar? All at once it flashed upon my mind that I had been imprudently confiding in my disclosures to Lucretia. I had told her that I carried a hundred and fifty pounds in coin, an easy thing to rob and a difficult thing to identify. She had heard that nobody was aware of my presence in Richmond, except herself and her brother. I had

not written to tell the Pritchards I was coming, and she knew that I had not told any one of my whereabouts, because I did not decide where I should go until I talked with her about the matter. No one in Canada would miss me. If these people chose to murder me for my money (and inn-keepers often murder their guests, I thought), nobody would think of inquiring or know where to inquire for me. Weeks would elapse before my mother wrote from England to ask my whereabouts, and by that time all traces might well be lost. I left Quebec only telling the people at my hotel that I was going to Montreal. Then I thought of Lucretia's eagerness to get into conversation, her observation about my money, her suggestion that I should come to the Richmond Hotel. And how could she, a small inn-keeper's daughter, afford to get all those fine furs and lockets by fair means? Did she really know the Pritchards, or was it likely, considering her position? All these things came across me in a moment. What a fool I had been ever to think of trusting such a girl!

I got up and walked about the room. It was evidently Lucretia's own bedroom; "part of the decoy," said I to myself sapiently. But could so beautiful a girl really hurt one? A piece of music was lying on the dressing-table. I took it up and looked at it casually. Gracious heavens! it was a song from "Lucrezia Borgia!" Her very name betrayed her! She too was a Lucretia. I walked over to the mantelpiece. A little ivory miniature hung above the centre: I gave it a glance as I passed. Incredible! It was the Beatrice Cenci! Talk of beautiful women! Why, they poison one, they stab one, they burn one alive, with a smile on their lips. Lucretia must have a taste for murderesses. Evidently she is a connoisseur.

At least, thought I, I shall sell my life dearly. I could not go to bed; but I pulled the bedstead over against one of the doors – the locked one – and I laid the mattress down in front of the other. Then I lay down on the mattress, my money-bag under my head, and put the poker conveniently by my side. If they came to rob and murder me, they should at least have a broken head to account for next day. But I soon got tired of this defensive attitude, and reflected that, if I must lie awake all night, I might as well have something to read. So I went over to the little book-case and took down the first book which came to hand. It bore on the outside the title "Œuvres de Victor Hugo. Tome I^{er}. Théâtre." "This, at any rate," said I to myself, "will be light and interesting." I returned to my mattress, opened the volume, and began to read *Le Roi s'amuse*.

I had never before dipped into that terrible drama, and I devoured it with a horrid avidity. I read how Triboulet bribed the gipsy to murder the king; how the gipsy's sister beguiled him into the hut; how the plot was matured; and how the sack containing the corpse was delivered over to Triboulet. It was an awful play to read on such a night and in such a place, with the wind howling round the corners and the snow gathering deeply upon the window-panes. I was in a considerable state of fright when I began it: I was in an agony of terror before I had got half-way through. Now and then I heard footsteps on the stairs: again I could distinguish two voices, one a woman's, whispering outside the door; a little later, the other door was very slightly opened and then pushed back again stealthily by a man's hand. Still I read on. At last, just as I reached the point where Triboulet is about to throw the corpse into the river, my candle, a mere end, began to sputter in its socket, and after a few ineffectual flickers suddenly went out, leaving me in the dark till morning.

I lay down once more, trembling but wearied out. A few minutes later the voices came again. The further door was opened a second time, and I saw dimly a pair of eyes (*not*, I felt sure, Lucretia's) peering in the gloom, and reflecting the light from the snow on the window. A man's voice said huskily in an undertone, "It's all right now;" and then there was a silence. I knew they were coming to murder me. I clutched the poker firmly, stood on guard over the dollars, and waited the assault. The moment that intervened seemed like a lifetime.

A minute. Five minutes. A quarter of an hour. They are evidently trying to take me off my guard. Perhaps they saw the poker; in any case, they must have felt the bedstead against the door. That would show them that I expected them. I held my watch to my ear and counted the seconds,

then the minutes, then the hours. When the candle went out it was three o'clock. I counted up till about half-past five.

After that I must have fallen asleep from very weariness. My head glided back upon the reticule, and I dozed uneasily until morning. Every now and then I started in my sleep, but the murderers hung back. When I awoke it was eight o'clock, and the dollars were still safe under my head. I rose wearily, washed myself, and arranged the tumbled clothes in which I had slept, for my portmanteau had not yet arrived from the Dépôt. Next, I put back the bed and mattress, and then I took the dollars and went downstairs to the bar, hardly knowing whether to laugh at my last night's terror, or to congratulate myself on my lucky escape from a den of robbers. At the foot of the stairs, whom should I come across but Lucretia herself!

In a moment the doubt was gone. She was enchanting. Quite a different style of dress, but equally lovely and suitable. A long figured gown of some fine woollen material, giving very nearly the effect of a plain neat print, and made quite simply to fit her perfect little figure. A plain linen collar, and a quiet silver brooch. Hair tied in a single broad knot above the head, instead of yesterday's chignon and cheese-plate. Altogether, a model winter morning costume for a cold climate. And as she advanced frankly, holding out her hand with a smile, I could have cut my own throat with a pocket-knife as a merited punishment for daring to distrust her. Such is human nature at the ripe age of twenty!

"We were so afraid you didn't sleep, Tom and I," she said with a little tone of anxiety; "we saw a light in your room till so very late, and Tom opened the door a wee bit once or twice to see if you were sleeping; but he said you seemed to have pulled the mattress on the floor. I *do* hope you weren't ill."

What on earth could I answer? Dare I tell this angel how I had suspected her? Impossible! "Well," I stammered out, colouring up to my eyes, "I *was* rather over-tired, and couldn't get to rest, so I put the candle on a chair, took a book, and lay on the floor so as to have a light to read by. But I slept very well after the candle went out, thank you."

"There were none but French books in the room, though," she said quickly: "perhaps you read French?"

"I read *Le Roi s'amuse*, or part of it," said I.

"Oh, what a dreadful play to read on Christmas Eve!" cried Lucretia, with a little deprecating gesture. "But you must come and have your breakfast."

I followed her into the dining-room, a pretty little bright-looking room behind the bar. Frightened as I was during the night, I could not fail to notice how tastefully the bedroom was furnished; but this little *salle-à-manger* was far prettier. The paper, the carpet, the furniture, were all models of what cheap and simple cottage decorations ought to be. They breathed of Lucretia. The Montreal nuns had evidently taught her what "art at home" meant. The table was laid, and the white table-cloth, with its bright silver and sprays of evergreen in the vase, looked delightfully appetising. I began to think I might manage a breakfast after all.

"How pretty all your things are!" I said to Lucretia.

"Do you think so?" she answered. "I chose them, and I laid the table."

I looked surprised; but in a moment more I was fairly overwhelmed when Lucretia left the room for a minute, and then returned carrying a tray covered with dishes. These she rapidly and dexterously placed upon the table, and then asked me to take my seat.

"But," said I, hesitating, "am I to understand... You don't mean to say... Are you ... going ... to *wait upon me*?"

Lucretia's face was one smile of innocent amusement from her white little forehead to her chiselled little chin. "Why, yes," she answered, laughing, "of course I am. I always wait upon our guests when I'm at home. And I cooked these salmon cutlets, which I'm sure you'll find nice if you only try them while they're hot." With which recommendation she uncovered all the dishes,

and displayed a breakfast that might have tempted St. Anthony. Not being St. Anthony, I can do Lucretia's breakfast the justice to say that I ate it with unfeigned heartiness.

So my princess was, after all, the domestic manager and assistant cook of a small country inn! Not a countess, not even a murderess (which is at least romantic), but only a prosaic housekeeper! Yet she *was* a princess for all that. Did she not read Victor Hugo, and play "Lucrezia Borgia," and spread her own refinement over the village tavern? In no other country could you find such a strange mixture of culture and simplicity; but it was new, it was interesting, and it was piquant. Lucretia in her morning dress officiously insisting upon offering me the buckwheat pancakes with her own white hands was Lucretia still, and I fell deeper in love than ever.

After breakfast came a serious difficulty. I must go to the Pritchards, but before I went, I must pay. Yet, how was I to ask for my bill? I *couldn't* demand it of Lucretia. So I sat a while ruminating, and at last I said, "I wonder how people do when they want to leave this house."

"Why," said Lucretia, promptly, "they order the sleigh."

"Yes," I answered sheepishly, "no doubt. But how do they manage about paying?"

Lucretia smiled. She was so absolutely transparent, and so accustomed to her simple way of doing business, that I suppose she did not comprehend my difficulty. "They ask *me*, of course, and I tell them what they owe. You owe us half-a-dollar."

Half-a-dollar – two shillings sterling – for a night of romance and terror, a bed and bedroom, a regal breakfast, and – Lucretia to wait upon one! It was *too* ridiculous. And these were the good simple Canadian villagers whom I had suspected of wishing to rob and murder me! I never felt so ashamed of my own stupidity in the whole course of my life.

I must pay it somehow, I supposed, but I could not bear to hand over two shilling pieces into Lucretia's outstretched palm. It was desecration, it was sheer sacrilege. But Lucretia took the half-dollar with the utmost calmness, and went out to order the sleigh.

I drove to the rector's, after saying good-bye to Lucretia, with a clear determination that before I left Richmond she should have consented to become my wife. Of course there were social differences, but those would be forgotten in South Kensington, and nobody need ever know what Lucretia had been in Canada. Besides, she was fit to shine in the society of duchesses – a society into which I cannot honestly pretend that I habitually penetrate.

The rector and his wife gave me a hearty welcome, and I found Mrs. Pritchard a good motherly sort of body – just the right woman for helping on a romantic love-match. So, in the course of the morning, as we walked back from church, I managed to mention to her casually that a very nice young woman had come down in the train with me from Quebec.

"You don't mean Lucretia?" cried good Mrs. Pritchard.

"Lucretia," I answered in a cold sort of way, "I think that *was* her name. In fact, I remember she told me so."

"Oh yes, everybody calls her Lucretia – indeed, she's hardly got any other name. She's the dearest creature in the world, as simple as a child, yet the most engaging and kind-hearted girl you ever met. She was brought up by some nuns at Montreal, and being a very clever girl, with a great deal of taste, she was their favourite pupil, and has turned out a most cultivated person."

"Does she paint?" I asked, thinking of the Beatrice.

"Oh, beautifully. Her ivory miniatures always take prizes at the Toronto Exhibition. And she plays and sings charmingly."

"Are they well off?"

"Very, for Canadians. Lucretia has money of her own, and they have a good farm besides the hotel."

"She said she knew you very well," I ventured to suggest.

"Oh yes; in fact, she's coming here this evening. We have an early dinner – you know our simple Canadian habits – and a few friends will drop in to high tea after evening service. She and Tom will be among them – you met Tom, of course?"

"I had the pleasure of making Tom's acquaintance at one o'clock this morning," I answered. "But, excuse my asking it, isn't it a little odd for you to mix with people in their position?"

The rector smiled and put in his word. "This is a democratic country," he said; "a mere farmer community, after all. We have little society in Richmond, and are very glad to know such pleasant intelligent people as Tom and Lucretia."

"But then, the *convenances*," I urged, secretly desiring to have my own position strengthened. "When I got to the hotel last night, or rather this morning, there were a lot of rough-looking hulking fellows drinking whiskey and playing cards."

"Ah, I dare say. Old Picard, and young Le Patourel from Melbourne, and the Post Office people sitting over a quiet game of *écarté* while they waited for the last train. The English mail was in last night. As for the whiskey, that's the custom of the country. We Canadians do nothing without whiskey. A single glass of Morton's proof does nobody any harm."

And these were my robbers and gamblers? A party of peaceable farmers and sleepy Post officials, sitting up with a sober glass of toddy and beguiling the time with *écarté* for love, in expectation of Her Majesty's mails. I shall never again go to bed with a poker by my side as long as I live.

About seven o'clock our friends came in. Lucretia was once more charming; this time in a long evening dress, a peach-coloured silk with square-cut boddice, and a little lace cap on her black hair. I dare say I saw almost the full extent of her wardrobe in those three changes; but the impression she produced upon me was still that of boundless wealth. However, as she had money of her own, I no longer wondered at the richness of her toilette, and I reflected that a comfortable little settlement might help to outweigh any possible prejudice on my mother's part.

Lucretia was the soul of the evening. She talked, she flirted innocently with every man in the room (myself included), she played divinely, and she sang that very song from "Lucrezia Borgia" in a rich contralto voice. As she rose at last from the piano, I could contain myself no longer. I must find some opportunity of proposing to her there and then. I edged my way to the little group where she was standing, flushed with the compliments on her song, talking to our hostess near the piano. As I approached from behind, I could hear that they were speaking about me, and I caught a few words distinctly. I paused to listen. It was very wrong, but twenty is an impulsive age.

"Oh, a very nice young man indeed," Lucretia was saying; "and we had a most enjoyable journey down. He talked so simply, and seemed such an innocent boy, so I took quite a fancy to him." (My heart beat about two hundred pulsations to the minute.) "Such a clever, intelligent talker too, full of wide English views and interests, so different from our narrow provincial Canadian lads." (Oh, Lucretia, I feel sure of you now. Love at first sight on both sides, evidently!) "And then he spoke to me so nicely about his mother. I was quite grieved to think he should be travelling alone on Christmas Eve, and so pleased when I heard he was to spend his Christmas with you, dear. I thought what I should have felt if –"

I listened with all my ears. What could Lucretia be going to say?

"If *one of my own dear boys was grown up*, and passing his Christmas alone in a strange land."

I reeled. The room swam before me. It was too awful. So all that Lucretia had ever felt was a mere motherly interest in me as a solitary English boy away from his domestic turkey on the twenty-fifth of December! Terrible, hideous, blighting fact! Lucretia was married!

The rector's refreshments in the adjoining dining-room only went to the length of sponge-cake and weak claret-cup. I managed to get away from the piano without fainting, and swallowed about a quart of the intoxicating beverage by tumblerfuls. When I had recovered sufficiently from the shock to trust my tongue, I ventured back into the drawing-room. It struck me then that I had never

yet heard Lucretia's surname. When she and her brother arrived in the early part of the evening, Mrs. Pritchard had simply introduced them to me by saying, "I think you know Tom and Lucretia already." Colonial manners are so unceremonious.

I joined the fatal group once more. "Do you know," I said, addressing Lucretia with as little tremor in my voice as I could easily manage, "it's very curious, but I have never heard your surname yet."

"Dear me," cried Lucretia, "I quite forgot. Our name is Arundel."

"And which is Mr. Arundel?" I continued. "I should like to make his acquaintance."

"Why," answered Lucretia with a puzzled expression of face, "you've met him already. Here he is!" And she took a neighbouring young man in unimpeachable evening dress gently by the arm. He turned round. It required a moment's consideration to recognize in that tall and gentlemanly young fellow with the plain gold studs and turndown collar my rough acquaintance of last night, Tom himself!

I saw it in a flash. What a fool I had been! I might have known they were husband and wife. Nothing but a pure piece of infatuated preconception could ever have made me take them for brother and sister. But I had so fully determined in my own mind to win Lucretia for myself that the notion of any other fellow having already secured the prize had never struck me.

It was all the fault of that incomprehensible Canadian society, with its foolish removal of the natural barriers between classes. My mother was quite right. I should henceforth be a high-and-dry conservative in all matters matrimonial, return home in the spring with heart completely healed, and after passing correctly through a London season, marry the daughter of a general or a Warwickshire squire, with the full consent of all the high contracting parties, at St. George's, Hanover Square. With this noble and moral resolution firmly planted in my bosom, I made my excuses to the rector and his good little wife, and left Richmond for ever the very next morning, without even seeing Lucretia once again.

But, somehow, I have never quite forgotten that journey from Quebec on Christmas Eve; and though I have passed through several London seasons since that date, and undergone increasingly active sieges from mammas and daughters, as my briefs on the Oxford Circuit grow more and more numerous, I still remain a bachelor, with solitary chambers in St. James's. I sometimes fancy it might have been otherwise if I could only once have met a second paragon exactly like Lucretia.

THE THIRD TIME

I

If Harry Lewin had never come to Stoke Peveril, Edie Meredith would certainly have married her cousin Evan.

For Evan Meredith was the sort of man that any girl of Edie's temperament might very easily fall in love with. Tall, handsome, with delicate, clear-cut Celtic face, piercing yet pensive black Welsh eyes, and the true Cymric gifts of music and poetry, Evan Meredith had long been his pretty cousin's prime favourite among all the young men of all Herefordshire. She had danced with him over and over again at every county ball; she had talked with him incessantly at every lawn-tennis match and garden-party; she had whispered to him quietly on the sofa in the far corner while distinguished amateurs were hammering away conscientiously at the grand piano; and all the world of Herefordshire took it for granted that young Mr. Meredith and his second cousin were, in the delightfully vague slang of society, "almost engaged."

Suddenly, like a flaming meteor across the quiet evening skies, Harry Lewin burst in all his dashing splendour upon the peaceful and limited Herefordshire horizon. He came from that land of golden possibilities, Australia; but he was Irish by descent, and his father had sent him young to Eton and Oxford, where he picked up the acquaintance of everybody worth knowing, and a sufficient knowledge of things in general to pass with brilliant success in English society. In his vacations, having no home of his own to go to, he had loitered about half the capitals and spas of Europe, so that Vichy and Carlsbad, Monte Carlo and Spezzia, Berlin and St. Petersburg, were almost as familiar to him as London and Scarborough. Nobody knew exactly what his father had been: some said a convict, some a gold-miner, some a bush-ranger; but whatever he was, he was at least exceedingly rich, and money covers a multitude of sins quite as well and as effectually as charity. When Harry Lewin came into his splendid property at his father's death, and purchased the insolvent Lord Tintern's old estate at Stoke Peveril, half the girls and all the mothers in the whole of Herefordshire rose at once to a fever of anxiety in their desire to know upon which of the marriageable young women of the county the wealthy new-comer would finally bestow himself in holy matrimony.

There was only one girl in the Stoke district who never appeared in the slightest degree flattered or fluttered by Harry Lewin's polite attentions, and that girl was Edie Meredith. Though she was only the country doctor's daughter – "hardly in our set at all, you know," the county people said depreciatingly – she had no desire to be the mistress of Peveril Court, and she let Harry Lewin see pretty clearly that she didn't care the least in the world for that distinguished honour.

It was at a garden party at Stoke Peveril Rectory that Edie Meredith met one afternoon her cousin Evan and the rich young Irish-Australian. Harry Lewin had stood talking to her with his easy jaunty manner, so perfectly self-possessed, so full of Irish courtesy and Etonian readiness, when Evan Meredith, watching them half angrily out of his dark Welsh eyes from the corner by the laburnum tree, walked slowly over to interrupt their *tête-à-tête* of set purpose. He chose certainly an awkward moment: for his earnest serious face and figure showed to ill advantage just then and there beside the light-hearted cheery young Oxonian's. Edie fancied as he strolled up to her that she had never seen her cousin Evan look so awkward, so countrified, and so awfully Welsh. (On the border counties, to look like a Welshman is of course almost criminal.) She wondered she had overlooked till now the fact that his was distinctly a local and rustic sort of handsomeness. He looked like a Herefordshire squireen gentleman, while Harry Lewin, with his Irish chivalry and his Oxford confidence, looked like a cosmopolitan and a man of society.

As Evan came up, glancing blackly at him from under his dark eyebrows, Harry Lewin moved away carelessly, raising his hat and strolling off as if quite unconcerned, to make way for the new-comer. Evan nodded to him a distant nod, and then turned to his cousin Edie.

"You've been talking a great deal with that fellow Lewin," he said sharply, almost angrily, glancing straight at her with his big black eyes.

Edie was annoyed at the apparent assumption of a right to criticise her. "Mr. Lewin's a very agreeable man," she answered quietly, without taking the least notice of his angry tone. "I always like to have a chat with him, Evan. He's been everywhere and knows all about everything – Paris and Vienna, and I don't know where. So very different, of course, from our Stoke young men, who've never been anywhere in their whole lives beyond Bristol or Hereford."

"Bristol and Hereford are much better places, I've no doubt, for a man to be brought up in than Paris or Vienna," Evan Meredith retorted hastily, the hot blood flushing up at once into his dusky cheek. "But as you seem to be so very much taken up with your new admirer, Edie, I'm sure I'm very sorry I happened at such an unpropitious moment to break in upon your conversation."

"So am I," Edie answered, quietly and with emphasis.

She hardly meant it, though she was vexed with Evan; but Evan took her immediately at her word. Without another syllable he raised his hat, turned upon his heel, and left her standing there alone, at some little distance from her mother, by the edge of the oval grass-plot. It was an awkward position for a girl to be left in – for everybody would have seen that Evan had retired in high dudgeon – had not Harry Lewin promptly perceived it, and with quiet tact managed to return quite casually to her side, and walk back with her to her mother's protection, so as to hide at once her confusion and her blushes. As for Evan, he wandered off moodily by himself among the lilacs and arbutus bushes of the lower shrubbery.

He had been pacing up and down there alone for half an hour or more, nursing his wrath and jealousy in his angry heart, when he saw between the lilac branches on the upper walk the flash of Edie's pretty white dress, followed behind at a discreet distance by the rustle of Mrs. Meredith's black satin. Edie was walking in front with Harry Lewin, and Mrs. Meredith, attempting vainly to affect a becoming interest in the rector's conversation, was doing the proprieties at twenty paces.

As they passed, Evan Meredith heard Harry Lewin's voice murmuring something in a soft, gentle, persuasive flow, not a word of which he could catch individually, though the general accent and intonation showed him at once that Harry was pleading earnestly with his cousin Edie. Evan could have written her verses – pretty enough verses, too – by the foolscap ream; but though he had the Welsh gift of rhyme, he hadn't the Irish gift of fluency and eloquence; and he knew in his own heart that he could never have poured forth to any woman such a steady, long, impassioned flood of earnest solicitation as Harry Lewin was that moment evidently pouring forth to his cousin Edie. He held his breath in silent expectation, and waited ten whole endless seconds – a long eternity – to catch the tone of Edie's answer.

Instead of the mere tone, he caught distinctly the very words of that low soft musical reply. Edie murmured after a slight pause: "No, no, Mr. Lewin, I must not – I cannot. I do not love you."

Evan Meredith waited for no more. He knew partly from that short but ominous pause, and still more from the half-hearted, hesitating way in which the nominal refusal was faintly spoken, that his cousin Edie would sooner or later accept his rival. He walked away, fiercely indignant, and going home, sat down to his desk, and wrote at white-heat an angry letter, beginning simply "Edith Meredith," in which he released her formally and unconditionally from the engagement which both of them declared had never existed.

Whether his letter expedited Harry Lewin's wooing or not, it is at least certain that in the end Evan Meredith's judgment was approved by the result; and before the next Christmas came round again, Edie was married to Harry Lewin, and duly installed as mistress of Peveril Court.

II

The first three months of Edie Lewin's married life passed away happily and pleasantly. Harry was always kindness itself to her; and as she saw more of him, she found in him what she had not anticipated, an unsuspected depth and earnestness of purpose. She had thought him at first a brilliant, dashing, clever Irishman; she discovered upon nearer view that he had something more within him than mere showy external qualities. He was deeply in love with her: he respected and admired her: and in the midst of all his manly chivalry of demeanour towards his wife there was a certain indefinable air of self-restraint and constant watchfulness over his own actions which Edie noticed with some little wifely pride and pleasure. She had not married a mere handsome rich young fellow; she had married a man of character and determination.

About three months after their marriage, Harry Lewin was called away for the first time to leave his bride. An unexpected letter from his lawyer in London – immediate business – those bothering Australian shares and companies! Would Edie forgive him? He would run up for the day only, starting early and getting back late the same night. It's a long run from Stoke to London, but you can just manage it if you fit your trains with dexterous ingenuity. So Harry went, and Edie was left alone, for the first time in her life, in the big rooms of Peveril Court for a whole day.

That very afternoon Evan Meredith and his father happened to call. It was Evan's first visit to the bride, for he couldn't somehow make up his mind to see her earlier. He was subdued, silent, constrained, regretful, but he said nothing in allusion to the past – nothing but praise of the Peveril Court grounds, the beauty of the house, the charm of the surroundings, the magnificence of the old Romneys and Sir Joshuas.

"You have a lovely place, Edie," he said, hesitating a second before he spoke the old familiar name, but bringing it out quite naturally at last. "And your husband? I hope I may have the – the pleasure of seeing him again."

Edie coloured. "He has gone up to town to-day," she answered simply.

"By himself?"

"By himself, Evan."

Evan Meredith coughed uneasily, and looked at her with a silent look which said more plainly than words could have said it, "Already!"

"He will be back this evening," Edie went on apologetically, answering aloud his unspoken thought. "I – I'm sorry he isn't here to see you, Evan."

"I'm sorry too, very sorry," Evan answered with a half-stifled sigh. He didn't mean to let her see the ideas that were passing through his mind; but his quick, irrepressible Celtic nature allowed the internal emotions to peep out at once through the thin cloak of that conventionally polite expression of regret. Edie knew he meant he was very sorry that Harry should have gone away so soon and left her.

That evening, about ten o'clock, as Edie, sitting alone in the blue drawing-room, was beginning to wonder when Harry's dogcart would be heard rolling briskly up the front avenue, there came a sudden double rap at the front door, and the servant brought in a sealed telegram. Edie tore it open with some misgiving. It was not from Harry. She read it hastily: "From Proprietor, Norton's Hotel, Jermyn Street, London, to Mrs. Lewin, Peveril Court, Stoke Peveril, Herefordshire. Mr. Lewin unfortunately detained in town by urgent business. He will not be able to return before to-morrow."

Edie laid down the telegram with a sinking heart. In itself there was nothing so very strange in Harry's being detained by business; men are always being detained by business; she knew it was a way they had, a masculine peculiarity. But why had not Harry telegraphed himself? Why had he left the proprietor of Norton's Hotel to telegraph for him? Why was he at Norton's Hotel at all? And

if he really was there, why could he not have written the telegram himself? It was very mysterious, perplexing, and inexplicable. Tears came into Edie's eyes, and she sat long looking at the flimsy pink Government paper, as if the mere inspection of the hateful message would help her to make out the meaning of the enclosed mystery.

Soon the question began to occur to her, what should she do for the night's arrangements? Peveril Court was so big and lonely; she hated the idea of stopping there alone. Should she have out the carriage and drive round to spend the night as of old at her mother's? But no; it was late, and the servants would think it so very odd of her. People would talk about it; they would say Harry had stopped away from her unexpectedly, and that she had gone back in a pique to her own home. Young wives, she knew, are always doing those foolish things, and always regretting them afterwards when they find the whole county magnifying the molehill into a veritable mountain. Much as she dreaded it, she must spend the night alone in that big bedroom – the haunted bedroom where the last of the Peverils died. Poor little Edie! with her simple, small, village ways, she hated that great rambling house, and all its halls and staircases and corridors! But there was no help for it. She went tearfully up to her own room, and flung herself without undressing on the great bed with the heavy crimson tapestry hangings.

There she lay all night, tossing and turning, crying and wondering, dozing off at times and starting up again fitfully, but never putting out the candles on the dressing-table, which had burned away deep in the sockets by the time morning began to peep through the grey Venetians of the east window.

III

Next morning Evan Meredith heard accidentally that Harry Lewin had stopped for the night in London, and had telegraphed unexpectedly to Edie that he had been detained in town on business.

Evan shook his head with an ominous look. "Poor child," he said to himself pityingly; "she *would* marry a man who had been brought up in Paris and Vienna!"

And when Harry came back that evening by the late train, Evan Meredith was loitering casually by the big iron gates of Peveril Court to see whether Edie's husband was really returning.

There was a very grave and serious look on Harry's face that surprised and somewhat disconcerted Evan. He somehow felt that Harry's expression was not that of a careless, dissipated fellow, and he said to himself, this time a little less confidently: "Perhaps after all I may have been misjudging him."

Edie was standing to welcome her husband on the big stone steps of the old manor house. He stepped from the dogcart, not lightly with a spring as was his usual wont, but slowly and almost remorsefully, like a man who has some evil tidings to break to those he loves dearest. But he kissed Edie as tenderly as ever – even more tenderly, she somehow imagined; and he looked at her with such a genuine look of love that Edie thought it was well worth while for him to go away for the sake of such a delightful meeting.

"Well, darling," she asked, as she went with him into the great dining-room, "why didn't you come back to the little wifie, as you promised yesterday?"

Harry looked her full in the face, not evasively or furtively, but with a frank, open glance, and answered in a very quiet voice, "I was detained on business, Edie."

"What business?" Edie asked, a little piqued at the indefiniteness of the answer.

"Business that absolutely prevented me from returning," Harry replied, with a short air of perfect determination.

Edie tried in vain to get any further detail out of him. To all her questions Harry only answered with the one set and unaltered formula, "I was detained on important business."

But when she had asked him for the fiftieth time in the drawing-room that evening, he said at last, not at all angrily, but very seriously, "It was business, Edie, closely connected with your own happiness. If I had returned last night, you would have been sorry for it, sooner or later. I stayed away for your own sake, darling. Please ask me no more about it."

Edie couldn't imagine what he meant; but he spoke so seriously, and smoothed her hand with such a tender, loving gesture, that she kissed him fervently, and brushed away the tears from her swimming eyes without letting him see them. As for Harry, he sat long looking at the embers in the smouldering fire, and holding his pretty little wife's hand tight in his without uttering a single syllable. At last, just as they were rising to go upstairs, he laid his hand upon the mantelpiece as if to steady himself, and said very earnestly, "Edie, with God's help, I hope it shall never occur again."

"What, Harry darling? What do you mean? What will never occur again?"

He paused a moment. "That I should be compelled to stop a night away from you unexpectedly," he answered then very slowly.

And when he had said it he took up the candle from the little side table and walked away, with two tears standing in his eyes, to his own dressing-room.

From that day forth Edie Lewin noticed two things. First, that her husband seemed to love her even more tenderly and deeply than ever. And second, that his strange gravity and self-restraint seemed to increase daily upon him.

And Evan Meredith, watching closely his cousin and her husband, thought to himself with a glow of satisfaction – for he was too generous and too true in his heart to wish ill to his rival – "After all, he loves her truly; he is really in love with her. Edie will be rich now, and will have a

good husband. What could I ever have given her compared to what Harry Lewin can give her? It is better so. I must not regret it."

IV

For five or six months more, life passed as usual at Peveril Court, or at Harry Lewin's new town house in Curzon Street, Mayfair. The season came and went pleasantly enough, with its round of dances, theatres, and dinners; and in the autumn Edie Lewin found herself once more back for the shooting in dear old Herefordshire. Harry was always by her side, the most attentive and inseparable of husbands; he seemed somehow to cling to her passionately, as if he could not bear to be out of her sight for a single moment. Edie noticed it, and felt grateful for his love. Evan Meredith noticed it too, and reproached himself bitterly more than once that he should ever so unworthily have distrusted the man who had been brought up in Paris and Vienna.

One day, however, Harry had ridden from Stoke to Hereford, for the exercise alone, and Edie expected him back to dinner. But at half-past seven, just as the gong in the hall was burrring loudly, a telegram arrived once more for Mrs. Lewin, which Edie tore open with trembling fingers. It was almost exactly the same mystifying message over again, only this time it was sent by Harry himself, not by an unknown hotel-keeping deputy. "I have been suddenly detained here by unexpected business. Do not expect me home before to-morrow. Shall return as early as possible. God bless you!"

Those last words, so singular in a telegram, roused and accentuated all Edie's womanly terrors. "God bless you!" – what on earth could Harry mean by that solemn adjuration under such strange and mysterious circumstances? There was something very serious the matter, Edie felt sure; but what it could be she could not even picture to herself. Her instinctive fears did not take that vulgarly mistrustful form that they might have taken with many a woman of lower and more suspicious nature; she knew and trusted Harry far too well for that; she was too absolutely certain of his whole unshaken love and tenderness; but the very vagueness and indefiniteness of the fears she felt made them all the harder and more terrible to bear. When you don't know what it is you dread, your fancy can dress up its terrors afresh every moment in some still more painful and distressing disguise.

If Harry had let her know where he was stopping, she would have ordered the carriage then and there, and driven over to Hereford, not to spy him out, but to be with him in his trouble or difficulty. That, however, was clearly impossible, for Harry had merely sent his telegram as from "H. Lewin, Hereford;" and to go about from hotel to hotel through the county town, inquiring whether her husband was staying there, would of course have been open to the most ridiculous misinterpretation. Everybody would have said she was indeed keeping a tight hand upon him! So with many bitter tears brushed hastily away, Edie went down in solemn and solitary state to dinner, hating herself for crying so foolishly, and burning hot with the unpleasant consciousness that the butler and footman were closely observing her face and demeanour. If she could have dined quite alone in her own boudoir very furtively it wouldn't have been quite so dreadful; but to keep up appearances with a sinking heart before those two eminently respectable and officious men-servants – it was really enough to choke one.

That night again Edie Lewin never slept for more than a few troubled minutes together; and whenever she awoke, it was with a start and a scream, and a vague consciousness of some impending evil.

When Harry came again next day he didn't laugh it off carelessly and lightly; he didn't soothe her fears and uneasiness with ready kisses and prompt excuses; he didn't get angry with her and tell her not to ask him too many questions about his own business: he met her as gravely and earnestly as before, with the same tender, loving, half self-reproachful tone, and yet with the same evident desire and intention to love and cherish her more fondly than ever. Edie was relieved, but she was

by no means satisfied. She knew Harry loved her tenderly, devotedly; but she knew also there was some sort of shadow or secret looming ominously between them.

Another wife, supposed dead? He would have trusted her and told her. Another love? Oh, no: she could trust him; it was impossible.

And so the weeks wore away, and Edie wondered all to no purpose. At last, by dint of constant wondering, she almost wore out the faculty of wonder, and half ceased to think about it any longer.

But she noticed that from day to day the old bright, brilliant Irish character was slowly fading out of Harry's nature, and that in its place there was growing up a settled, noble, not unbecoming earnestness. He seemed perhaps a trifle less striking and attractive than formerly, but a great deal worthier of any true woman's enduring love and admiration.

Evan Meredith noticed the change as well. He and Harry had grown now into real friends. Harry saw and recognized the genuine depth of Evan's nature. Evan had made amends and apologies to Harry for a single passing rudeness or two. Both liked the other better for the momentary rivalry and for the way he had soon forgotten it. "He's a good fellow," Evan said to his father often, "and Edie, with her quiet, simple English nature, has made quite another man of him – given him the ballast and the even steadiness he once wanted."

V

Spring came, and then summer; and with summer, the annual visitation of garden parties. The Trenches at Malbury Manor were going to give a garden party, and Harry and Edie drove across to it. Edie took her husband over in the pony-carriage with the two little greys she loved so well to drive herself: the very prettiest and best-matched ponies, everybody said, in the whole county of Hereford.

As they walked about on the lawn together, they met Edie's father and mother. Somehow, Edie happened to fasten herself accidentally upon her mother, while Harry strolled away alone, and stood talking with something of his old brilliancy to one group or another of loungers independently. For awhile, Edie missed him; he had gone off to look at the conservatories or something. Then, she saw him chatting with Canon Wilmington and his daughters over by one of the refreshment tables, and handing them champagne cup and ices, while he talked with unusual volubility and laughter. Presently he came up to her again, and to her great surprise said, with a yawn, "Edie, this is getting dreadfully slow. I can't stand it any longer. I think I shall just slip away quietly and walk home; you can come after me whenever you like with the ponies! Good-bye till dinner. God bless you, darling!"

It wasn't a usual form of address with him, and Edie vaguely noted it in passing, but thought nothing more about the matter after the first moment. "Good-bye, Harry," she said laughingly. "Perhaps Evan will see me home. Good-bye."

Harry smiled rather sadly. "Evan has ridden over on one of my cobs," he answered quietly, "and so I suppose he'll have to ride back again."

"He's the best fellow that ever lived," Evan said, as Harry turned away with a friendly nod. "Upon my word, I'm quite ashamed of the use I make of your husband's stables, Edie."

"Nonsense, Evan; we're always both delighted when you will use anything of ours as if it were your own."

At six o'clock the ponies were stopping the way, and Edie prepared to drive home alone. She took the bye-road at the back of the grounds in preference to the turnpike, because it wouldn't be so crowded or so dusty for her to drive upon.

They had gone about a mile from the house, and had passed the Beehive, where a group of half-tipsy fellows was loitering upon the road outside the tavern, when a few hundred yards further Edie suddenly checked the greys for no immediately apparent reason.

"Got a stone in his hoof, ma'am?" the groom asked, looking down curiously at the off horse, and preparing to alight for the expected emergency.

"No," Edie answered with a sudden shake of her head. "Look there, William! On the road in front of us! What a disgusting brute. I nearly ran over him."

The groom looked in the direction where Edie pointed with her whip, and saw lying on the ground, straight before the horses' heads, a drunken man, asleep and helpless, with a small pocket flask clasped in his hand, quite empty.

"Pick him up!" Edie said in a tone of disgust. "Carry him over and lay him on the side of the road there, will you, William?"

The man went off to do as he was directed. At that moment, Evan Meredith, coming up from behind on Harry's cob, called out lightly, "Can I help you, Edie? What's the matter? Ho! One of those beastly fellows from the Beehive yonder. Hold a minute, William, you've got a regular job there – more than an armful. Drunken men are heavy to carry. Wait a bit, and I'll come and help you."

Ho rode forward, to the groom's side just as the groom raised in his arms the drunkard's head and exposed to view his down-turned face. Then, with a sudden cry of horror and pity, Evan

Meredith, not faltering for a moment, drove his heel into his horse's flank, and rode off, speechless with conflicting emotions, leaving Edie there alone, face to face with her fallen husband.

It was Harry Lewin.

Apoplexy? Epilepsy? An accident? A sunstroke? No, no. Edie could comfort herself with none of those instantaneous flashes of conjecture, for his face and his breath would alone have told the whole story, even if the empty flask in his drunken hand had not at once confirmed the truth of her first apprehension. She sat down beside him on the green roadside, buried her poor face in her trembling hands, and cried silently, silently, silently, for twenty minutes.

The groom, standing motionless officially beside her, let her tears have free vent, and knew not what to say or do under such extraordinary and unprecedented circumstances.

One thing only Edie thought once or twice in the midst of that awful blinding discovery. Thank God that Evan Meredith had not stopped there to see her misery and degradation. An Englishman might have remained like a fool, with the clumsy notion of assisting her in her trouble, and getting him safely home to Peveril Court for her. Evan, with his quick Welsh perception, had seen in a second that the only possible thing for her own equals to do on such an occasion was to leave her alone with her unspeakable wretchedness.

After a while, she came to a little, by dint of crying and pure exhaustion, and began to think that something must at least be done to hide this terrible disgrace from the prying eyes of all Herefordshire.

She rose mechanically, without a word, and motioning the groom to take the feet, she lifted Harry's head – her own husband's head – that drunken wretch's head – great heavens, which was it? and helped to lay him silently on the floor of the pony carriage. He was helpless and motionless as a baby. Her eyes were dry now, and she hardly even shuddered. She got into the carriage again, covered over the breathing mass of insensible humanity at the bottom with her light woollen wrapper, and drove on in perfect silence till she reached Peveril Court. As she drew up in front of the door, the evening was beginning to close in rapidly. The groom, still silent, jumped from the carriage, and ran up the steps with his usual drilled accuracy to ring the bell. Edie beckoned to him imperiously with her hand to stop and come back to her. He paused, and turned down the steps again to hear what she wished. Edie's lips were dry; she couldn't utter a word: but she pointed mutely to her husband's prostrate form, and the groom understood at once that she wished him to lift Harry out of the carriage. Hastily and furtively they carried him in at the library door – the first room inside the house – and there they laid him out upon the sofa, Edie putting one white finger passionately on her lip to enjoin silence. As soon as that was done, she sat down to the table with marvellous resolution, and wrote out a cheque for twenty pounds from her own cheque-book. Then at last she found speech with difficulty. "William," she said, her dry husky throat almost choking with the effort, "take that, instead of notice. Go away at once – I'll drive you to the station – go to London, and never say a single word of this to any one."

William touched his hat in silence, and walked back slowly to the carriage. Edie, now flushed and feverish, but dry of lips and erect of mien, turned the key haughtily in the door, and stalked out to the greys once more. Silently still she drove to the station, and saw William take the London train. "You shall have a character," she said, very quietly; "write to me for it. But never say a word of this for your life to anybody."

William touched his hat once more, and went away, meaning conscientiously in his own soul to keep this strange and unexpected compact.

Then Edie drove herself back to Peveril Court, feeling that only Evan Meredith knew besides; and she could surely count at least on Evan's honour.

But to-morrow! to-morrow! what could she ever do to-morrow?

Hot and tearless still, she rang the drawing-room bell. "Mr. Lewin will not be home to-night," she said, with no further word of explanation. "I shall not dine. Tell Watkins to bring me a cup of tea in my own bedroom."

The maid brought it, and Edie drank it. It moistened her lips and broke the fever. Then she flung herself passionately upon the bed, and cried, and cried, and cried, wildly, till late in the evening.

Eleven o'clock came. Twelve o'clock. One. She heard them tolling out from the old clock-tower, clanging loudly from the church steeple, clinking and tinkling from all the timepieces in all the rooms of Peveril Court. But still she lay there, and wept, and sobbed, and thought of nothing. She didn't even figure it or picture it to herself; her grief and shame and utter abasement were too profound for mind to fathom. She only felt in a dim, vague, half-unconscious fashion that Harry – the Harry she had loved and worshipped – was gone from her for ever and ever.

In his place, there had come that irrational, speechless, helpless Thing that lay below, breathing heavily in its drunken sleep, down on the library sofa.

VI

By half-past one the lights had long been out in all the rooms, and perfect silence reigned throughout the household. Impelled by a wild desire to see him once more, even though she loathed him, Edie took a bedroom candle in her hand, and stole slowly down the big staircase.

Loathed him? Loved him – ay, loved him even so. Loved him, and the more she loved him, the more utterly loathed him.

If it had been any lesser or lower man, she might have forgiven him. But *him*– Harry – it was too unspeakable.

Creeping along the passage to the library door, she paused and listened. Inside, there was a noise of footsteps, pacing up and down the room hurriedly. He had come to himself, then! He had slept off his drunken helplessness! She paused and listened again to hear further.

Harry was stalking to and fro across the floor with fiery eagerness, sobbing bitterly to himself, and pausing every now and then with a sort of sudden spasmodic hesitation. From time to time she heard him mutter aloud, "She must have seen me! She must have seen me! They will tell her, they will tell her! Oh, God! they will tell her!"

Should she unlock the door, and fling herself wildly into his arms? Her instinct told her to do it, but she faltered and hesitated. A drunkard! a drunkard! Oh no! she could not. The evil genius conquered the good, and she checked the impulse that alone could have saved her.

She crept up again, with heart standing still and failing within her, and flung herself once more upon her own bed.

Two o'clock. Three. Half-past three. A quarter to four.

How long the night seems when you are watching and weeping!

Suddenly, at the quarter-hour just gone, a sharp ring at a bell disturbed her lethargy – a ring two or three times repeated, which waked the butler from his sound slumber.

Edie walked out cautiously to the top of the stairs and listened. The butler stood at the library door and knocked in vain. Edie heard a letter pushed under the door, and in a muffled voice heard Harry saying, "Give that letter to your mistress, Hardy – to-morrow morning."

A vague foreboding of evil overcame her. She stole down the stairs in the blank dark and took the letter without a word from the half-dressed and wondering butler. Then she glided back to her own room, sat down eagerly by the dressing-table, and began to read it.

"Edie,

"This is the third time, and I determined with myself that the third time should be the last one. Once in London; once at Hereford; once now. I can stand it no longer. My father died a drunkard. My mother died a drunkard. I cannot resist the temptation. It is better I should not stop here. I have tried hard, but I am beaten in the struggle. I loved you dearly: I love you still far too much to burden your life by my miserable presence. I have left you everything. Evan will make you happier than I could. Forgive me.

"*Harry.*"

She dropped the letter with a scream, and almost would have fainted.

But even before the faintness could wholly overcome her, another sound rang out sharper and clearer far from the room below her. It brought her back to herself immediately. It was the report of a pistol.

Edie and the butler hurried back in breathless suspense to the library door. It was locked still. Edie took the key from her pocket and turned it quickly. When they entered, the candles on the

mantelpiece were burning brightly, and Harry Lewin's body, shot through the heart, lay in a pool of gurgling blood right across the spattered hearthrug.

THE GOLD WULFRIC

PART I

I

There are only two gold coins of Wulfric of Mercia in existence anywhere. One of them is in the British Museum, and the other one is in my possession.

The most terrible incident in the whole course of my career is intimately connected with my first discovery of that gold Wulfric. It is not too much to say that my entire life has been deeply coloured by it, and I shall make no apology therefore for narrating the story in some little detail. I was stopping down at Lichfield for my summer holiday in July, 1879, when I happened one day accidentally to meet an old ploughman who told me he had got a lot of coins at home that he had ploughed up on what he called the "field of battle," a place I had already recognized as the site of the Mercian kings' wooden palace.

I went home with him at once in high glee, for I have been a collector of old English gold and silver coinage for several years, and I was in hopes that my friendly ploughman's find might contain something good in the way of Anglo-Saxon pennies or shillings, considering the very promising place in which he had unearthed it.

As it turned out, I was not mistaken. The little hoard, concealed within a rude piece of Anglo-Saxon pottery (now No. 127 in case LIX. at the South Kensington Museum), comprised a large number of common Frankish Merovingian coins (I beg Mr. Freeman's pardon for not calling them Merwings), together with two or three Kentish pennies of some rarity from the mints of Ethelbert at Canterbury and Dover. Amongst these minor treasures, however, my eye at once fell upon a single gold piece, obviously imitated from the imperial Roman aureus of the pretender Carausius, which I saw immediately must be an almost unique bit of money of the very greatest numismatic interest. I took it up and examined it carefully. A minute's inspection fully satisfied me that it was indeed a genuine mintage of Wulfric of Mercia, the like of which I had never before to my knowledge set eyes upon.

I immediately offered the old man five pounds down for the whole collection. He closed with the offer forthwith in the most contented fashion, and I bought them and paid for them all upon the spot without further parley.

When I got back to my lodgings that evening I could do nothing but look at my gold Wulfric. I was charmed and delighted at the actual possession of so great a treasure, and was burning to take it up at once to the British Museum to see whether even in the national collection they had got another like it. So being by nature of an enthusiastic and impulsive disposition, I determined to go up to town the very next day, and try to track down the history of my Wulfric. "It'll be a good opportunity," I said to myself, "to kill two birds with one stone. Emily's people haven't gone out of town yet. I can call there in the morning, arrange to go to the theatre with them at night, and then drive at once to the Museum and see how much my find is worth."

Next morning I was off to town by an early train, and before one o'clock I had got to Emily's.

"Why, Harold," she cried, running down to meet me and kiss me in the passage (for she had seen me get out of my hansom from the drawing-room window), "how on earth is it that you're up in town to-day? I thought you were down at Lichfield still with your Oxford reading party."

"So I am," I answered, "officially at Lichfield; but I've come up to-day partly to see you, and partly on a piece of business about a new coin I've just got hold of."

"A coin!" Emily answered, pretending to pout. "Me and a coin! That's how you link us together mentally, is it? I declare, Harold, I shall be getting jealous of those coins of yours some day, I'm certain. You can't even come up to see me for a day, it seems, unless you've got some matter of a coin as well to bring you to London. Moral: never get engaged to a man with a fancy for collecting coins and medals."

"Oh, but this is really such a beauty, Emily," I cried enthusiastically. "Just look at it, now. Isn't it lovely? Do you notice the inscription – 'Wulfric Rex!' I've never yet seen one anywhere else at all like it."

Emily took it in her hands carelessly. "I don't see any points about that coin in particular," she answered in her bantering fashion, "more than about any other old coin that you'd pick up anywhere."

That was all we said then about the matter. Subsequent events engrained the very words of that short conversation into the inmost substance of my brain with indelible fidelity. I shall never forget them to my dying moment.

I stopped about an hour altogether at Emily's, had lunch, and arranged that she and her mother should accompany me that evening to the Lyceum. Then I drove off to the British Museum, and asked for leave to examine the Anglo-Saxon coins of the Mercian period.

The superintendent, who knew me well enough by sight and repute as a responsible amateur collector, readily gave me permission to look at a drawerful of the earliest Mercian gold and silver coinage. I had brought one or two numismatic books with me, and I sat down to have a good look at those delightful cases.

After thoroughly examining the entire series and the documentary evidence, I came to the conclusion that there was just one other gold Wulfric in existence besides the one I kept in my pocket, and that was the beautiful and well-preserved example in the case before me. It was described in the last edition of Sir Theophilus Wraxton's "Northumbrian and Mercian Numismatist" as an absolutely unique gold coin of Wulfric of Mercia, in imitation of the well-known aureus of the false emperor Carausius. I turned to the catalogue to see the price at which it had been purchased by the nation. To my intense surprise I saw it entered at a hundred and fifty pounds.

I was perfectly delighted at my magnificent acquisition.

On comparing the two examples, however, I observed that, though both struck from the same die and apparently at the same mint (to judge by the letter), they differed slightly from one another in two minute accidental particulars. My coin, being of course merely stamped with a hammer and then cut to shape, after the fashion of the time, was rather more closely clipped round the edge than the Museum specimen; and it had also a slight dent on the obverse side, just below the W of Wulfric. In all other respects the two examples were of necessity absolutely identical.

I stood for a long time gazing at the case and examining the two duplicates with the deepest interest, while the Museum keeper (a man of the name of Mactavish, whom I had often seen before on previous visits) walked about within sight, as is the rule on all such occasions, and kept a sharp look-out that I did not attempt to meddle with any of the remaining coins or cases.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, I had not mentioned to the superintendent my own possession of a duplicate Wulfric; nor had I called Mactavish's attention to the fact that I had pulled a coin of my own for purposes of comparison out of my waistcoat pocket. To say the truth, I was inclined to be a little secretive as yet about my gold Wulfric, because until I had found out all that was known about it I did not want anybody else to be told of my discovery.

At last I had fully satisfied all my curiosity, and was just about to return the Museum Wulfric to its little round compartment in the neat case (having already replaced my own duplicate in my waistcoat pocket), when all at once, I can't say how, I gave a sudden start, and dropped the coin with a jerk unexpectedly upon the floor of the museum.

It rolled away out of sight in a second, and I stood appalled in an agony of distress and terror in the midst of the gallery.

Next moment I had hastily called Mactavish to my side, and got him to lock up the open drawer while we two went down on hands and knees and hunted through the length and breadth of the gallery for the lost Wulfric.

It was absolutely hopeless. Plain sailing as the thing seemed, we could see no trace of the missing coin from one end of the room to the other.

At last I leaned in a cold perspiration against the edge of one of the glass cabinets, and gave it up in despair with a sinking heart. "It's no use, Mactavish," I murmured desperately; "the thing's lost, and we shall never find it."

Mactavish looked me quietly in the face. "In that case, sir," he answered firmly, "by the rules of the Museum I must call the superintendent." He put his hand, with no undue violence, but in a strictly official manner, upon my right shoulder. Then he blew a whistle. "I'm sorry to be rude to you, sir," he went on, apologetically, "but by the rules of the Museum I can't take my hand off you till the superintendent gives me leave to release you."

Another keeper answered the whistle. "Send the superintendent," Mactavish said quietly. "A coin missing."

In a minute the superintendent was upon the spot. When Mactavish told him I had dropped the gold Wulfric of Mercia he shook his head very ominously. "This is a bad business, Mr. Tait," he said gloomily. "A unique coin, as you know, and one of the most valuable in the whole of our large Anglo-Saxon collection."

"Is there a mouse-hole anywhere," I cried in agony; "any place where it might have rolled down and got mislaid or concealed for the moment?"

The superintendent went down instantly on his own hands and knees, pulled up every piece of the cocoa-nut matting with minute deliberation, searched the whole place thoroughly from end to end, but found nothing. He spent nearly an hour on that thorough search; meanwhile Mactavish never for a moment relaxed his hold upon me.

At last the superintendent desisted from the search as quite hopeless, and approached me very politely.

"I'm extremely sorry, Mr. Tait," he said in the most courteous possible manner, "but by the rules of the Museum I am absolutely compelled either to search you for the coin or to give you into custody. It may, you know, have got caught somewhere about your person. No doubt you would prefer, of the two, that I should look in all your pockets and the folds of your clothing."

The position was terrible. I could stand it no longer.

"Mr. Harbourne," I said, breaking out once more from head to foot into a cold sweat, "I must tell you the truth. I have brought a duplicate gold Wulfric here to-day to compare with the Museum specimen, and I have got it this very moment in my waistcoat pocket."

The superintendent gazed back at me with a mingled look of incredulity and pity.

"My dear sir," he answered very gently, "this is altogether a most unfortunate business, but I'm afraid I must ask you to let me look at the duplicate you speak of."

I took it, trembling, out of my waistcoat pocket and handed it across to him without a word. The superintendent gazed at it for a moment in silence; then, in a tone of the profoundest commiseration, he said slowly, "Mr. Tait, I grieve to be obliged to contradict you. This is our own specimen of the gold Wulfric!"

The whole Museum whirled round me violently, and before I knew anything more I fainted.

II

When I came to I found myself seated in the superintendent's room, with a policeman standing quietly in the background.

As soon as I had fully recovered consciousness, the superintendent motioned the policeman out of the room for a while, and then gently forced me to swallow a brandy and soda.

"Mr. Tait," he said compassionately, after an awkward pause, "you are a very young man indeed, and, I believe, hitherto of blameless character. Now, I should be very sorry to have to proceed to extremities against you. I know to what lengths, in a moment of weakness, the desire to possess a rare coin will often lead a connoisseur, under stress of exceptional temptation. I have not the slightest doubt in my own mind that you did really accidentally drop this coin; that you went down on your knees honestly intending to find it; that the accident suggested to you the ease with which you might pick it up and proceed to pocket it; that you yielded temporarily to that unfortunate impulse; and that by the time I arrived upon the scene you were already overcome with remorse and horror. I saw as much immediately in your very countenance. Nevertheless, I determined to give you the benefit of the doubt, and I searched over the whole place in the most thorough and conscientious manner... As you know, I found nothing... Mr. Tait, I cannot bear to have to deal harshly with you. I recognize the temptation and the agony of repentance that instantly followed it. Sir, I give you one chance. If you will retract the obviously false story that you just now told me, and confess that the coin I found in your pocket was in fact, as I know it to be, the Museum specimen, I will forthwith dismiss the constable, and will never say another word to any one about the whole matter. I don't want to ruin you, but I can't, of course, be put off with a falsehood. Think the matter carefully over with yourself. Do you or do you not still adhere to that very improbable and incredible story?"

Horried and terror-stricken as I was, I couldn't avoid feeling grateful to the superintendent for the evident kindness with which he was treating me. The tears rose at once into my eyes.

"Mr. Harbourne," I cried passionately, "you are very good, very generous. But you quite mistake the whole position. The story I told you was true, every word of it. I bought that gold Wulfric from a ploughman at Lichfield, and it is not absolutely identical with the Museum specimen which I dropped upon the floor. It is closer clipped round the edges, and it has a distinct dent upon the obverse side, just below the W of Wulfric."

The superintendent paused a second, and scanned my face very closely.

"Have you a knife or a file in your pocket?" he asked in a much sterner and more official tone.

"No," I replied, "neither – neither."

"You are sure?"

"Certain."

"Shall I search you myself, or shall I give you in custody?"

"Search me yourself," I answered confidently.

He put his hand quietly into my left-hand breast pocket, and to my utter horror and dismay drew forth, what I had up to that moment utterly forgotten, a pair of folding pocket nail-scissors, in a leather case, of course with a little file on either side.

My heart stood still within me.

"That is quite sufficient, Mr. Tait," the superintendent went on, severely. "Had you alleged that the Museum coin was smaller than your own imaginary one you might have been able to put in the facts as good evidence. But I see the exact contrary is the case. You have stooped to a disgraceful and unworthy subterfuge. This base deception aggravates your guilt. You have deliberately defaced a valuable specimen in order if possible to destroy its identity."

What could I say in return? I stammered and hesitated.

"Mr. Harbourne," I cried piteously, "the circumstances seem to look terribly against me. But, nevertheless, you are quite mistaken. The missing Wulfric will come to light sooner or later and prove me innocent."

He walked up and down the room once or twice irresolutely, and then he turned round to me with a very fixed and determined aspect which fairly terrified me.

"Mr. Tait," he said, "I am straining every point possible to save you, but you make it very difficult for me by your continued falsehood. I am doing quite wrong in being so lenient to you; I am proposing, in short, to compound a felony. But I cannot bear, without letting you have just one more chance, to give you in charge for a common robbery. I will let you have ten minutes to consider the matter; and I beseech you, I beg of you, I implore you to retract this absurd and despicable lie before it is too late for ever. Just consider that if you refuse I shall have to hand you over to the constable out there, and that the whole truth must come out in court, and must be blazoned forth to the entire world in every newspaper. The policeman is standing here by the door. I will leave you alone with your own thoughts for ten minutes."

As he spoke he walked out gravely, and shut the door solemnly behind him. The clock on the chimney-piece pointed with its hands to twenty minutes past three.

It was an awful dilemma. I hardly knew how to act under it. On the one hand, if I admitted for the moment that I had tried to steal the coin, I could avoid all immediate unpleasant circumstances; and as it would be sure to turn up again in cleaning the Museum, I should be able at last to prove my innocence to Mr. Harbourne's complete satisfaction. But, on the other hand, the lie – for it *was* a lie – stuck in my throat; I could not humble myself to say I had committed a mean and dirty action which I loathed with all the force and energy of my nature. No, no! come what would of it, I must stick by the truth, and trust to that to clear up everything.

But if the superintendent really insisted on giving me in charge, how very awkward to have to telegraph about it to Emily! Fancy saying to the girl you are in love with, "I can't go with you to the theatre this evening, because I have been taken off to gaol on a charge of stealing a valuable coin from the British Museum." It was too terrible!

Yet, after all, I thought to myself, if the worst comes to the worst, Emily will have faith enough in me to know it is ridiculous; and, indeed, the imputation could in any case only be temporary. As soon as the thing gets into court I could bring up the Lichfield ploughman to prove my possession of a gold Wulfric; and I could bring up Emily to prove that I had shown it to her that very morning. How lucky that I had happened to take it out and let her look at it! My case was, happily, as plain as a pikestaff. It was only momentarily that the weight of the evidence seemed so perversely to go against me.

Turning over all these various considerations in my mind with anxious hesitancy, the ten minutes managed to pass away almost before I had thoroughly realized the deep gravity of the situation.

As the clock on the chimney-piece pointed to the half-hour, the door opened once more, and the superintendent entered solemnly. "Well, Mr. Tait," he said in an anxious voice, "have you made up your mind to make a clean breast of it? Do you now admit, after full deliberation, that you have endeavoured to steal and clip the gold Wulfric?"

"No," I answered firmly, "I do not admit it; and I will willingly go before a jury of my countrymen to prove my innocence."

"Then God help you, poor boy," the superintendent cried despondently. "I have done my best to save you, and you will not let me. Policeman, this is your prisoner. I give him in custody on a charge of stealing a gold coin, the property of the trustees of this Museum, valued at a hundred and seventy-five pounds sterling."

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