

Henty George Alfred

# The Curse of Carne's Hold: A Tale of Adventure



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# **G. A. Henty**

## **The Curse of Carne's Hold: A Tale of Adventure**

### **CHAPTER I. HOW THE CURSE BEGAN**

There was nothing about Carne's Hold that would have suggested to the mind of the passing stranger that a curse lay upon it. Houses to which an evil history is attached lie almost uniformly in low and damp situations. They are embedded in trees; their appearance is gloomy and melancholy; the vegetation grows rank around them, the drive is overgrown with weeds and mosses, and lichens cling to the walls. Carne's Hold possessed none of these features. It stood high up on the slope of a hill, looking down into the valley of the Dare, with the pretty village of Carnesford nestling among its orchards, and the bright stream sparkling in the sunshine.

There was nothing either gloomy or forbidding about its architecture, and the family now simply called their abode The Carnes; the term "Hold" that the country people applied to it was indeed a misnomer, for the bombardiers of Essex had battered the walls of the old fortified house, and had called in the aid of fire to finish the work of destruction. The whole of the present structure was therefore subsequent to that date; it had been added to and altered many times, and each of its owners had followed out his own fancies in utter disregard of those of his predecessors; consequently the house represented a medley of diverse styles, and, although doubtless an architectural monstrosity, was picturesque and pleasing to the eye of men ignorant of the canons of Art.

There were no large trees near it, though a clump rose a few hundred yards behind it, and took away the effect of bareness it would otherwise have had. The garden was well kept, and bright with flowers, and it was clear that no blighting influence hung over them, nor, it would be thought, over the girl, who, with a straw hat swinging in one hand, and a basket, moved among them. But the country people for six miles round firmly believed that a curse lay on Carne's Hold, and even among the county families no one would have been willing to give a daughter in marriage to an owner of the place.

Carnesford, now a good-sized village, had once been a tiny hamlet, an appanage of Carne's Hold, but it had long since grown out of leading strings, and though it still regarded The Carnes with something of its old feudal feeling, it now furnished no suit or service unless paid for so doing. Carnesford had grown but little of late years, and had no tendency to increase. There was work enough in the neighbourhood for such of its inhabitants as wanted to work, and in summer a cart went daily with fruit and garden produce to Plymouth, which lay about twenty miles away, the coast road dipping down into the valley, and crossing the bridge over the Dare at Carnesford, and then climbing the hill again to the right of The Hold.

Artists would sometimes stop for a week or two to sketch the quaint old-fashioned houses in the main street, and especially the mill of Hiram Powlett, which seemed to have changed in no way since the days when its owner held it on the tenure of grinding such corn as the owners of The Hold required for the use of themselves and their retainers. Often, too, in the season, a fisherman would descend from the coach as it stopped to change horses at the "Carne's Arms" and would take up his quarters there, for there was rare fishing in the Dare, both in the deep still pool above the mill and for three or four miles higher up, while sea-trout were nowhere to be found plumper and stronger than in the stretch of water between Carnesford and Dareport, two miles away.

Here, where the Dare ran into the sea, was a fishing village as yet untouched, and almost unknown even to wandering tourists, and offering indeed no accommodation whatever to the stranger beyond what he might, perchance, obtain in the fishermen's cottages.

The one drawback to Carnesford, as its visitors declared, was the rain. It certainly rained often, but the villagers scarcely noticed it. It was to the rain, they knew, that they owed the bright green of the valley and the luxuriousness of their garden crops, which always fetched the top price in Plymouth market; and they were so accustomed to the soft mist brought up by the south-west wind from over the sea that they never noticed whether it was raining or not.

Strangers, however, were less patient, and a young man who was standing at the door of the "Carne's Arms," just as the evening was closing in at the end of a day in the beginning of October, 1850, looked gloomily out at the weather. "I do not mind when I am fishing," he muttered to himself; "but when one has once changed into dry clothes one does not want to be a prisoner here every evening. Another day like this, and I shall pack up my traps and get back again on board."

He turned and went back into the house, and, entering the bar, took his seat in the little sanctum behind it; for he had been staying in the house for a week, and was now a privileged personage. It was a snug little room; some logs were blazing on the hearth, for although the weather was not cold, it was damp enough to make a fire pleasant. Three of the landlord's particular cronies were seated there: Hiram Powlett, the miller; and Jacob Carey, the blacksmith; and old Reuben Claphurst, who had been the village clerk until his voice became so thin and uncertain a treble that the vicar was obliged to find a successor for him.

"Sit down, Mr. Gulston," the landlord said, as his guest entered. "Fine day it has been for fishing, and a nice basket you have brought in."

"It's been well enough for fishing, landlord, but I would rather put up with a lighter basket, and have a little pleasanter weather."

The sentiment evidently caused surprise, which Jacob Carey was the first to give expression to.

"You don't say, now, that you call this unpleasant weather, sir? Now I call this about as good weather as we could expect in the first week of October – warm and soft, and in every way seasonable."

"It may be all that," the guest said, as he lit his pipe; "but I own I don't care about having the rain trickling down my neck from breakfast-time to dark."

"Our fishermen about here look on a little rain as good for sport," Hiram Powlett remarked.

"No doubt it is; but I am afraid I am not much of a sportsman. I used to be fond of fishing when I was a lad, and thought I should like to try my hand at it again, but I am afraid I am not as patient as I was. I don't think sea life is a good school for that sort of thing."

"I fancied now that you might be a sailor, Mr. Gulston, though I didn't make so bold as to ask. Somehow or other there was something about your way that made me think you was bred up to the sea. I was not sure about it, for I can't recollect as ever we have had a sailor gentleman staying here for the fishing before."

"No," Mr. Gulston laughed, "I don't think we often take to the rod. Baiting a six-inch hook at the end of a sea-line for a shark is about the extent to which we usually indulge; though sometimes when we are at anchor the youngsters get the lines overboard and catch a few fish. Yes, I am a sailor, and belong, worse luck, to the flagship at Plymouth. By the way," he went on, turning to Jacob Carey, "you said last night, just as you were going out, something about the curse of Carne's Hold. That's the house up upon the hill, isn't it? What is the curse, and who said it?"

"It is nothing sir, it's only foolishness," the landlord said, hastily. "Jacob meant nothing by it."

"It ain't foolishness, John Beaumont, and you know it – and, for that, every one knows it. Foolishness indeed! Here's Reuben Claphurst can tell you if it's nonsense; he knows all about it if any one does."

"I don't think it ought to be spoken of before strangers," Hiram Powlett put in.

"Why not?" the smith asked, sturdily. "There isn't a man on the country-side but knows all about it. There can be no harm in telling what every one knows. Though the Carnes be your landlords, John Beaumont, as long as you pay the rent you ain't beholden to them; and as for you, Hiram, why every one knows as your great-grandfather bought the rights of the mill from them, and your folk have had it ever since. Besides, there ain't nothing but what is true in it, and if the Squire were here himself, he couldn't say no to that."

"Well, well, Jacob, there's something in what you say," the landlord said, in the tone of a man convinced against his will; but, indeed, now that he had done what he considered his duty by making a protest, he had no objection to the story being told. "Maybe you are right; and, though I should not like it said as the affairs of the Carnes were gossiped about here, still, as Mr. Gulston might, now that he has heard about the curse on the family, ask questions and hear all sorts of lies from those as don't know as much about it as we do, and especially as Reuben Claphurst here does, maybe it were better he should get the rights of the story from him."

"That being so," the sailor said, "perhaps you will give us the yarn, Mr. Claphurst, for I own that you have quite excited my curiosity as to this mysterious curse."

The old clerk, who had told the story scores of times, and rather prided himself on his telling, was nothing loth to begin.

"There is something mysterious about it, sir, as you say; so I have always maintained, and so I shall maintain. There be some as will have it as it's a curse on the family for the wickedness of old Sir Edgar. So it be, surelie, but not in the way they mean. Having been one of the officers of the church here for over forty year, and knowing the mind of the old parson, ay, and of him who was before him, I always take my stand on this. It was a curse, sure enough, but not in the way as they wants to make out. It wouldn't do to say as the curse of that Spanish woman had nowt to do with it, seeing as we has authority that curses does sometimes work themselves out; but there ain't no proof to my mind, and to the mind of the parsons as I have served under, that what they call the curse of Carne's Hold ain't a matter of misfortune, and not, as folks about here mostly think, a kind of judgment brought on them by that foreign, heathen woman. Of course, I don't expect other people to see it in that light."

This was in answer to a grunt of dissent on the part of the blacksmith.

"They ain't all had my advantages, and looks at it as their fathers and grandfathers did before them. Anyhow, there is the curse, and a bitter curse it has been for the Carnes, as you will say, sir, when you have heard my story.

"You must know that in the old times the Carnes owned all the land for miles and miles round, and Sir Marmaduke fitted out three ships at his own expense to fight under Howard and Blake against the Spaniards.

"It was in his time the first slice was cut off the property, for he went up to Court, and held his own among the best of them, and made as brave a show, they say, as any of the nobles there. His son took after him, and another slice, though not a big one, went; but it was under Sir Edgar, who came next, that bad times fell upon Carne's Hold. When the troubles began he went out for the King with every man he could raise in the country round, and they say as there was no man struck harder or heavier for King Charles than he did. He might have got off, as many another one did, if he would have given it up when it was clear the cause was lost; but whenever there was a rising anywhere he was off to join it, till at last house and land and all were confiscated, and he had to fly abroad.

"How he lived there no one exactly knows. Some said as he fought with the Spaniards against the Moors; others, and I think they were not far from the mark, that he went out to the Spanish Main, and joined a band of lawless men, and lived a pirate's life there. No one knows about that. I don't think any one, even in those days, did know anything, except that when he came back with King Charles he brought with him a Spanish wife. There were many tales about her. Some said

that she had been a nun, and that he had carried her off from a convent in Spain, but the general belief was – and as there were a good many Devonshire lads who fought with the rovers on the Spanish Main, it's likely that the report was true – that she had been the wife of some Spanish Don, whose ship had been captured by the pirates.

"She was beautiful, there was no doubt about that. Such a beauty, they say, as was never seen before or since in this part. But they say that from the first she had a wild, hunted look about her, as if she had either something on her conscience, or had gone through some terrible time that had well-nigh shaken her reason. She had a baby some months old with her when she arrived, and a nurse was engaged from the village, for strangely enough, as every one thought at the time, Sir Edgar had brought back no attendant either for himself or his lady.

"No sooner was he back, and had got possession of his estates, being in that more lucky than many another who fought for the Crown, than he set to work to rebuild The Hold; living for the time in a few rooms that were patched up and made habitable in the old building. Whatever he had been doing while he was abroad, there was no doubt whatever that he had brought back with him plenty of money, for he had a host of masons and carpenters over from Plymouth, and spared no expense in having things according to his fancy. All this time he had not introduced his wife to the county. Of course, his old neighbours had called and had seen her as well as him, but he had said at once that until the new house was fit to receive visitors he did not wish to enter society, especially as his wife was entirely ignorant of the English tongue.

"Even in those days there were tales brought down to the village by the servants who had been hired from here, that Sir Edgar and his wife did not get on well together. They all agreed that she seemed unhappy, and would sit for hours brooding, seeming to have no care or love for her little boy, which set folk more against her, since it seemed natural that even a heathen woman should care for her child.

"They said, too, there were often fierce quarrels between Sir Edgar and her, but as they always talked in her tongue, no one knew what they were about. When the new house was finished they moved into it, and the ruins of the old Hold were levelled to the ground. People thought then that Sir Edgar would naturally open the house to the county, and, indeed, some entertainments were given, but whether it was that they believed the stories to his disadvantage, or that they shrank from the strange hostess, who, they say, always looked on these occasions stately and cold, and who spoke no word of their language, the country gentry gradually fell away, and Carne's Hold was left pretty much to its owners.

"Soon afterwards another child was born. There were, of course, more servants now, and more state, but Lady Carne was as much alone as ever. Whether she was determined to learn no word of English, or whether he was determined that she should not, she at any rate made no attempt to acquire her husband's language, and many said that it was a shame he did not get her a nurse and a maid who could speak her tongue; for in the days of Charles there were foreigners enough in England, and there could have been no difficulty in procuring her an attendant of her own religion and race.

"They quarrelled more than ever; but the servants were all of opinion that whatever it was about it was her doing more than his. It was her voice to be heard rising in passionate tones, while he said but little, and they all agreed he was polite and courteous in his manner to her. As for her, she would walk for hours by herself up and down the terrace, talking aloud to herself, sometimes wringing her hands and throwing her arms wildly about. At this time there began to be a report among the country round that Lady Carne was out of her mind.

"She was more alone than ever now, for Sir Edgar had taken to making journeys up to town and remaining for weeks at a time, and there was a whisper that he played heavily and unluckily. So things went on until the third child was born, and a fortnight afterwards a servant from The Hold rode through the village late at night on his way for the doctor, and stopped a moment to tell



the news that there was a terrible scene up at The Hold, for that during a momentary absence of the nurse, Lady Carne had stabbed her child to death, and when he came away she was raving wildly, the efforts of Sir Edgar and two of the servants hardly sufficing to hold her.

"After that no one except the inmates of The Hold ever saw its mistress again; the windows in one of the wings were barred, and two strange women were brought down from London and waited and attended on the poor lady. There were but few other servants there, for most of the girls from about here soon left, saying that the screams and cries that rang at times through the house were so terrible that they could not bear them; but, indeed, there was but small occasion for servants, for Sir Edgar was almost always away. One night one of the girls who had stayed on and had been spending the evening with her friends, went home late, and just as she reached the house she saw a white figure appear at one of the barred windows.

"In a moment the figure began crying and screaming, and to the girl's surprise many of her words were English, which she must have picked up without any one knowing it. The girl always declared that her language made her blood run cold, and was full of oaths, such as rough sailor-men use, and which, no doubt, she had picked up on ship-board; and then she poured curses upon the Carnes, her husband, the house, and her descendants. The girl was so panic-stricken that she remained silent till, in a minute or two, two other women appeared at the window, and by main force tore Lady Carne from her hold upon the bars.

"A few days afterwards she died, and it is mostly believed by her own hand, though this was never known. None of the servants, except her own attendants, ever entered the room, and the doctor never opened his lips on the subject. Doubtless he was well paid to keep silence. Anyhow, her death was not Sir Edgar's work, for he was away at the time, and only returned upon the day after her death. So, sir, that is how the curse came to be laid on Carne's Hold."

"It is a terrible story," Mr. Gulston said, when the old clerk ceased; "a terrible story. It is likely enough that the rumour was true, and that he carried her off, after capturing the vessel and killing her husband, and perhaps all the rest of them, and that she had never recovered from the shock. Was there ever any question as to whether they had been married?"

"There was a question about it – a good deal of question; and at Sir Edgar's death the next heir, who was a distant cousin, set up a claim, but the lawyer produced two documents Sir Edgar had given him. One was signed by a Jack Priest, who had, it was said, been one of the crew on board Sir Edgar's ship, certifying that he had duly and lawfully married Sir Edgar Carne and Donna Inez Martos; and there was another from a Spanish priest, belonging to a church at Porto Rico, certifying that he had married the same pair according to Catholic rites, appending a note saying that he did so although the husband was a heretic, being compelled and enforced by armed men, the town being in the possession of a force from two ships that had entered the harbour the night before. As, therefore, the pair had been married according to the rites of both Churches, and the Carnes had powerful friends at Court, the matter dropped, and the title has never since been disputed. As to Sir Edgar himself, he fortunately only lived four years after his wife's death. Had he lived much longer, there would have been no estate left to dispute. As it was, he gambled away half its wide acres."

"And how has the curse worked?" Mr. Gulston asked.

"In the natural way, sir. As I was saying before it has just been in the natural way, and whatever people may say, there is nothing, as I have heard the old parson lay down many a time, to show that that poor creature's wild ravings had aught to do with what followed. The taint in the blood of Sir Edgar's Spanish wife was naturally inherited by her descendants. Her son showed no signs of it, at least as far as I have heard, until he was married and his wife had borne him three sons. Then it burst out. He drew his sword and killed a servant who had given him some imaginary offence, and then, springing at his wife, who had thrown herself upon him, he would have strangled her had not the servants run in and torn him off her. He, too, ended his days in confinement. His sons showed no signs of the fatal taint.

"The eldest married in London, for none of the gentry of Devonshire would have given their daughter in marriage to a Carne. The others entered the army; one was killed in the Low Countries, the youngest obtained the rank of general and married and settled in London. The son of the eldest boy succeeded his father, but died a bachelor. He was a man of strange, moody habits, and many did not hesitate to say that he was as mad as his grandfather had been. He was found dead in his library, with a gun just discharged lying beside him. Whether it had exploded accidentally, or whether he had taken his life, none could say.

"His uncle, the General, came down and took possession, and for a time it seemed as if the curse of the Carnes had died out, and indeed no further tragedies have taken place in the family, but several of its members have been unlike other men, suffering from fits of morose gloom or violent passion. The father of Reginald, the present Squire, was of a bright and jovial character, and during the thirty years that he was possessor of The Hold was so popular in this part of the country that the old stories have been almost forgotten, and it is generally believed that the curse of the Carnes has died out."

"The present owner," Mr. Gulston asked; "what sort of a man is he?"

"I don't know nothing about him," the old man replied; "he is since my time."

"He is about eight-and-twenty," the landlord said. "Some folks say one thing about him, some another; I says nothing. He certainly ain't like his father, who, as he rode through the village, had a word for every one; while the young Squire looks as if he was thinking so much that he didn't even know that the village stood here. The servants of The Hold speak well of him – he seems kind and thoughtful when he is in the humour, but he is often silent and dull, and it is not many men who would be dull with Miss Margaret. She is one of the brightest and highest spirited young ladies in the county. There's no one but has a good word for her. I think the Squire studies harder than is good for him. They say he is always reading, and he doesn't hunt or shoot; and natural enough when a man shuts himself up and takes no exercise to speak of, he gets out of sorts and dull like; anyhow, there's nothing wrong about him. He's just as sane and sensible as you and I."

After waiting for two days longer and finding the wet weather continue, Mr. Gulston packed up his rods and fishing tackle and returned to Plymouth. He had learned little more about the family at The Hold, beyond the fact that Mrs. Mervyn, who inhabited a house standing half a mile further up the valley, was the aunt of Reginald and Margaret Carne, she having been a sister of the late possessor of The Hold. In her youth she had been, people said, the counterpart of her niece, and it was not therefore wonderful that Clithero Mervyn had, in spite of the advice of his friends and the reputation of the Carnes, taken what was considered in the county the hazardous step of making her his wife.

This step he had never repented, for she had, like her brother, been one of the most popular persons in that part of the county, and a universal favourite. The Mervyn estate had years before formed part of that of the Carnes, but had been separated from it in the time of Sir Edgar's grandson, who had been as fond of London life and as keen a gambler as his ancestor.

The day before he started, as he was standing at the door of the hotel, Reginald Carne and his sister had ridden past; they seemed to care no more for the weather than did the people of the village, and were laughing and talking gaily as they passed, and Charles Gulston thought to himself that he had never in all his travels seen a brighter and prettier face than that of the girl.

He thought often of the face that day, but he was not given to romance, and when he had once returned to his active duties as first lieutenant of H.M.S. *Tenebreuse*, he thought no more on the subject until three weeks later his captain handed him a note, saying:

"Here, Gulston, this is more in your line than mine. It's an invitation to a ball, for myself and some of my officers, from Mrs. Mervyn. I have met her twice at the Admiral's, and she is a very charming woman, but as her place is more than twenty miles away and a long distance from a railway station, I certainly do not feel disposed to make the journey. They are, I believe, a good

county family. She has two pretty daughters and a son – a captain in the Borderers, who came into garrison about a month ago; so I have no doubt the soldiers will put in a strong appearance."

"I know the place, sir," Gulston said; "it's not far from Carnesford, the village where I was away fishing the other day, and as I heard a good deal about them I think I will take advantage of the invitation. I dare say Mr. Lucas will be glad to go too, if you can spare him."

"Certainly, any of them you like, Gulston, but don't take any of the midshipmen; you see Mrs. Mervyn has invited my officers, but as the soldiers are likely to show up in strength, I don't suppose she wants too many of us."

"We have an invitation to a ball, doctor," Lieutenant Gulston said after leaving the captain, to their ship's doctor, "for the 20th, at a Mrs. Mervyn's. The captain says we had better not go more than three. Personally I rather want to go. So Hilton of course must remain on board, and Lucas can go. I know you like these things, although you are not a dancing man. As a rule it goes sorely against my conscience taking such a useless person as one of our representatives; but upon the present occasion it does not matter, as there is a son of the house in the Borderers; and, of course, they will put in an appearance in strength."

"A man can make himself very useful at a ball, even if he doesn't dance, Gulston," the doctor said. "Young fellows always think chits of girls are the only section of the female sex who should be thought of. Who is going to look after their mothers, if there are only boys present? The conversation of a sensible man like myself is quite as great a treat to the chaperones as is the pleasure of hopping about the room with you to the girls. The conceit and selfishness of you lads surprise me more and more, there are literally no bounds to them. How far is this place off?"

"It's about twenty miles by road, or about fifteen by train, and eight or nine to drive afterwards. I happen to know about the place, as it's close to the village where I was fishing a fortnight ago."

"Then I think the chaperones will have to do without me, Gulston. I am fond of studying human nature, but if that involves staying up all night and coming back in the morning, the special section of human nature there presented must go unstudied."

"I have been thinking that one can manage without that, doctor. There is a very snug little inn where I was stopping in the village, less than a mile from the house. I propose that we go over in the afternoon, dine at the inn, and dress there. Then we can get a trap to take us up to the Mervyns', and can either walk or drive down again after it is over, or come back by train with the others, according to the hour and how we feel when the ball is over."

"Well, that alters the case, lad, and under those conditions I will be one of the party."

## CHAPTER II. MARGARET CARNE

Ronald Mervyn was, perhaps, the most popular man in his regiment. They were proud of him as one of the most daring steeplechase riders in the service, and as a man who had greatly distinguished himself by a deed of desperate valour in India. He was far and away the best cricketer in the corps; he could sing a capital song, and was an excellent musician and the most pleasant of companions. He was always ready to do his friends a service, and many a newly-joined subaltern who got into a scrape had been helped out by Ronald Mervyn's purse. And yet at times, as even those who most liked and admired him could not but admit, Ronald Mervyn was a queer fellow. His fits were few and far between, but when they occurred he was altogether unlike himself. While they lasted, he would scarce exchange a word with a soul, but shut himself in his room, or, as soon as parade was over, mounted his horse and rode off, not to return probably until late at night.

Mervyn's moods were the subject of many a quiet joke among the young officers of the regiment. Some declared that he must have committed a murder somewhere, and was occasionally troubled in his conscience; while some insisted that Mervyn's strange behaviour was only assumed in order that he might be the more appreciated at other times. Among the two or three officers of the regiment who came from that part of the country, and knew something of the family history of the Mervyns, it was whispered that he had inherited some slight share of the curse of the Carnes. Not that he was mad in the slightest degree – no one would think of saying that of Ronald Mervyn – but he had certainly queer moods. Perhaps the knowledge that there was a taint in his blood affected him, and in course of time he began to brood over it.

When this mood was on him, soon after joining the regiment, he himself had spoken to the doctor about it.

"Do you know, doctor, I am a horrible sufferer from liver complaint?"

"You don't look it, Mervyn," the surgeon replied; "your skin is clear, and your eye is bright. You are always taking exercise, your muscles are as hard as nails. I cannot believe that there is much the matter with you."

"I assure you, doctor, that at times for two or three days I am fit for nothing. I get into such a state that I am not fit to exchange a word with a human being, and could quarrel with my best friend if he spoke to me. I have tried all sorts of medicines, but nothing seems to cure me. I suppose it's liver; I don't know what else it can be. I have spoken about it to the Major, and asked him if at any time he sees me look grumpy, to say a word to the mess, and ask them to leave me to myself; but I do wish you could give me something."

The doctor had recommended courses of various foreign waters, and had given him instructions to bathe his head when he felt it coming on; but nothing had availed. Once a year, or sometimes oftener, Ronald retired for two or three days, and then emerged as well and cheerful as before.

Once, when the attack had been particularly severe, he had again consulted the doctor, this time telling him the history of his family on his mother's side, and asking him frankly whether he thought these periodical attacks had any connection with the family taint. The doctor, who had already heard the story in confidence from one of the two men who knew it, replied:

"Well, Mervyn, I suppose that there's some sort of distant connection between the two things, but I do not think you are likely to be seriously affected. I think you can set your mind at ease on that score. A man of so vigorous a frame as you are, and leading so active and healthy a life, is certainly not a likely subject for insanity. You should dismiss the matter altogether from your mind, old fellow. Many men with a more than usual amount of animal spirits suffer at times from

fits of depression. In your case, perhaps due, to some extent, to your family history, these fits of depression are more severe than usual. Probably the very circumstance that you know this history has something to do with it, for when the depression – which is, as I have said, not uncommon in the case of men with high spirits, and is, in fact, a sort of reaction – comes over you, no doubt the thought of the taint in the blood occurs to you, preys upon your mind, and deeply intensifies your depression."

"That is so, doctor. When I am in that state my one thought is that I am going mad, and I sometimes feel then as if it would be best to blow out my brains and have done with it."

"Don't let such a fancy enter your head, Mervyn," the doctor said, earnestly. "I can assure you that I think you have no chance whatever of becoming insane. The fits of depression are of course troublesome and annoying, but they are few and far apart, and at all other times you are perfectly well and healthy. You should, therefore, regard it as I do – as a sort of reaction, very common among men of your sanguine temperament, and due in a very slight degree to the malady formerly existent in your family. I have watched you closely since you came to the regiment, and, believe me, that I do not say it solely to reassure you when I affirm that it is my full belief and conviction that you are as sane as other men, and it is likely that as you get on in life these fits of depression will altogether disappear. You see both your mother and uncle were perfectly free from any suspicion of a taint, and it is more than probable that it has altogether died out. At any rate the chances are slight indeed of its reappearing in your case."

"Thank you, doctor; you can imagine what a relief your words are to me. I don't worry about it at other times, and indeed feel so thoroughly well, that I could laugh at the idea were it mooted; but during these moods of mine it has tried me horribly. If you don't mind, I will get you to write your opinion down, so that next time the fit seizes me I can read it over, and assure myself that my apprehensions are unfounded."

Certainly no one would associate the idea of insanity with Ronald Mervyn, as upon the day before the ball at his mother's house he sat on the edge of the ante-room table, and laughed and talked with a group of five young officers gathered round him.

"Mind, you fellows must catch the seven o'clock train, or else you will be too late. There will be eight miles to drive; I will have a trap there to meet you, and you won't be there long before the others begin to arrive. We are not fashionable in our part of the county. We shall have enough partners for you to begin to dance by half-past nine, and I can promise you as pretty partners as you can find in any ball-room in England. When you have been quartered here a bit longer you will be ready to admit the truth of the general opinion, that, in point of pretty women, Devonshire can hold its own against any county in England. No, there is no fear whatever of your coming in too great strength. Of course, in Plymouth here, one can overdo the thing, but when one gets beyond the beat of the garrison, men are at a premium. I saw my mother's list; if it had not been for the regiment the female element would have predominated terribly. The army and navy, India and the colonies, to say nothing of all-devouring London, are the scourges of the country; the younger sons take wings to themselves and fly, and the spinsters are left lamenting."

"I think there is more push and go among younger sons than there is in the elders," one of the young officers said.

"They have not got the same responsibilities," Ronald laughed. "It is easy to see you are a younger son, Charley; there's a jaunty air about your forage cap and a swagger in your walk, that would tell any observant person that you are free from all responsibilities, and could, as the Latin grammar says, sing before a robber."

There was a general laugh, for Charley Mansfield was notoriously in a general state of impecuniosity. He, himself, joined merrily in the laugh.

"I can certainly say," he replied, "'He who steals my purse steals trash;' but I don't think he would get even that without a tussle. Still, what I said is true, I think. I know my elder brother is a

fearfully stately personage, who, on the strength of two years' difference of age, and his heirship, takes upon himself periodically to inflict ponderous words of wisdom upon me. I think a lot of them are like that; but after all, as I tell him, it's the younger sons who have made England what it is. We won her battles and furnished her colonies, and have done pretty nearly everything that has been done; while the elder sons have only turned into respectable landowners and prosy magistrates."

"Very well, Charley, the sentiments do you honour," another laughed; "but there, the assembly is sounding. Waiter, bring me a glass of sherry; your sentiments have so impressed me, Charley, that I intend to drink solemnly to the success of second sons."

"You are not on duty, are you, Mervyn?"

"No, I am starting in half an hour to get home. I shall be wanted to aid in the final preparations. Well, I shall see you all to-morrow night. Don't forget the seven o'clock train. I expect we shall keep it up till between three and four. Then you can smoke a cigar, and at five the carriages will be ready to take you to the station to catch the first train back, and you will be here in time for a tub and a change before early parade."

The ball at the Mervyns' was a brilliant one. The house was large, and as Mr. Mervyn had died four years before, and Ronald had since that time been absent on foreign service, it was a long time since an entertainment on a large scale had been given there to the county. A little to the disappointment of many of the young ladies in the neighbourhood, the military and naval officers did not come in uniform. There were two or three girls staying in the house, and one of them in the course of the evening, when she was dancing with Ronald, said:

"We all consider you have taken us in, Captain Mervyn. We made sure that you would all be in uniform. Of course those who live near Plymouth are accustomed to it, but in these parts the red coats are rather a novelty, and we feel we have been defrauded."

"We never go to balls, Miss Blackmoor, in uniform, except when they are regular naval or military balls, either given by our own regiment or some of the regiments in garrison, or by the navy. That is generally the rule though perhaps in some regiments it is not so strictly adhered to as with us."

"Then I consider that it is a fraud upon the public, Captain Mervyn. Gentlemen's dress is so dingy and monotonous that I consider it distinctly the duty of soldiers to give us a little light and colour when they get the chance."

"Very well, Miss Blackmoor, I will bear it in mind; and next time my mother gives a ball, the regiment, if it is within reach, shall come in uniform. By the way, do you know who is the man my cousin is dancing with? There are lots of faces I don't know here; being seven or eight years away makes a difference in a quiet country place."

"That is Mr. Gulston; he is first-lieutenant of the flagship at Plymouth. I know it because he was introduced to me early in the evening, and we danced together, and a capital dancer he is, too."

"He is an uncommonly good-looking fellow," Ronald said.

Margaret Carne seemed to think so, too, as she danced with him two or three times in the course of the evening, and went down to supper on his arm.

Ronald having, as the son of the house, to divide his attentions as much as possible, did not dance with his cousin. Lieutenant Gulston had been accompanied by the third-lieutenant, and by the doctor, who never missed an opportunity of going to a ball because, as he said, it gave him an opportunity of studying character.

"You see," he would argue, "on board a ship one gets only the one side of human nature. Sailors may differ a bit one from another, but they can all be divided into two or three classes – the steady honest fellow who tries to do his work well; the reckless fellow who is ready to do his work, but is up to every sort of mischief and devilment; and the lazy, loafing fellow who neglects his duty whenever he possibly can, and is always shamming sick in order to get off it. Some day or other I shall settle on shore and practise there, and I want to learn something about the people

I shall have to deal with; besides, there's nothing more amusing than looking on at a ball when you have no idea of dancing yourself. It's astonishing what a lot of human nature you see if you do but keep your wits about you."

In the course of the evening he came up to the first-lieutenant.

"Who is that man you have just been talking to, Gulston? I have been watching him for some time. He has not been dancing, but has been standing in corners looking on."

"He is Mr. Carne, doctor; a cousin, or rather a nephew, of our hostess."

"Is he the brother of that pretty girl you have been dancing with?"

The lieutenant nodded.

"Then I am sorry for her," the surgeon said, bluntly.

"Sorry! What for?"

The surgeon answered by another question.

"Do you know anything about the family, Gulston?"

"I have heard something about them. Why?"

"Never mind now," the surgeon said. "I will tell you in the morning; it's hardly a question to discuss here," and he turned away before the lieutenant could ask further.

It was four o'clock before the dancing ceased and the last carriage rolled away. Then the military and naval men, and two or three visitors from Plymouth, gathered in the library, and smoked and talked for an hour, and were then conveyed to the station to catch the early train. The next day, as they were walking up and down the quarter-deck, the first-lieutenant said: "By the way, doctor, what was it you were going to say last night about the Carnes? You said you were sorry for Miss Carne, and asked me if I knew anything about the history of the family."

"Yes, that was it, Gulston; it wasn't the sort of thing to talk about there, especially as I understand the Mervyns are connections of the Carnes. The question I was going to ask you was this: You know their family history; is there any insanity in it?"

The lieutenant stopped suddenly in his walk with an exclamation of surprise and pain.

"What do you mean, Mackenzie? Why do you ask such a question?"

"You have not answered mine. Is there insanity in the blood?"

"There has been," the lieutenant said, reluctantly.

"I felt sure of it. I think you have heard me say my father made a special study of madness; and when I was studying for my profession I have often accompanied him to lunatic asylums, and I devoted a great deal of time to the subject, intending to make it my special branch also. Then the rambling fit seized me and I entered the service; but I have never missed following the subject up whenever I have had an opportunity. I have therefore visited asylums for lunatics whenever such existed, at every port which we have put into since I have been in the service.

"When my eye first fell upon Mr. Carne he was standing behind several other people, watching the dancing, and the expression of his face struck me as soon as my eye fell upon him. I watched him closely all through the evening. He did not dance, and rarely spoke to any one, unless addressed. I watched his face and his hands – hands are, I can tell you, almost as expressive as faces – and I have not the smallest hesitation in saying that the man is mad. It is possible, but not probable, that at ordinary times he may show no signs of it; but at times, and last night was one of those times, the man is mad; nay, more, I should be inclined to think that his madness is of a dangerous type.

"Now that you tell me it is hereditary, I am so far confirmed in my opinion that I should not hesitate, if called upon to do so, to sign a certificate to the effect that, in my opinion, he was so far insane as to need the most careful watching, if not absolute confinement."

The colour had faded from the lieutenant's face as the doctor spoke.

"I am awfully sorry," he said, in a low tone, "and I trust to God, doctor, that you are mistaken. I cannot but think that you are. I was introduced to him by his sister, and he was most civil and

polite, indeed more than civil, for he asked me if I was fond of shooting, and when I said that I was extremely so, he invited me over to his place. He said he did not shoot himself, but that next week his cousin Mervyn and one or two others were coming to him to have two or three days' pheasant shooting, and he would be glad if I would join the party; and, as you may suppose, I gladly accepted the invitation."

"Well," the doctor said, drily, "so far as he is concerned, there is no danger in your doing so, if, as you say, he doesn't shoot. If he did, I should advise you to stay away; and in any case, if you will take the advice which I offer, you won't go. You will send an excuse."

The lieutenant made no answer for a minute or two, but paced the room in silence.

"I won't pretend to misunderstand you, Mackenzie. You mean there's no danger with him, but you think there may be from her. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

The doctor nodded.

"I saw you were taken with her, Gulston; that is why I have spoken to you about her brother."

"You don't think – confound it, man – you can't think," the lieutenant said, angrily, "that there is anything the matter with her?"

"No, I don't think so," the doctor said, gravely. "No, I should say certainly not; but you know in these cases where it is in the blood it sometimes lies dormant for a generation and then breaks out again. I asked somebody casually last night about their father, and he said that he was a capital fellow and most popular in the country; so if it is in the blood it passed over him, and is showing itself again in the son. It may pass over the daughter and reappear in her children. You never know, you see. Do you mind telling me what you know about the family?"

"Not now; not at present. I will at some other time. You have given me a shock, and I must think it over."

The doctor nodded, and commenced to talk about other matters. A minute or two later the lieutenant made some excuse, and turned into the cabin. Dr. Mackenzie shook his head.

"The lad is hard hit," he said, "and I am sorry for him. I hope my warning comes in time; it will do if he isn't a fool, but all young men are fools where women are concerned. I will say for him that he has more sense than most, but I would give a good deal if this had not happened."

Lieutenant Gulston was, indeed, hard hit; he had been much struck with the momentary glance he had obtained of Margaret Carne as he stood on the steps of the "Carne Arms," and the effect had been greatly heightened on the previous day. Lieutenant Gulston had, since the days when he was a middy, indulged in many a flirtation, but he had never before felt serious. He had often laughed at the impressibility of some of his comrades, and had scoffed at the idea of love at first sight, but now that he began to think matters seriously over, the pain the doctor's remarks had given him opened his eyes to the fact that it was a good deal more than a passing fancy.

Thinking it over in every light, he acknowledged the prudent course would be to send some excuse to her brother, with an expression of regret that he found that a matter of duty would prevent his coming over, as he had promised, for the shooting. Then he told himself that after all the doctor might be mistaken, and that it would be only right that he should judge for himself. If there was anything in it, of course he should go no more to The Hold, and no harm would be done. Margaret was certainly very charming; she was more than charming, she was the most lovable woman he had ever met. Still, of course, if there was any chance of her inheriting this dreadful thing, he would see her no more. After all, no more harm could be done in a couple of days than had been done already, and he was not such a fool but that he could draw back in time. And so after changing his mind half-a-dozen times, he resolved to go over for the shooting.

"Ruth, I want to speak to you seriously," Margaret Carne said to her maid two days after the ball. Ruth Powlett was the miller's daughter, and the village gossips had been greatly surprised when, a year before, they heard that she was going up to The Hold to be Miss Carne's own maid; for although the old mill was a small one, and did no more than a local business, Hiram was accounted



to have laid by a snug penny, and as Ruth was his only child, she was generally regarded as the richest heiress in Carnesford. That Hiram should then let her go out into service, even as maid to Miss Carne at The Hold, struck every one with surprise.

It was generally assumed that the step had been taken because Hiram Powlett wanted peace in the house. He had, after the death of his first wife, Ruth's mother, married again, and the general verdict was that he had made a mistake. In the first place, Hiram was a staunch Churchman, and one of the churchwardens at Carnesford; but his wife, who was a Dareport woman – and that alone was in the opinion of Carnesford greatly against her – was a Dissenter, and attended the little chapel at Dareport, and entertained the strongest views as to the prospects and chances of her neighbours in a future state; and in the second place, perhaps in consequence of their religious opinions, she was generally on bad terms with all her neighbours.

But when Hiram married her she had a good figure, the lines of her face had not hardened as they afterwards did, and he had persuaded himself that she would make an excellent mother for Ruth. Indeed, she had not been intentionally unkind, and although she had brought her up strictly, she believed that she had thoroughly done her duty; lamenting only that her efforts had been thwarted by the obstinacy and perverseness of her husband in insisting that the little maid should trot to church by his side, instead of going with her to the chapel at Dareport.

Ruth had grown up a quiet and somewhat serious girl; she had blossomed out into prettiness in the old mill, and folks in the village were divided as to whether she or Lucy Carey, the smith's daughter, was the prettiest girl in Carnesford. Not that there was any other matter in comparison between them, for Lucy was somewhat gay and flirty, and had a dozen avowed admirers; while Ruth had from her childhood made no secret of her preference for George Forester, the son of the little farmer whose land came down to the Dare just where Hiram Powlett's mill stood.

He was some five years older than she was, and had fished her out of the mill-stream when she fell into it, when she was eight years old. From that time he had been her hero. She had been content to follow him about like a dog, to sit by his side for hours while he fished in the deep pool above the mill, under the shadow of the trees, quite content with an occasional word or notice. She took his part heartily when her stepmother denounced him as the idlest and most impertinent boy in the parish; and when, soon after she was fifteen, he one day mentioned that, as a matter of course, she would some day be his wife, she accepted it as a thing of which she had never entertained any doubt whatever.

But Hiram now took the alarm, and one day told her that she was to give up consorting with young Forester.

"You are no longer a child, Ruth, and if you go on meeting young Forester down at the pool, people will be beginning to talk. Of course I know that you are a good girl, and would never for a moment think of taking up with George Forester. Every one knows what sort of young fellow he is; he never does a day's work on the farm, and he is in and out of the 'Carne Arms' at all hours. He associates with the worst lot in the village, and it was only the other day that when the parson tried to speak to him seriously, he answered him in a way that was enough to make one's hair stand on end."

Ruth obeyed her father, and was no more seen about with George Forester; but she believed no tale to his disadvantage, and when at times she met with him accidentally, she told him frankly enough that though her father didn't like her going about with him, she loved him and meant to love him always, whatever they might say. Upon all other points her father's will was law to her, but upon this she was firm; and two years afterwards, when some words young Forester had spoken at a public-house about his daughter came to his ears, Hiram renewed the subject to her, she answered staunchly that unless he gave his consent she would not marry George Forester, but that nothing would make her give him up or go back from her word.

For once Hiram Powlett and his wife were thoroughly in accord. The former seldom spoke upon the subject, but the latter was not so reticent, and every misdeed of young Forester was

severely commented upon by her in Ruth's hearing. Ruth seldom answered, but her father saw that she suffered, and more than once remonstrated with his wife on what he called her cruelty, but found that as usual Hesba was not to be turned from her course.

"No, Hiram Powlett," she said, shutting her lips tightly together; "I must do my duty whether it pleases you or not, and it is my duty to see that Ruth does not throw away her happiness in this world and the next by her headstrong conduct. She does not belong to the fold, but in other respects I will do her credit to say she is a good girl and does her duty as well as can be expected, considering the dulness of the light she has within her; but if she were to marry this reprobate she would be lost body and soul; and whatever you may think of the matter, Hiram Powlett, I will not refrain from trying to open her eyes."

"I am quite as determined as you are, Hesba, that the child shall not marry this young rascal, but I don't think it does any good to be always nagging at her. Women are queer creatures; the more you want them to go one way the more they will go the other."

But though Hiram Powlett did not say much, he worried greatly. Ruth had always been quiet, but she was quieter than ever now, and her cheeks gradually lost their roses, and she looked pale and thin. At last Hiram determined that if he could not obtain peace for her at home he would elsewhere, and hearing that Miss Carne's maid was going to be married he decided to try to get Ruth the place. She would be free from Hesba's tongue there, and would have other things to think about besides her lover, and would moreover have but few opportunities of seeing him. He was shy of approaching the subject to her, and was surprised and pleased to find that when he did, instead of opposing it as he had expected, she almost eagerly embraced the proposal.

In fact, Ruth's pale cheeks and changed appearance were not due, as her father supposed, to unhappiness at her stepmother's talk against George Forester; but because in spite of herself she began to feel that her accusations were not without foundation. Little by little she learnt, from chance words dropped by others, that the light in which her father held George Forester was that generally entertained in the village. She knew that he often quarrelled with his father, and that after one of these altercations he had gone off to Plymouth and enlisted, only to be bought out a few days afterwards.

She knew that he drank, and had taken part in several serious frays that had arisen at the little beershop in the village; and hard as she fought against the conviction, it was steadily making its way, that her lover was wholly unworthy of her. And yet, in spite of his faults, she loved him. Whatever he was with others, he was gentle and pleasant with her, and she felt that were she to give him up his last chance would be gone. So she was glad to get away from the village for a time, and to the surprise of her father, and the furious anger of George Forester, she applied for and obtained the post of Margaret Carne's maid.

She had few opportunities of seeing George Forester now; but what she heard when she went down to the village on Sundays was not encouraging. He drank harder than before, and spent much of his time down at Dareport, and, as some said, was connected with a rough lot there who were fonder of poaching than of fishing.

Margaret Carne was aware of what she considered Ruth's infatuation. She kept herself well informed of the affairs of the village – the greater portion of which belonged to her and her brother – and she learnt from the clergyman, whose right hand she was in the choir and schools, a good deal of the village gossip. She had never spoken to Ruth on the subject during the nine months she had been with her, but now she felt she was bound to do so.

"What is it, Miss Margaret?" Ruth said, quietly, in answer to her remark.

"I don't want to vex you, and you will say it is no business of mine, but I think it is, for you know I like you very much, besides, your belonging to Carnesford. Of course I have heard – every one has heard, you know – about your engagement to young Forester. Now a very painful thing has happened. On the night of the dance our gamekeepers came across a party of poachers in the

woods, as of course you have heard, and had a fight with them, and one of the keepers is so badly hurt that they don't think he will live. He has sworn that the man who stabbed him was George Forester, and my brother, as a magistrate, has just signed a warrant for his arrest.

"Now, Ruth, surely this man is not worthy of you. He bears, I hear, on all sides a very bad character, and I think you will be more than risking your happiness with such a man; I think for your own sake it would be better to give him up. My brother is very incensed against him; he has been out with the other keepers to the place where this fray occurred and he says it was a most cowardly business, for the poachers were eight to three, and he seems to have no doubt whatever that Forester was one of the party, and that they will be able to prove it. I do think, Ruth, you ought to give him up altogether. I am not talking to you as a mistress, you know, but as a friend."

"I think you are right, Miss Margaret," the girl said, in a low voice. "I have been thinking it over in every way. At first I didn't think what they said was true, and then I thought that perhaps I might be able to keep him right, and that if I were to give him up there would be no chance for him. I have tried very hard to see what was my duty, but I think now that I see it, and that I must break off with him. But oh! it is so hard," she added, with a quiver in her voice, "for though I know that I oughtn't to love him, I can't help it."

"I can quite understand that, Ruth," Margaret Carne agreed. "I know if I loved any one I should not give him up merely because everybody spoke ill of him. But, you see, it is different now. It is not merely a suspicion, it is almost absolute proof; and besides, you must know that he spends most of his time in the public-house, and that he never would make you a good husband."

"I have known that a long time," Ruth said, quietly; "but I have hoped always that he might change if I married him. I am afraid I can't hope any longer, and I have been thinking for some time that I should have to give him up. I will tell him so now, if I have an opportunity."

"I don't suppose you will, for my brother says he has not been home since the affair in the wood. If he has, he went away again at once. I expect he has made either for Plymouth or London, for he must know that the police would be after him for his share in this business. I am very sorry for it, Ruth, but I do think you will be happier when you have once made up your mind to break with him. No good could possibly come of your sacrificing yourself."

Ruth said no more on the subject, but went about her work as quietly and orderly as usual, and Margaret Carne was surprised to see how bravely she held up, for she knew that she must be suffering greatly.

## CHAPTER III. TWO QUARRELS

Three days later the shooting party assembled. Several gentlemen came to stay at the house, while Ronald Mervyn and his party, of course, put up at Mervyn Hall. The shooting was very successful, and the party were well pleased with their visit. Reginald Carne was quiet and courteous to his guests, generally accompanying them through the day, though he did not himself carry a gun. After the first day's shooting there was a dinner party at Mervyn Hall, and the following evening there was one at The Hold.

Lieutenant Gulston enjoyed himself more than any one else, though he was one of the least successful of the sportsmen, missing easy shots in a most unaccountable manner, and seeming to take but moderate interest in the shooting. He had, very shortly after arriving at the house, come to the conclusion that the doctor was altogether mistaken, and that Reginald Carne showed no signs whatever of being in any way different from other men. "The doctor is so accustomed to us sailors," he said to himself, "that if a man is quiet and studious he begins to fancy directly there must be something queer about him. That is always the way with doctors who make madness a special study. They suspect every one they come across of being out of their mind. I shouldn't be at all surprised if he doesn't fancy I am cracked myself. The idea is perfectly absurd. I watched Carne closely at dinner, and no one could have been more pleasant and gentlemanly than he was. I expect Mackenzie must have heard a word let drop about this old story, and of course if he did he would set down Carne at once as being insane. Well, thank goodness, that's off my mind; it's been worrying me horribly for the last few days. I have been a fool to trouble myself so about Mackenzie's croakings, but now I will not think anything more about it."

On the following Sunday, as Ruth Powlett was returning from church in the morning, and was passing through the little wood that lay between Carnesford and The Hold, there was a rustle among the trees, and George Forester sprang out suddenly.

"I have been waiting since daybreak to see you, Ruth, but as you came with that old housekeeper I could not speak to you. I have been in Plymouth for the last week. I hear that they are after me for that skirmish with the keepers, so I am going away for a bit, but I couldn't go till I said good-bye to you first, and heard you promise that you would always be faithful to me."

"I will say good-bye, George, and my thoughts and prayers will always be with you, but I cannot promise to be faithful – not in the way you mean."

"What do you mean, Ruth?" he asked, angrily. "Do you mean that after all these years you are going to throw me off?"

Ruth was about to reply, when there was a slight rustling in the bushes.

"There is some one in the path in the wood."

George Forester listened for a moment.

"It's only a rabbit," he said, impatiently. "Never mind that now, but answer my question. Do you dare to tell me that you are going to throw me over?"

"I am not going to throw you off, George," she said, quietly; "but I am going to give you up. I have tried, oh! how hard I have tried, to believe that you would be better some day, but I can't hope so any longer. You have promised again and again that you would give up drinking, but you are always breaking your promise, and now I find that in spite of all I've said, you still hold with those bad men at Dareport, and that you have taken to poaching, and now they are in search of you for being one of those concerned in desperately wounding John Morton. No, George, I have for years withstood even my father. I have loved you in spite of his reproaches and entreaties, but I

feel now that instead of your making me happy I should be utterly miserable if I married you, and I have made a promise to Miss Carne that I would give you up."

"Oh, she has been meddling, has she?" George Forester said with a terrible imprecation; "I will have revenge on her, I swear I will. So it's she who has done the mischief, and made you false to all you promised. Curse you! with your smooth face, and your church-going ways, and your canting lies. You think, now they are hunting me away, you can take up with some one else; but you shan't, I swear, though I swing for it."

And he grasped her suddenly by the throat; but at this moment there was a sound of voices in the road behind them, and dashing Ruth to the ground with a force that stunned her, he sprang into the woods. A minute later the stablemen at The Hold came along the road and found Ruth still lying on the ground.

After a minute's consultation they determined to carry her down to her father's house, as they had no idea what was the best course to pursue to bring her round. Two of them, therefore, lifted and carried her down, while the other hurried on to prepare the miller for their arrival.

"Master Powlett," he said as he entered, "your girl has hurt herself; I expect she slipped on a stone somehow, going up the hill, and came down heavy; anyhow we found her lying there insensible, and my two mates are bringing her down. We saw her two or three hundred yards ahead of us as we came out of the churchyard, so she could not have laid there above a minute or so when we came up."

Ruth was brought in. Mrs. Powlett had not yet returned from Dareport, but a neighbour was soon fetched in by one of the men while another went for the doctor, and in a few minutes Ruth opened her eyes.

"Don't talk, dear," her father said, "lie quiet for a few minutes and you will soon be better; you slipped down in the road, you know, and gave yourself a shake, but it will be all right now."

Ruth closed her eyes again and lay quiet for a short time, then she looked up again and tried to sit up.

"I am better now, father."

"Thank God for that, Ruth. It gave me a turn when I saw you carried in here, I can tell you; but lie still a little time longer, the doctor will be here in a few minutes."

"I don't want him, father."

"Yes, you do, my dear, and anyhow as he has been sent for he must come and see you; you need not trouble about going up to The Hold, it was three of the men there that found you and brought you down; I will send a note by them to Miss Carne telling her you had a bad fall, and that we will keep you here until to-morrow morning. I am sure you will not be fit to walk up that hill again to-day. Anyhow we will wait until the doctor comes and hear what he says."

Ten minutes later the doctor arrived, and after hearing Hiram's account of what had happened, felt Ruth's pulse and then examined her head.

"Ah, here is where you fell," he said; "a good deal of swelling, and it has cut the skin. However, a little bathing with warm water is all that is wanted. There, now, stand up if you can and walk a step or two, and tell me if you feel any pain anywhere else."

"Ah, nowhere except in the shoulder. Move your arm. Ah, that is all right, nothing broken. You will find you are bruised a good deal, I have no doubt. Well, you must keep on the sofa all day, and not do any talking. You have had a severe shake, that's evident, and must take care of yourself for a day or two. You have lost all your colour, and your pulse is unsteady and your heart beating anyhow. You must keep her quite quiet, Hiram. If I were you I would get her up to bed. Of course you must not let her talk, and I don't want any talking going on around her, you understand?"

Hiram did understand, and before Mrs. Powlett returned from chapel, Ruth, with the assistance of the woman who had come in, was in bed.

"I look upon it as a judgment," Mrs. Powlett said upon her return, when she heard the particulars. "If she had been with me at chapel this never would have happened. It's a message to her that no good can come of her sitting under that blind guide, the parson. I hope it will open her eyes, and that she will be led to join the fold."

"I don't think it is likely, Hesba," Hiram said, quietly, "and you will find it hard to persuade her that loose stone I suppose she trod on was dropped special into the road to trip her up in coming from church. Anyhow you can't talk about it to-day; the doctor's orders are that she is to be kept perfectly quiet, that she is not to talk herself, and that there's to be no talking in the room. He says she can have a cup of tea if she can take it, but I doubt at present whether she can take even that; the poor child looks as if she could scarce open her eyes for anything, and no wonder, for the doctor says she must have fallen tremendous heavy."

Mrs. Powlett made the tea and took it upstairs. Any ideas she may have had of improving the occasion, in spite of the doctor's injunctions, vanished when she saw Ruth's white face on the pillow. Noiselessly she placed the little table close to the bed and put the cup upon it. Ruth opened her eyes as she did so.

"Here is some tea, dearie," Hesba said, softly. "I will put it down here, and you can drink it when you feel inclined." Ruth murmured "Thank you," and Hesba stooped over her and kissed her cheek more softly than she had ever done before, and then went quietly out of the room again.

"She looks worse than I thought for, Hiram," she said, as she proceeded to help the little servant they kept to lay the cloth for dinner. "I doubt she's more hurt than the doctor thinks. I could see there were tears on her cheek, and Ruth was never one to cry, not when she was hurt ever so much. Of course, it may be because she is low and weak; still I tell you that I don't like it. Is the doctor coming again?"

"Yes; he said he would look in again this evening."

"I don't like it," Hesba repeated, "and after dinner I will put on my bonnet and go down to the doctor myself and hear what he has got to say about her. Perhaps he will tell me more than he would you; he knows what poor creatures men are. They just get frightened out of what wits they've got, if you let on any one's bad; but I will get it out of him. It frets me to think I wasn't here when she was brought in, instead of having strangers messing about her."

It came into Hiram's mind to retort that her being away at that moment was a special warning against her going to Dareport; but the low, troubled voice in which she spoke, and the furtive passing of her hand across her cheek to brush away a tear, effectually silenced him. It was all so unusual in the case of Hesba, whom, indeed, he had never seen so soft and womanly since the first day she had crossed the threshold of the house, that he was at once touched and alarmed.

"I hope you are wrong, wife; I hope you are wrong," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "I don't think the doctor thought badly of it, but he seemed puzzled like, I thought; but if there's trouble, Hesba, we will bear it together, you and I; it's sent for good, we both know that. We goes the same way, you know, wife, if we don't go by the same road."

The woman made no answer, for at that moment the girl appeared with the dinner. Hesba ate but a few mouthfuls, and then saying sharply that she had no appetite, rose from the table, put on her bonnet and shawl, and, without a word, walked out.

She was away longer than Hiram expected, and in the meantime he had to answer the questions of many of the neighbours, who, having heard from the woman who had been called in of Ruth's accident, came to learn the particulars. When Hesba returned she brought a bundle with her.

"The doctor's coming in an hour," she said. "I didn't get much out of him, except he said it had been a shock to her system, and he was afraid that there might be slight concussion of the brain. He said if that was so we should want some ice to put to her head, and I have been up to The Hold and seen Miss Carne. I had heard Ruth say they always have ice up there, and she has given me

some. She was just coming down to inquire about Ruth, but of course I told her she couldn't talk to nobody. That was the doctor's orders. Has she moved since I have been away?"

Hiram shook his head. "I have been up twice, but she was just lying with her eyes closed."

"Well, I will go and sit up there," Hesba said. "Tell that girl if she makes any noise, out of the house she goes; and the best thing you can do is to take your pipe and sit in that arbour outside, or walk up and down if you can't keep yourself warm; and don't let any one come knocking at the door and worriting her. It will be worse for them if I has to come down."

Hiram Powlett obeyed his wife's parting injunction and kept on guard all the afternoon, being absent from his usual place in church for the first time for years. In the evening there was nothing for him to do in the house, and his wife being upstairs, he followed his usual custom of dropping for half an hour into the snugery of the "Carne Arms."

"Yes, it's true," he said in answer to the questions of his cronies, "Ruth has had a bad fall, and the doctor this afternoon says as she has got a slight concussion of the brain. He said he hoped she would get over it, but he looked serious-like when he came downstairs. It's a bad affair, I expect. But she is in God's hands, and a better girl never stepped, though I says it." There was a murmur of regret and consolation among the three smokers, but they saw that Hiram was too upset for many words, and the conversation turned into other channels for a time, Hiram taking no share in it but smoking silently.

"It's a rum thing," he said, presently, during a pause in the conversation, "that a man don't know really about a woman's nature, not when he has lived with her for years and years. Now there's my wife Hesba, who has got a tongue as sharp as any one in this village." A momentary smile passed round the circle, for the sharpness of Hesba Powlett's tongue was notorious. "It scarce seemed to me, neighbours, as she had got a soft side to her or that she cared more for Ruth than she did for the house-dog. She always did her duty by her, I will say that for her; and a tidier woman and a better housewife there ain't in the country round. But duty is one thing and love is another. Now you would hardly believe it, but I do think that Hesba feels this business as much as I do. You wouldn't have knowed her; she goes about the house with her shoes off as quiet as a mouse, and she speaks that soft and gentle you wouldn't know it was her. Women's queer creatures anyway."

There was a chorus of assent to the proposition, and, in fact, the discovery that Hesba Powlett had a soft side to her nature was astonishing indeed.

For three days Ruth Powlett lay unconscious, and then quiet and good nursing, and the ice on her head, had their effect; and one evening the doctor, on visiting her, said that he thought a change had taken place, and that she was now sleeping naturally. The next morning there was consciousness in her eyes when she opened them, and she looked in surprise at the room darkened by a curtain pinned across the window, and at Hesba, sitting by her bedside, with a huge nightcap on her head.

"What is it, mother, what has happened?"

"You have been ill, Ruth, but thank God you are better now. Don't talk, dear, and don't worry. I have got some beef-tea warming by the fire; the doctor said you were to try and drink a cup when you woke, and then to go off to sleep again."

Ruth looked with a feeble surprise after Hesba as she left the room, missing the sharp, decisive foot-tread. In a minute she returned as noiselessly as she had gone.

"Can you hold the cup yourself, Ruth, or shall I feed you?"

Ruth put out her hand, but it was too weak to hold the cup. She was able, however, slightly to raise her head, and Hesba held the cup to her lips.

"What have you done to your feet, mother?" she asked, as she finished the broth.

"I have left my shoes downstairs, Ruth; the doctor said you were to be kept quiet. Now try to go to sleep, that's a dear."

She stooped and kissed the girl affectionately, and Ruth, to her surprise, felt a tear drop on her cheek. She was wondering over this strange circumstance when she again fell asleep.

In a few days she was about the house again, but she was silent and grave, and did not gain strength as fast as the doctor had hoped for. However, in three weeks' time she was well enough to return to The Hold. Hiram had strongly remonstrated against her doing so, but she seemed to set her mind upon it, urging that she would be better for having something to think about and do than in remaining idle at home; and as the doctor was also of opinion that the change would be rather likely to benefit than to do her harm, Hiram gave way.

The day before she left she said to her father:

"Do you know whether George Forester has been caught, or whether he has got away?"

"He has not been caught, Ruth, but I don't think he has gone away; there is a talk in the village that he has been hiding down at Dareport, and the constable has gone over there several times, but he can't find signs of him. I think he must be mad to stay so near when he knows he is wanted. I can't think what is keeping him."

"I have made up my mind, father, to give him up. You have been right, and I know now he would not make me a good husband; but please don't say anything against him, it is hard enough as it is."

Hiram kissed his daughter.

"Thank God for that news, Ruth. I hoped after that poaching business you would see it in that light, and that he wasn't fit for a mate for one like you. Your mother will be glad, child. She ain't like the same woman as she was, is she?"

"No, indeed, father, I do not seem to know her."

"I don't know as I was ever so knocked over in my life as I was yesterday, Ruth, when your mother came downstairs in her bonnet and shawl, and said, 'I am going to church with you, Hiram.' I didn't open my lips until we were half-way, and then she said as how it had been borne in on her as how her not being here when you was brought in was a judgment on her for being away at Dareport instead of being at church with us; and she said more than that, as how, now she thought over it, she saw as she hadn't done right by me and you all these years, and hoped to make a better wife what time she was left to us. I wasn't sure at church time as it wasn't a dream to see her sitting there beside me, and joining in the hymns, listening attentive to the parson as she has always been running down. She said on the way home she felt just as she did when she was a girl, five-and-twenty years ago, and used to come over here to church, afore she took up with the Methodies."

Ruth kissed her father.

"Then my fall has done good after all," she said. "It makes me happy to know it."

"I shall be happy when I see you quite yourself again, Ruth. Come back to us soon, dear."

"I will, father; in the spring I will come home again for good, I promise you," and so Ruth returned for a time to The Hold.

"I am glad you are back again, Ruth," Miss Carne, who had been down several times to see her, said. "I told you not to hurry yourself, and I would have done without you for another month, but you know I am really very glad to have you back again. Mary managed my hair very well, but I could not talk to her as I do to you."

Ruth had not been many hours in the house before she learnt from her fellow-servants that Mr. Gulston had been over two or three times since the shooting party, and that the servants in general had an opinion that he came over to see Miss Carne.

"It's easy to see that with half an eye," one of the girls said, "and I think Miss Margaret likes him too, and no wonder, for a properer-looking man is not to be seen; but I always thought she would have married her cousin. Every one has thought so for years."

"It's much better she should take the sailor gentleman," one of the elder women said. "I am not saying anything against Mr. Ronald, who is as nice a young gentleman as one would want to



see, but he is her cousin, and I don't hold to marriages among cousins anyhow, and especially in a family like ours."

"I think it is better for us not to talk about it at all," Ruth said, quietly; "I don't think it right and proper, and it will be quite time enough to talk about Miss Margaret's affairs when we know she is engaged."

The others were silent for a minute after Ruth's remark, and then the under-housemaid, who had been an old playmate of Ruth's, said:

"You never have ideas like other people, Ruth Powlett. It is a funny thing that we can't say a word about people in the house without being snapped up."

"Ruth is right," the other said, "and your tongue runs too fast, Jane. As Ruth says, it will be quite time enough to talk when Miss Margaret is engaged; till then the least said the better."

In truth, Lieutenant Gulston had been several times at The Hold, and his friend the doctor, seeing his admonition had been altogether thrown away, avoided the subject, but from his gravity of manner showed that he had not forgotten it; and he shook his head sadly when one afternoon the lieutenant had obtained leave until the following day. "I wish I had never spoken. Had I not been an old fool I should have known well enough that he was fairly taken by her. We have sailed together for twelve years, and now there is an end to our friendship. I hope that will be all, and that he will not have reason to be sorry he did not take my advice and drop it in time. Of course she may have escaped and I think that she has done so; but it's a terrible risk – terrible. I would give a year's pay that it shouldn't have happened."

An hour before Lieutenant Gulston left his ship, Ronald Mervyn had started for The Hold. A word that had been said by a young officer of the flagship who was dining at mess had caught his ears. It was concerning his first-lieutenant.

"He's got quite a fishing mania at present, and twice a week he goes off for the day to some place twenty miles away – Carnesford, I think it is. He does not seem to have much luck; anyhow, he never brings any fish home. He is an awfully good fellow, Gulston; the best first-lieutenant I ever sailed with by a long way."

What Ronald Mervyn heard was not pleasant to him. He had noticed the attentions Gulston had paid to Margaret Carne at the ball, and had been by no means pleased at meeting him, installed at The Hold with the shooting party, and the thought that he had been twice a week over in that neighbourhood caused an angry surprise. The next morning, therefore, he telegraphed home for a horse to meet him at the station, and started as soon as lunch was over. He stayed half an hour at home, for his house lay on the road between the station and Carne's Hold. The answer he received from his sister to a question he put did not add to his good temper.

Oh, yes. Mr. Gulston had called a day or two after he had been to the shooting party, and they had heard he had been at The Hold several times since.

When he arrived there, Ronald found that Margaret and her brother were both in the drawing-room, and he stood chatting with them there for some time, or rather chatting with Margaret, for Reginald was dull and moody. At last the latter sauntered away.

"What's the matter with you, sir?" Margaret said to her cousin. "You don't seem to be quite yourself; is it the weather? Reginald is duller and more silent than usual, he has hardly spoken a word to-day."

"No, it's not the weather," he replied, sharply. "I want to ask you a question, Margaret."

"Well, if you ask it civilly," the girl replied, "I will answer it, but certainly not otherwise."

"I hear that that sailor fellow has been coming here several times. What does it mean?"

Margaret Carne threw back her head haughtily. "What do you mean, Ronald, by speaking in that tone; are you out of your mind?"

"Not more than the family in general," he replied, grimly; "but you have not answered my question."

"I have not asked Lieutenant Gulston what he comes here for," she said, coldly; "and, besides, I do not recognise your right to ask me such a question."

"Not recognise my right?" he repeated, passionately. "I should have thought that a man had every right to ask such a question of the woman he is going to marry."

"Going to marry?" she repeated, scornfully. "At any rate this is the first I have heard of it."

"It has always been a settled thing," he said, "and you know it as well as I do. You promised me ten years ago that you would be my wife some day."

"Ten years ago I was a child. Ronald, how can you talk like this! You know we have always been as brother and sister together. I have never thought of anything else of late. You have been home four or five months, anyhow, and you have had plenty of time to speak if you wanted to. You never said a word to lead me to believe that you thought of me in any other way than as a cousin."

"I thought we understood each other, Margaret."

"I thought so too," the girl replied, "but not in the same way. Oh, Ronald, don't say this; we have always been such friends, and perhaps years ago I might have thought it would be something more; but since then I have grown up and grown wiser, and even if I had loved you in the way you speak of, I would not have married you, because I am sure it would be bad for us both. We have both that terrible curse in our blood, and if there was not another man in the world I would not marry you."

"I don't believe you would have said so a month ago," Ronald Mervyn said, looking darkly at her. "This Gulston has come between us, that's what it is, and you cannot deny it."

"You are not behaving like a gentleman, Ronald," the girl said, quietly. "You have no right to say such things."

"I have a right to say anything," he burst out. "You have fooled me and spoilt my life, but you shall regret it. You think after all these years I am to be thrown by like an old glove. No, by Heaven; you may throw me over, but I swear you shall never marry this sailor or any one else, whatever I do to prevent it. You say I have the curse of the Carnes in my blood. You are right, and you shall have cause to regret it."

He leapt from the window, which Margaret had thrown open a short time before, for the fire had overheated the room, ran down to the stables, leapt on his horse, and rode off at a furious pace. Neither he nor Margaret had noticed that a moment before a man passed along the walk close under the window. It was Lieutenant Gulston. He paused for a moment as he heard his name uttered in angry tones, opened the hall door without ceremony, and hurried towards that of the drawing-room. Reginald Carne was standing close to it, and it flashed across Gulston's mind that he had been listening. He turned his head at the sailor's quick step. "Don't go in there just at present, Gulston, I fancy Margaret is having a quarrel with her cousin. They are quiet now, we had best leave them alone."

"He was using very strong language," the sailor said, hotly. "I caught a word or two as I passed the windows."

"It's a family failing. I fancy he has gone now. I will go in and see. I think it were best for you to walk off for a few minutes, and then come back again. People may quarrel with their relatives, you know, but they don't often care for other people to be behind the scenes."

"No, you are quite right," Gulston answered; "the fact is, for the moment I was fairly frightened by the violence of his tone, and really feared that he was going to do something violent. It was foolish, of course, and I really beg your pardon. Yes, what you say is quite right. If you will allow me I will have the horse put in the trap again. I got out at the gate and walked across the garden, telling the man to take the horse straight round to the stables; but I think I had better go and come again another day. After such a scene as she has gone through Miss Carne will not care about having a stranger here."

"No, I don't think that would be best," Reginald Carne said. "She would wonder why you did not come, and would, likely enough, hear from her maid that you had been and gone away again, and might guess you had heard something of the talking in there. No, I think you had better do as I said – go away, and come again in a few minutes."

The lieutenant accordingly went out and walked about the shrubbery for a short time, and then returned. Miss Carne did not appear at dinner, but sent down a message to say that she had so bad a headache she would not be able to appear downstairs that evening.

Reginald Carne did not play the part of host so well as usual. At times he was gloomy and abstracted, and then he roused himself and talked rapidly. Lieutenant Gulston thought that he was seriously discomposed at the quarrel between his sister and his cousin; and he determined at any rate not to take the present occasion to carry out the intention he had formed of telling Reginald Carne that he was in love with his sister, and hoped he would have no objection to his telling her so, as he had a good income besides his pay as first-lieutenant. When the men had been sitting silently for some time after wine was put on the table, he said:

"I think, Carne, I will not stop here to-night. Your sister is evidently quite upset with this affair, and no wonder. I shall feel myself horribly *de trop*, and would rather come again some other time if you will let me. If you will let your man put a horse in the trap I shall catch the ten o'clock train comfortably."

"Perhaps that would be best, Gulston. I am not a very lively companion at the best of times, and family quarrels are unpleasant enough for a stranger."

A few minutes later Lieutenant Gulston was on his way to the station. He had much to think about on his way home. In one respect he had every reason to be well satisfied with what he had heard, as it had left no doubt whatever in his mind that Margaret Carne had refused the offer of her cousin, and that the latter had believed that he had been refused because she loved him – Charlie Gulston. Of course she had not said so; still she could not have denied it, or her cousin's wrath would not have been turned against him.

Then he was sorry that such a quarrel had taken place, as it would probably lead to a breach between the two families. He knew Margaret was very fond of her aunt and the girls. Then the violence with which Ronald Mervyn had spoken caused him a deal of uneasiness. Was it possible that a sane man would have gone on like that? Was it possible that the curse of the Carnes was still working? This was an unpleasant thought; but that which followed was still more anxious.

Certainly, from the tone of his voice, he had believed that Ronald Mervyn was on the point of using violence to Margaret, and if the man was really not altogether right in his head there was no saying what he might do. As for himself, he laughed at the threats that had been uttered against him. Mad or sane, he had not the slightest fear of Ronald Mervyn. But if, as was likely enough, this mad-brained fellow tried to fix a quarrel upon him in some public way, it might be horribly unpleasant – so unpleasant that he did not care to think of it. He consoled himself by hoping that when Mervyn's first burst of passion had calmed down, he might look at the matter in a more reasonable light, and see that at any rate he could not bring about a public quarrel without Margaret's name being in some way drawn into it; that her cousin could not wish, however angry he might be with her.

It was an unpleasant business. If Margaret accepted him, he would take her away from all these associations. It was marvellous that she was so bright and cheerful, knowing this horrible story about that Spanish woman, and that there was a taint in the blood. That brother of hers, too, was enough to keep the story always in her mind. The doctor was certainly right about him. Of course he wasn't mad, but there was something strange about him, and at times you caught him looking at you in an unpleasant sort of way.

"He is always very civil," the lieutenant muttered to himself; "in fact, wonderfully civil and hospitable, and all that. Still I never feel quite at my ease with him. If I had been a rich man, and they had been hard up, I should have certainly suspected there was a design in his invitations,

and that he wanted me to marry Margaret; but, of course, that is absurd. He can't tell that I have a penny beyond my pay; and a girl like Margaret might marry any one she liked, at any rate out of Devonshire. Perhaps he may not have liked the idea of her marrying this cousin of hers; and no doubt he is right there, and seeing, as I daresay he did see, that I was taken with Margaret, he thought it better to give me a chance than to let her marry Mervyn.

"I don't care a snap whether all her relations are mad or not. I know that she is as free from the taint as I am; but it can't be wholesome for a girl to live in such an atmosphere, and the next time I go over I will put the question I meant to put this evening, and if she says yes, I will very soon get her out of it all." And then the lieutenant indulged in visions of pretty houses, with bright gardens looking over the sea, and finally concluded that a little place near Ryde or Cowes would be in every way best and most convenient, as being handy to Portsmouth, and far removed from Devonshire and its associations. "I hope to get my step in about a year; then I will go on half-pay. I have capital interest, and I daresay my cousin in the Admiralty will be able to get me a dockyard appointment of some sort at Portsmouth; if not, I shall, of course, give it up. I am not going to knock about the world after I am married."

This train of thought occupied him until almost mechanically he left the train, walked down to the water, hailed a boat, and was taken alongside his ship.

## **CHAPTER IV. A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY**

Margaret Carne's message as to her inability to come down to dinner was scarcely a veracious one. She was not given to headaches, and had not, so far as she could remember, been once laid up with them, but after what had been said, she did not feel equal to going downstairs and facing Charlie Gulston. She had never quite admitted to herself that she loved the young sailor who had for the last few weeks been so much at the house, and of whose reason for so coming she had but little doubt; but now, as she sat alone in the room, she knew well enough the answer she should give to his question, when it came.

At present, however, the discovery of her own feelings caused alarm rather than pleasure. There had been no signs of fear in her face when her cousin raged and threatened, but she did not believe that the threats were empty ones; he had often frightened her when she was a child by furious bursts of passion, and although it was many years now since she had seen him thus, she felt sure that he would do as he had threatened, and was likely enough to take any violent step that might occur to him in his passion, to carry out his threat.

Although she had put a bold front on it, Margaret felt at heart that his reproach was not altogether unjustified. There had been a boy and girl understanding between them, and although it had not been formally ratified of late years, its existence was tacitly recognised in both families, and until a few months before she herself had considered that in the natural course of events she should some day be Ronald Mervyn's wife.

Had he reproached her gently, she would have frankly admitted this, and would have asked him to forgive her for changing her mind now that years had wrought a change in her feelings; but the harshness and suddenness of his attack had roused her pride, and driven her to take up the ground that there was no formal engagement between them, and that as he had not renewed the subject for years she was at perfect liberty to consider herself free. She had spoken but the truth in saying that their near relationship was in her eyes a bar to their marriage. Of late years she had thought much more than she had when a girl over the history of the family and the curse of the Carnes, and although she had tried her best to prevent herself from brooding over the idea, she could not disguise from herself that her brother was at times strange and unlike other men, and her recollections of Ronald's outbursts of temper, as a boy, induced the suspicion that he, too, had not altogether escaped the fatal taint. Still, had not Charlie Gulston come across her path, it was probable that she would have drifted on as before, and would, when the time came have accepted Ronald Mervyn as her husband.

The next morning, when Ruth Powlett went as usual to call her mistress, she started with surprise as she opened the door, for the blind was already up and the window open. Closing the door behind her, she went in and placed the jug of hot water she carried by the washstand, and then turned round to arouse her mistress. As she did so a low cry burst from her lips, and she grasped a chair for support. The white linen was stained with blood, and Margaret lay there, white and still, with her eyes wide open and fixed in death. The clothes were drawn a short way down in order that the murderer might strike at her heart. Scarce had she taken this in, when Ruth felt the room swim round, her feet failed her, and she fell insensible on the ground.

In a few minutes the cold air streaming in through the open window aroused her. Feebly she recovered her feet, and, supporting herself against the wall, staggered towards the door. As she did so her eye fell on an object lying by the side of the bed. She stopped at once with another gasping cry, pressed her hand on her forehead, and stood as if fascinated, with her eyes fixed upon it. Then

slowly and reluctantly, as if forced to act against her will, she moved towards the bed, stooped and picked up the object she had seen.

She had recognised it at once. It was a large knife with a spring blade, and a silver plate let into the buckhorn handle, with a name, G. Forester, engraved upon it. It was a knife she herself had given to her lover a year before. It was open and stained with blood. For a minute or two she stood gazing at it in blank horror. What should she do, what should she do? She thought of the boy who had been her playmate, of the man she had loved, and whom, though she had cast him off, she had never quite ceased to love. She thought of his father, the old man who had always been kind to her. If she left this silent witness where she had found it there would be no doubt what would come of it. For some minutes she stood irresolute.

"God forgive me," she said at last. "I cannot do it." She closed the knife, put it into her dress, and then turned round again. She dared not look at the bed now, for she felt herself in some way an accomplice in her mistress's murder, and she made her way to the door, opened it, and then hurried downstairs into the kitchen, where the servants, who were just sitting down to breakfast, rose with a cry as she entered.

"What is it, Ruth? What's the matter? Have you seen anything?"

Ruth's lips moved but no sound came from them, her face was ghastly white, and her eyes full of horror.

"What is it, child?" the old cook said, advancing and touching her, while the others shrank back, frightened at her aspect.

"Miss Margaret is dead," came at last slowly from her lips. "She has been murdered in the night," and she reeled and would have fallen again had not the old servant caught her in her arms and placed her in a chair. A cry of horror and surprise had broken from the servants, then came a hubbub of talk.

"It can't be true." "It is impossible." "Ruth must have fancied it." "It never could be," and then they looked in each other's face as if seeking a confirmation of their words.

"I must go up and see," the cook said. "Susan and Harriet, you come along with me; the others see to Ruth. Sprinkle some water on her face. She must have been dreaming."

Affecting a confidence which she did not feel, the cook, followed timidly by the two frightened girls, went upstairs. She stood for a moment hesitating before she opened the door; then she entered the room, the two girls not daring to follow her. She went a step into the room, then gave a little cry and clasped her hands.

"It is true," she cried; "Miss Margaret has been murdered!"

Then the pent-up fears of the girls found vent in loud screams, which were echoed from the group of servants who had clustered at the foot of the stairs in expectation of what was to come.

A moment later the door of Reginald Carne's room opened, and he came out partly dressed.

"What is the matter? What is all this hubbub about?"

"Miss Margaret is murdered, sir," the two girls burst out, pausing for an instant in their outcry.

"Murdered!" he repeated, in low tones. "You are mad; impossible!" and pushing past them he ran into Margaret's room.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, in a long, low note of pain and horror. "Good God, who can have done this?" and he leaned against the wall and covered his face with his hands. The old servant had advanced to the bed, and laid a hand on the dead girl. She now touched her master.

"You had better go away now, Mr. Reginald, for you can do nothing. She is cold, and must have been dead hours. We must lock the door up till the police come."

So saying, she gently led him from the room, closed the door and locked it. Reginald Carne staggered back to his room.

"Poor master," the old servant said, looking after him, "this will be a terrible blow for him; he and Miss Margery have always been together. There's no saying what may come of it," and she shook her head gravely; then she roused herself, and turned sharply on the girls.

"Hold your noise, you foolish things; what good will that do? Get downstairs at once."

Driving them before her, she went down to the kitchen, and out of the door leading to the yard, where one of the maids was at the moment telling the grooms what had happened.

"Joe, get on a horse and ride off and fetch Dr. Arrowsmith. He can't be of any good, but he ought to come. Send up Job Harpur, the constable, and then ride on to Mr. Volkes; he is the nearest magistrate, and will know what to do."

Then she went back into the kitchen.

"She has come to, Mrs. Wilson; but she don't seem to know what she is doing."

"No wonder," the cook said, "after such a shock as she has had; and she only just getting well after her illness. Two of you run upstairs and get a mattress off her bed and two pillows, and lay them down in the servants' hall; then take her in there and put her on them. Jane, get some brandy out of the cellaret and bring it here; a spoonful of that will do her good."

A little brandy and water was mixed, and the cook poured it between Ruth's lips, for she did not seem to know what was said to her, and remained still and impassive, with short sobs bursting at times from her lips. Then two servants half lifted her, and took her into the servants' hall, and laid her down on the mattress. All were sobbing and crying, for Margaret Carne had been greatly loved by those around her.

In half an hour the doctor arrived.

"Is it possible the news is true?" he asked as he leapt from his gig; the faces of those around were sufficient answer. "Good Heavens, what a terrible business! Tell Mr. Carne I am here."

Reginald Carne soon came down. He was evidently terribly shaken. He held out his hand in silence to the doctor.

"What does it all mean?" the latter said, huskily. "It seems too horrible to be true. Can it be that your sister, whom I have known since she was a child, is dead? Murdered, too! It seems impossible."

"It does seem impossible, doctor; but it is true. I have seen her myself," and he shuddered. "She has been stabbed to the heart."

The doctor wiped his eyes.

"Well, I must go up and see her," he said. "Poor child, poor child. No, you need not ring. I will go up by myself."

Dr. Arrowsmith had attended the family for many years, and knew perfectly well which was Margaret's room. The old cook was standing outside the door of the drawing-room.

"Here is the key, sir. I thought it better to lock the door till you came."

"Quite right," the doctor replied. "Don't let any one up till Mr. Volkes comes. The servant said he was going for him. Ah, here is Harpur. That is right, Harpur; you had better come up with me, but I shouldn't touch anything if I were you till Mr. Volkes comes; besides, we shall be having the Chief Constable over here presently, and it is better to leave everything as it is." They entered the room together.

"Dear, dear, to think of it now," the constable murmured, standing awe-struck at the door, for the course of his duty was for the most part simple, and he had never before been face to face with a tragedy like this.

The doctor moved silently to the bed, and leant over the dead girl.

"Stabbed to the heart," he murmured; "death must have been instantaneous." Then he touched her arm and tried to lift it.

"She has been dead hours," he said to the constable, "six or seven hours, I should say. Let us look round. The window is open, you see. Can the murderer have entered there?" He looked

out. The wall was covered with ivy, and a massive stem grew close to the window. "Yes," he went on, "an active man could have climbed that. See, there are some leaves on the ground. I think, Harpur, your best plan will be to go down and take your station there and see no one comes along or disturbs anything. See, this jewel-box on the table has been broken open and the contents are gone, and I do not see her watch anywhere. Well, that is enough to do at present; we will lock this room up again until Mr. Volkes comes."

When they came downstairs, the cook again came out.

"Please, sir, will you come in here? Ruth Powlett, Miss Margaret's maid, seems very bad; it was she who first found it out, and it's naturally given her a terrible shock. She came down looking like a mad woman, then she fainted off, and she doesn't seem to have any sort of consciousness yet."

"Ruth Powlett! why, I have been attending her for the last three weeks. Yes, such a shock may be very serious in her case," and the doctor went in.

"Have you any sal volatile in the house?" he asked, after he had felt her pulse.

"There's some in the medicine chest, I think, sir, but I will soon see."

She went out and presently returned with a bottle. The doctor poured a teaspoonful into a glass and added a little water. Then he lifted Ruth's head, and forced it between her lips. She gasped once or twice, and then slightly opened her eyes.

"That is right, Ruth," the doctor said, cheeringly, "try and rouse yourself, child. You remember me, don't you?" Ruth opened her eyes and looked up.

"That's right, child, I mustn't have you on my hands again, you know." Ruth looked round with a puzzled air, then a sharp look of pain crossed her face.

"I know, Ruth," said the doctor, soothingly; "it is terrible for every one, but least terrible for your poor young mistress; she passed away painlessly, and went at once from life into death. Every one loved her, you know; it may be that God has spared her much unhappiness."

Ruth burst into a paroxysm of crying; the doctor nodded to the old servant.

"That's what I wanted," he whispered, "she will be better after this. Get a cup of hot tea for her, or beef-tea will be better still if you have any, make her drink it and then leave her for a time. I will see her again presently."

Immediately the doctor left him, Reginald Carne wrote a telegram to the Chief Constable of the county, and despatched a servant with orders to gallop as fast as he could to the station and send it off.

Mr. Volkes, the magistrate, arrived half an hour later, terribly shocked by the news he had heard. He at once set about making inquiries, and heard what the doctor and constable had to say. No one else had been in the room except the old cook, Mr. Carne, and the poor girl's own maid.

"It would be useless for you to question the girl to-day, Volkes. She is utterly prostrate with the shock, but I have no doubt she will be able to give her evidence at the inquest. So far as I can see there does not seem to be the slightest clue. Apparently some villain who knows something about the house has climbed through the window, stabbed her, and made off with her jewellery."

"It is a hideous business," the magistrate said; "there has not been such a startling crime committed in the county in all my experience. And to think that Margaret Carne should be the victim, a girl every one liked; it is terrible, terrible. What's your opinion, doctor? Some wandering tramp, I suppose?"

"I suppose so. Certainly it can be none of the neighbours. In the first place, as you say, every one liked her and in the second, a crime of that sort is quite out of the way of our quiet Devonshire people. It must have been some stranger, that's evident. Yet on the other hand it is singular that the man should have got into her room. I don't suppose there has been a window fastened or a door locked on the ground floor for years; the idea of a burglary never occurs to any one here. By the way, the coroner ought to be informed at once. I will speak to Carne about it; if we do it this morning he will have time to send over this evening and summon a jury for to-morrow; the



sooner it is over the better. Directly the Chief Constable arrives he will no doubt send round orders everywhere for tramps and suspicious persons to be arrested. Plymouth is the place where they are most likely to get some clue; in the first place it's the largest town in this part, and in the second there are sure to be low shops where a man could dispose of valuables."

In the afternoon, Captain Hendricks, the Chief Constable, arrived, and took the matter in hand. In the first place he had a long private conversation with Job Harpur, who had been steadily keeping watch in the garden beneath the window, leaving him with strict orders to let no one approach the spot.

He then, with a sergeant who had arrived with him, made a thorough search of the bedroom. After this he examined every one who knew anything about the matter, with the exception of Ruth Powlett, for whom the doctor said absolute quiet was necessary, as to all they knew about it. Then he obtained a minute description of the missing watch and jewels, and telegraphed it to Plymouth and Exeter. Having done this he went out into the garden again, and there a close search was made on the grass and borders for the marks of footsteps. When all this was done he had a long private conversation with Reginald Carne.

The news of Margaret Carne's murder created an excitement in Carnesford, such as had never been equalled since the day when Lady Carne murdered her child and the curse of Carne's Hold began its work. There was not a soul in the valley but knew her personally, for Margaret had taken great interest in village matters, had seen that soups and jellies were sent down from The Hold to those who were sick, had begged many a man off his rent when laid up or out of work, and had many pensioners who received weekly gifts of money, tea, or other little luxuries. She gave prizes in the school; helped the parson with his choir; and scarcely a day passed without her figure being seen in the streets of Carnesford. That she could be murdered seemed incredible, and when the news first arrived it was received with absolute unbelief. When such confirmation was received that doubt was no longer possible, all work in Carnesford was suspended. Women stood at their doors and talked to their neighbours and wept freely. Men gathered in knots and talked it over and uttered threats of what they would do if they could but lay hands on the murderer. Boys and girls walked up the hill and stood at the edge of the wood, talking in whispers and gazing on the house as if it presented some new and mysterious attraction. Later in the day two or three constables arrived, and asked many questions as to whether any one had heard any one passing through the street between one and three in the morning; but Carnesford had slept soundly, and no one was found who had been awake between those hours.

The little conclave in the sanctum at the "Carne's Arms" met half an hour earlier than usual. They found on their arrival there a stranger chatting with the landlord, who introduced him to them as Mr. Rentford, a detective officer from Plymouth.

"A sad affair, gentlemen, a sad affair," Mr. Rentford said, when they had taken their seats and lit their churchwardens. "As sad an affair, I should say, as ever I was engaged in."

"It is that," Jacob Carey said. "Here's Mr. Claphurst here, who has been here, man and boy, for nigh eighty years. He will tell you that such an affair as this has never happened in this part in his time."

"I suppose, now," the detective said, "there's none in the village has any theory about it; I mean," he went on, as none of his hearers answered, "no one thinks it can be any one but some tramp or stranger to the district?"

"It can't be no one else," Jacob Carey said, "as I can see. What do you say, Hiram Powlett? I should say no one could make a nearer guess than you can, seeing as they say it was your Ruth as first found it out."

"I haven't seen Ruth," Hiram said; "the doctor told me, as he came down, as she was quite upset with the sight, and that it would be no good my going up to see her, as she would have to keep still all day. So I can't see farther into it than another; but surely it must be some stranger."

"There was no one about here so far as you have heard, Mr. Powlett, who had any sort of grudge against this poor lady?"

"Not a soul, as far as I know," Hiram replied. "She could speak up sharp, as I have heard, could Miss Carne, to a slatternly housewife or a drunken husband; but I never heard as she made an enemy by it, though, if she had, he would have kept his tongue to himself, for there were not many here in Carnesford who would have heard a word said against Miss Carne and sat quiet over it."

"No, indeed," Jacob Carey affirmed, bringing down his fist with a heavy thump on his knee. "The Squire and his sister were both well liked, and I for one would have helped duck any one that spoke against them in the Dare. She was the most liked, perhaps, because of her bright face and her kind words and being so much down here among us; but the Squire is well liked, too; he is not one to laugh and talk as she was, but he is a good landlord, and will always give a quarter's rent to a man as gets behindhand for no fault of his own, and if there is a complaint about a leaky roof or any repairs that want doing, the thing is done at once and no more talk about it. No, they have got no enemies about here as I know of, except maybe it's the poachers down at Dareport, for though the Squire don't shoot himself, he preserves strictly, and if a poacher's caught he gets sent to the quarter sessions as sure as eggs is eggs."

"Besides," the old clerk put in, "they say as Miss Carne's watch and things has been stolen; that don't look as if it was done out of revenge, do it?"

"Well, no," the detective said, slowly; "but that's not always to be taken as a sign, because you see if any one did a thing like that, out of revenge, they would naturally take away anything that lay handy, so as to make it look as if it was done for theft."

The idea was a new one to his listeners, and they smoked over it silently for some minutes.

"Lord, what evil ways there are in the world," Reuben Claphurst said at last. "Wickedness without end. Now what do you make out of this, mister? Of course these things come natural to you."

The detective shook his head. "It's too early to form an opinion yet, Mr. Claphurst – much too early. I dare say we shall put two and two together and make four presently, but at present you see we have got to learn all the facts, and you who live close ought to know more than we do, and to be able to put us on the track to begin with. You point me out a clue, and I will follow it, but the best dogs can't hunt until they take up the scent."

"That's true enough," the blacksmith said, approvingly.

"Have there been any strangers stopping in the village lately?" the detective asked.

"There have been a few stopping off and on here, or taking rooms in the village," the landlord answered; "but I don't think there has been any one fishing on the stream for the last few days."

"I don't mean that class; I mean tramps."

"That I can't tell you," the landlord replied; "we don't take tramps in here; they in general go to Wilding's beershop at the other end of the village. He can put up four or five for the night, and in summer he is often full, for we are just about a long day's tramp out from Plymouth, and they often make this their first stopping-place out, or their last stopping-place in, but it's getting late for them now, not many come along after the harvest is well over. Still, you know, there may have been one there yesterday, for aught I know."

"I will go round presently and ask. Any one who was here the night before might well have lain in the woods yesterday, and gone up and done it."

"I don't believe as you will ever find anything about it. There's a curse on Carne's Hold, as every one knows, and curses will work themselves out. If I were the Squire, I would pull the place down, every stick and stone of it, and I would build a fresh one a bit away. I wouldn't use so much as a brick or a rafter of the old place, for the curse might stick to it. I would have everything new from top to bottom."

"Yes, I have heard of the curse on Carne's Hold," the detective said. "A man who works with me, and comes from this part of the country, told me all about it as we came over to-day. However, that has nothing to do with this case."

"It's partly the curse as that heathen woman, as Sir Edgar brought home as his wife, laid on the place," the old clerk said, positively; "and it will go on working as long as Carne's Hold stands. That's what I says, and I don't think as any one else here will gainsay me."

"That's right enough," the blacksmith agreed, "I think we are all with you there, Mr. Claphurst. It ought to have been pulled down long ago after what has happened there. Why, if Mr. Carne was to say to me, 'Have the house and the garden and all rent free, Jacob Carey, as long as you like,' I should say, 'Thank you, Squire, but I wouldn't move into it, not if you give me enough beside to keep it up.' I call it just flying in the face of Providence. Only look at Hiram Powlett there; he sends his daughter up to be Miss Carne's maid at The Hold, and what comes of it? Why, she tumbles down the hill a-going up, and there she lies three weeks, with the doctor coming to see her every day. That was a clear warning if ever there was one. Who ever heard of a girl falling down and hurting herself like that? No one. And it would not have happened if it hadn't been for the curse of Carne's Hold."

"I shouldn't go so far as that," Hiram Powlett said. "What happened to my lass had nothing to do with The Hold; she might have been walking up the hill at any time, and she might have slipped down at any time. A girl may put her foot on a loose stone and fall without it having anything to say to The Hold one way or the other. Besides, I have never heard it said as the curse had aught to do except with the family."

"I don't know about that," the smith replied. "That servant that was killed by the Spanish woman's son; how about him? It seems to me as the curse worked on him a bit, too."

"So it did, so it did," Hiram agreed. "I can't gainsay you there, Jacob Carey; now you put it so, I see there is something in it, though never before have I heard of there being anything in the curse except in the family."

"Why, didn't Miles Jefferies, father of one of the boys as is in the stables, get his brains kicked out by one of the old Squire's horses?"

"So he did, Jacob, so he did; still grooms does get their brains kicked out at other places besides The Hold. But there is something in what you say, and if I had thought of it before, I would never have let my Ruth go up there to service. I thought it was all for the best at the time, and you knows right enough why I sent her up there, to be away from that George Forester; still, I might have sent her somewhere else, and I would have done if I had thought of what you are saying now. Sure enough no good has come of it. I can't hold that that fall of hers had aught to do with the curse of the Carnes, but this last affair, which seems to me worse for her than the first, sure enough comes from the curse."

"Who is this George Forester, if you don't mind my asking the question?" the detective said. "You see it's my business to find out about people."

"Oh, George hadn't nothing to do with this business," Hiram replied. "He's the son of a farmer near here, and has always been wild and a trouble to the old man, but he's gone away weeks ago. He got into a poaching scrape, and one of the keepers was hurt, and I suppose he thought he had best be out of it for a time; anyhow, he has gone. But he weren't that sort of a chap. No, there was no harm in George Forester, not in that way; he was lazy and fonder of a glass than was good for him, and he got into bad company down at Dareport, and that's what led him to this poaching business, I expect, because there was no call for him to go poaching. His father's got a tidy farm, and he wanted for nothing. If he had been there he couldn't have wanted to steal Miss Carne's jewellery. He was passionate enough, I know, and many a quarrel has he had with his father, but nothing would have made me believe, even if he had been here, that old Jim Forester's son had a hand in a black business like this; so don't you go to take such a notion as that into your head."

"He would not be likely to have any quarrel with Miss Carne?" the detective asked.

"Quarrel? No," Hiram replied sharply, for he resented the idea that any possible suspicion of Margaret Carne's murder should be attached to a man with whom Ruth's name had been connected. "I don't suppose Miss Carne ever spoke a word to him in her life. What should she speak to him for? Why, he had left the Sunday school years before she took to seeing after it. 'Tain't as if he had been one of the boys of the village."

As Jacob Carey, Reuben Claphurst, and the landlord, each gave an assenting murmur to Hiram's words, the detective did not think it worth while to pursue the point further, for there really seemed nothing to connect this George Forester in any way with Margaret Carne's death.

"Well," he said, taking up his hat, "I will go round to this beershop you speak of, and make inquiries as to whether any tramps have been staying there. It is quite certain this young lady didn't put an end to herself. What we have got to find out is: Who was the man that did it?"

## CHAPTER V. THE INQUEST

It was six o'clock, and already quite dark, when, as Lieutenant Gulston was writing in his cabin, his servant told him that Dr. Mackenzie had just come off from the shore, and would be glad if he could spare him a few minutes' conversation.

"Tell him I will be on the quarter-deck in a minute." He added a few lines to the letter he was writing, put it in an envelope, and, taking his cap, went out, dropping the letter into the post-bag that hung near his cabin, and then went on to the quarter-deck. He was rather pleased with the doctor's summons, for he highly esteemed him, and regretted the slight estrangement which had arisen between them.

"Well, doctor," he asked, cheerily, "have some of the men been getting into mischief ashore?"

"No, lad, no," the doctor replied, and the first-lieutenant felt that something more serious was the matter, for since he had obtained his rank of first-lieutenant the doctor had dropped his former habit of calling him lad. "No, I have heard some news ashore that will affect you seriously. I am sorry, dear lad, very sorry. I may have thought that you were foolish, but that will make no difference now."

"What is it, doctor?" Lieutenant Gulston asked, with a vague alarm at the gravity of the doctor's manner of treating him.

"The evening papers came out with an early edition, Gulston, and the boys are shouting out the news of a terrible affair, a most terrible affair at your friends the Carnes'. Be steady, lad, be steady. It's a heavy blow for a man to have to bear. Miss Carne is dead."

"Dead! Margaret dead!" the lieutenant repeated, incredulously. "What are you saying, doctor? There must be some mistake. She was well yesterday, for I was over there in the evening and did not leave until nine o'clock. It can't be true."

"It is true, lad, unhappily; there is no mistake. She was found dead in her bed this morning."

The lieutenant was almost stunned by the blow.

"Good God!" he murmured. "It seems impossible."

The doctor walked away and left him for a minute or two to himself. "I have not told you all as yet, lad," he went on, when he returned; "it makes no difference to her, poor girl – none. She passed out of life, it seems, painlessly and instantly, but it is worse for those who are left."

He paused a moment. "She was found stabbed to the heart by a midnight robber."

An exclamation of horror broke from the sailor. "Murdered? Good Heavens!"

"Ay, lad, it is true. It seems to have been done in her sleep, and death was instantaneous. There, I will leave you for a while, now. I will put the paper in your cabin, so that when you feel equal to reading the details you can do so. Try and think it is all for the best, lad. No one knows what trouble might have darkened her life and yours had this thing not happened. I know you will not be able to think so now, but you will feel it so some day."

An hour later Lieutenant Gulston entered the doctor's cabin. There was a look of anger as well as of grief on his face that the doctor did not understand.

"Doctor, I believe this is no murder by a wandering tramp, as the paper says. I believe it was done from revenge, and that the things were stolen simply to throw people off the scent. I will tell you what took place yesterday. I drove up as far as the gate in the garden; there one road sweeps round in front of the house, the other goes straight to the stables; so I got down, and told the man he might as well drive straight in, while I walked up to the house. The road follows close under the drawing-room windows, and, one of these being open, as I passed I heard a man's voice raised loud in anger, so loudly and so passionately, indeed, that I involuntarily stopped. His words were,

as nearly as I can recollect, 'You have fooled me and spoilt my life, but you shall regret it. You think after all these years I am to be thrown off like an old glove. No, by Heaven; you may throw me over, but I swear you shall never marry this sailor or anybody else, whatever I may have to do to prevent it. You say I have the curse of the Carnes in my blood! You are right, and you shall have cause to regret it.' The voice was so loud and passionate that I believed the speaker was about to do some injury to Margaret, for I did not doubt that it was to her he was speaking, and I ran round through the hall-door to the door of the room; but I found Carne himself standing there. He, too, I suppose, when he had been about to enter, had heard the words. He said, 'Don't go in just at present, Margaret and her cousin are having a quarrel, but I think it's over now.' Seeing that he was there at hand I went away for a bit, and found afterwards that Mervyn had jumped from the window, gone to the stable and ridden straight off. Margaret didn't come down to dinner, making an excuse that she was unwell. Now, what do you think of that, doctor? You know that Mervyn's mother was a Carne, and that he has this mad blood that you warned me against in his veins. There is his threat, given in what was an almost mad outburst of passion. She is found dead this morning; what do you think of it?"

"I don't know what to think of it, Gulston; I know but little of Mervyn myself, but I have heard men in his regiment say that he was a queer fellow, and though generally a most cheery and pleasant companion, he has at times fits of silence and moroseness similar, I should say, to those of his cousin, Reginald Carne. It is possible, lad, though I don't like to think so. When there is madness in the blood no one can say when it may blaze out, or what course it can take. The idea is a terrible one, and yet it is possible; it may indeed be so, for the madness in the family has twice before led to murder. The presumption is certainly a grave one, for although his messmates may consider Mervyn to be, as they say, a queer fellow, I do not think you would find any of them to say he was mad, or anything like it. Remember, Gulston, this would be a terrible accusation to bring against any man, even if he can prove – as probably he can prove – that he was at home, or here in Plymouth, at the time of the murder. The charge that he is mad, and the notoriety such a charge would obtain, is enough to ruin a man for life."

"I can't help that," the lieutenant said, gloomily. "I heard him threaten Margaret, and I shall say so at the coroner's inquest to-morrow. If a man is such a coward as to threaten a woman he must put up with any consequences that may happen to befall him."

The coroner and jury met in the dining-room at The Hold; they were all Carnesford men. Hiram Powlett, Jacob Carey, and the landlord of the "Carne's Arms" were upon it, for the summoning officer had been careful to choose on such an important occasion the leading men of the village. After having gone upstairs to view the body, the coroner opened the proceedings. The room was crowded. Many of the gentry of the neighbourhood were present. Lieutenant Gulston, with a hard set look upon his face, stood in a corner of the room with the doctor beside him. Ronald Mervyn, looking, as some of the Carnesford people remarked in a whisper, ten years older than he did when he drove through the village a few days before, stood on the other side of the table talking in low tones to some of his neighbours.

"We shall first, gentlemen," the coroner said, "hear evidence as to the finding of the body. Ruth Powlett, the maid of the deceased lady, is the first witness."

A minute later there was a stir at the door, and Ruth was led in by a constable. She was evidently so weak and unhinged that the coroner told her to take a chair.

"Now, Miss Powlett, tell us what you saw when you entered your mistress's room."

"Upon opening the door," Ruth said, in a calmer and more steady voice than was expected from her appearance, "I saw that the window was open and the blind up. I was surprised at this, for Miss Carne did not sleep with her window open in winter, and the blind was always down. I walked straight to the washstand and placed the can of hot water there; then I turned round to wake Miss Carne, and I saw her lying there with a great patch of blood on her nightdress, and I knew

by her face that she was dead. Then I fainted. I do not know how long I lay there. When I came to myself I got up and went to the door, and went downstairs to the kitchen and gave the alarm."

"You did not notice that any of Miss Carne's things had been taken from the table?" the coroner asked.

"No, sir."

"Were there any signs of a struggle having taken place?"

"No, sir, I did not see any. Miss Carne lay as if she was sleeping quietly. She was lying on her side."

"The bedclothes were not disarranged?"

"No, sir, except that the clothes were turned down a short distance."

"You were greatly attached to your mistress, Miss Powlett?"

"Yes, sir."

"She was generally liked – was she not?"

"Yes, sir. Every one who knew Miss Carne was fond of her."

"Have any of you any further questions to ask?" the coroner asked the jury.

There was no reply.

"Thank you, Miss Powlett. I will not trouble you further at present."

The cook then gave her testimony, and Dr. Arrowsmith was next called. He testified to the effect that upon his arrival he found that the room had not been disturbed in any way; no one had entered it with the exception, as he understood, of Miss Carne's maid, the cook, and Mr. Carne. The door was locked. When he went in, he found the deceased was dead, and it was his opinion, from the coldness and rigidity of the body, that she must have been dead seven or eight hours. It was just nine o'clock when he arrived. He should think, therefore, that death had taken place between one and half-past two in the morning. Death had been caused by a stab given either with a knife or dagger. The blow was exactly over the heart, and extended down into the substance of the heart itself. Death must have been absolutely instantaneous. Deceased lay in a natural position, as if asleep. The clothes had been turned down about a foot, just low enough to uncover the region of the heart.

After making an examination of the body, he examined the room with the constable, and found that a jewel-box on the table was open and its contents gone. The watch and chain of the deceased had also disappeared. He looked out of the window, and saw that it could be entered by an active man by climbing up a thick stem of ivy that grew close by. He observed several leaves lying on the ground, and was of the opinion that the assassin entered there.

"From what you say, Dr. Arrowsmith, it is your opinion that no struggle took place?"

"I am sure that there was no struggle," the doctor replied. "I have no question that Miss Carne was murdered in her sleep. I should say that the bedclothes were drawn down so lightly that she was not disturbed."

"Does it not appear an extraordinary thing to you, Dr. Arrowsmith, that if, as it seems, Miss Carne did not awake, the murderer should have taken her life?"

"Very extraordinary," the doctor said, emphatically. "I am wholly unable to account for it. I can understand that had she woke and sat up, a burglar might have killed her to secure his own safety, but that he should have quietly and deliberately set himself to murder her in her sleep is to me most extraordinary."

"You will note this circumstance, gentlemen," the coroner said to the jury. "It is quite contrary to one's usual experiences in these cases. As a rule, thieves are not murderers. To secure their own safety they may take life, but as a rule they avoid running the risk of capital punishment, and their object is to effect robbery without rousing the inmates of the house. At present the evidence certainly points to premeditated murder rather than to murder arising out of robbery. It is true that robbery has taken place, but this might be merely a blind."

"You know of no one, Dr. Arrowsmith, who would have been likely to entertain any feeling of hostility against Miss Carne?"

"Certainly not, sir. She was, I should say, universally popular, and certainly among the people of Carnesford she was regarded with great affection, for she was continually doing good among them."

"I am prepared to give evidence on that point," a voice said from the corner of the room, and there was a general movement of surprise as every one turned round to look at the speaker.

"Then perhaps, sir, we may as well hear your evidence next," the coroner said, "because it may throw some light upon the matter and enable us to ask questions to the point of further witnesses."

The lieutenant moved forward to the table: "My name is Charles Gulston. I am first-lieutenant of the *Tenebreuse*, the flagship at Plymouth. I had the honour of the acquaintance of Mr. and Miss Carne, and have spent a day or two here on several occasions. I may say that I was deeply attached to Miss Carne, and had hoped some day to make her my wife. The day before yesterday I came over here upon Mr. Carne's invitation to dine and spend the night. His dogcart met me at the station. As we drove up to the last gate – that leading into the garden – I alighted from the trap and told the man to drive it straight to the stable, while I walked across the lawn to the house. The drawing-room window was open, and as I passed I heard the voice of a man raised in tones of extreme passion, so much so that I stopped involuntarily. His words were:

"'You have fooled me and spoilt my life, but you shall regret it. You think that after all these years I am to be thrown off like an old glove. No, by Heaven! You may throw me over, but I vow that you shall never marry this sailor, or any one else, whatever I may have to do to prevent it. You say I have the curse of the Carnes in my blood. You are right, and you shall have cause to regret it.'

"The words were so loud and the tone so threatening that I ran round into the house and to the door, and should have entered it had not Mr. Carne, who was standing there, having apparently just come up, begged me not to do so, saying that his sister and cousin were having a quarrel, but that it was over now. As he was there I went away for a few minutes, and when I returned I found that Miss Carne had gone upstairs, and that her cousin had left, having, as Mr. Carne told me, left by the open window."

While Lieutenant Gulston was speaking a deep silence reigned in the room, and as he mentioned what Reginald Carne had said, every eye turned towards Ronald Mervyn, who stood with face as white as death, and one arm with clenched hand across his breast, glaring at the speaker.

"Do you mean, sir – ?" he burst out as the lieutenant ceased; but the coroner at once intervened.

"I must pray you to keep silent for the present, Captain Mervyn. You will have every opportunity of speaking presently.

"As to these words that you overheard, Mr. Gulston, did you recognise the speaker of them before you heard from Mr. Carne who was with his sister in the drawing-room?"

"Certainly. I recognised the voice at once as that of Captain Mervyn, whom I have met on several occasions."

"Were you impressed with his words, or did they strike you as a mere outburst of temper?"

"I was so impressed with the tone in which they were spoken that I ran round to the drawing-room to protect Miss Carne from violence."

"Was it your impression, upon thinking of them afterwards, that the words were meant as a menace to Miss Carne?"

"No, sir. The impression left upon my mind was that Captain Mervyn intended to fix some quarrel on me, as I had no doubt whatever that it was to me he alluded in his threats. The matter dwelt in my mind all the evening, for naturally nothing could have been more unpleasant than a public quarrel with a near relative of a lady to whom one is attached."

There was a long silence. Then the coroner asked the usual question of the jurymen.



None of them had a question to ask; indeed, all were so confounded by this new light thrown upon the matter that they had no power of framing a question.

Job Harpur was then called. He testified to entering the bedroom of the deceased with Dr. Arrowsmith, and to the examination he had made of it. There he had found the jewel-box opened, its contents abstracted, and the watch gone. He could find nothing else disarranged in the room, or any trace whatever that would give a clue as to the identity of the murderer. He then looked out of the window with Dr. Arrowsmith, and saw by a few leaves lying on the ground, and by marks upon the bark of the ivy, that some one had got up or down.

Dr. Arrowsmith had suggested that he should take up his post there, and not allow any one to approach, as a careful search might show footsteps or other marks that would be obliterated were people allowed to approach the window. When Captain Hendricks came they examined the ground together. They could find no signs of footsteps, but at a distance of some ten yards, at the foot of the wall, they found a torn glove, and this he produced.

"You have no reason in connecting this with the case in any way, I suppose, constable?" the coroner asked as the glove was laid on the table before him. "It might have been lying there for some time, I suppose."

"It might, sir."

It was a dog-skin glove stitched with red, with three lines of black and red stitching down the back. While the glove was produced and examined by the jury, Ronald Mervyn was talking in whispers to some friends standing round him.

"I wish to draw your attention," Lieutenant Gulston said in a low tone to Captain Hendricks, "that Captain Mervyn is at this moment holding in his hand a glove that in point of colour exactly matches that on the table; they are both a brighter yellow than usual." The Chief Constable glanced at the gloves and then whispered to the coroner. The latter started, and then said, "Captain Mervyn, would you kindly hand me the glove you have in your hand. It is suggested to me that its colour closely resembles that of the glove on the table." Mervyn, who had not been listening to the last part of the constable's evidence, turned round upon being spoken to.

"My glove, yes, here it is. What do you want it for?" The coroner took the glove and laid it by the other. Colour and stitching matched exactly; there could be no doubt but that they were a pair. A smothered exclamation broke from almost every man in the room.

"What is it?" Ronald Mervyn asked.

"The constable has just testified, Captain Mervyn, that he found this glove a few feet from the window of the deceased. No doubt you can account for its being there, but until the matter is explained it has, of course, a somewhat serious aspect, coupled with the evidence of Lieutenant Gulston."

Again Ronald Mervyn whitened to the hair.

"Do I understand, sir," he said in a low voice, "that I am accused of the murder of my cousin?"

"No one is at present accused," the coroner said, quietly. "We are only taking the evidence of all who know anything about this matter. I have no doubt whatever that you will be able to explain the matter perfectly, and to prove that it was physically impossible that you could have had any connection whatever with it."

Ronald Mervyn passed his hand across his forehead.

"Perhaps," the coroner continued, "if you have the fellow of the glove now handed to me in your pocket, you will kindly produce it, as that will, of course, put an end to this part of the subject."

"I cannot," Ronald Mervyn answered. "I found as I was starting to come out this morning that one of my gloves was missing, and I may say at once that I have no doubt that the other glove is the one I lost; though how it can have got near the place where it was found I cannot explain."

The men standing near fell back a little. The evidence given by Mr. Gulston had surprised them, but had scarcely affected their opinion of their neighbour, but this strong piece of confirmatory evidence gave a terrible shock to their confidence in him.

Mr. Carne was next called. He testified to being summoned while dressing by the cries of the servants, and to having found his sister lying dead.

"Now, Mr. Carne," the coroner said, "you have heard the evidence of Lieutenant Gulston as to a quarrel that appears to have taken place on the afternoon of this sad event, between your sister and Captain Mervyn. It seems from what he said that you also overheard a portion of it."

"I beg to state that I attach no importance to this," Reginald Carne said, "and I absolutely refuse to give any credence to the supposition that my cousin, Captain Mervyn, was in any way instrumental in the death of my sister."

"We all think that, Mr. Carne, but at the same time I must beg you to say what you know about the matter."

"I know very little about it," Reginald Carne said, quietly. "I was about to enter the drawing-room, where I knew my cousin and my sister were, and I certainly heard his voice raised loudly. I opened the door quietly, as is my way, and was about to enter, when I heard words that showed me that the quarrel was somewhat serious. I felt that I had better leave them alone, and therefore quietly closed the door again. A few seconds later Lieutenant Gulston rushed in from the front door, and was about to enter when I stopped him. Seeing that it was a mere family wrangle, it was better that no third person should interfere in it, especially as I myself was at hand, ready to do so if necessary, which I was sure it was not."

"But what were the words that you overheard, Mr. Carne?"

Reginald Carne hesitated. "I do not think they were of any consequence" he said. "I am sure they were spoken on the heat of the moment, and meant nothing."

"That is for us to judge, Mr. Carne. I must thank you to give them us as nearly as you can recollect."

"He said then," Reginald Carne said, reluctantly, "'I swear you shall never marry this sailor or any one else, whatever I may have to do to prevent it.' That was all I heard."

"Do you suppose the allusion was to Lieutenant Gulston?"

"I thought so at the time, and that was one of the reasons why I did not wish him to enter. I thought by my cousin's tone that did Lieutenant Gulston enter at that moment an assault might take place."

"What happened after the lieutenant, in compliance with your request, left you?"

"I waited a minute or two and then went in. My sister was alone. She was naturally much vexed at what had taken place."

"Will you tell me exactly what she said?"

Again Reginald Carne hesitated.

"I really don't think," he said after a pause, "that my sister meant what she said. She was indignant and excited, and I don't think that her words could be taken as evidence."

"The jury will make all allowances, Mr. Carne. I have to ask you to tell them the words."

"I cannot tell you the precise words," he said, "for she spoke for some little time. She began by saying that she had been grossly insulted by her cousin, and that she must insist that he did not enter the house again, for if he did she would certainly leave it. She said he was mad with passion; that he was in such a state that she did not feel her life was safe with him. I am sure, gentlemen, she did not at all mean what she said, but she was in a passion herself and would, I am sure, when she was cool, have spoken very differently."

There was a deep silence in the room. At last the coroner said:

"Just two more questions, Mr. Carne, and then we have done. Captain Mervyn, you say, had left the room when you entered it. Is there any other door to the drawing-room than that at which you were standing?"

"No, sir, there is no other door; the window was wide open, and as it is only three feet from the ground I have no doubt he went out that way. I heard him gallop off a minute or two later, so that he must have run straight round to the stables."

"In going from the drawing-room window to the stables, would he pass under the window of your sister's room?"

"No," Reginald replied. "That is quite the other side of the house."

"Then, in fact, the glove that was found there could not have been accidentally dropped on his way from the drawing-room to the stable?"

"It could not," Reginald Carne admitted, reluctantly.

"Thank you; if none of the jury wish to ask you any question, that is all we shall require at present."

The jury shook their heads. They were altogether too horrified at the turn matters were taking to think of any questions to the point. The Chief Constable then called the gardener, who testified that he had swept the lawn on the afternoon of the day the murder was committed, and that had a glove been lying at that time on the spot where it was discovered he must have noticed it.

When the man had done, Captain Hendricks intimated that that was all the evidence that he had at present to call.

"Now, Captain Mervyn," the coroner said, "you will have an opportunity of explaining this matter, and, no doubt, will be able to tell us where you were at the time Miss Carne met her death, and to produce witnesses who will at once set this mysterious affair, as far as you are concerned, at rest."

Ronald Mervyn made a step forward. He was still very pale, but the look of anger with which he had first heard the evidence against him had passed, and his face was grave and quiet.

"I admit, sir," he began in a steady voice, "the whole facts that have been testified. I acknowledge that on that afternoon I had a serious quarrel with my cousin, Margaret Carne. The subject is a painful one to touch upon, but I am compelled to do so. I had almost from boyhood regarded her as my future wife. There was a boy and girl understanding between us to that effect, and although no formal engagement had taken place, she had never said anything to lead me to believe that she had changed her mind on the subject; and I think I may say that in both of our families it was considered probable that at some time or other we should be married.

"On that afternoon I spoke sharply to her – I admit that – as to her receiving the attentions of another man; and upon her denying altogether my right to speak to her on such a subject, and repudiating the idea of any engagement between us, I certainly, I admit it with the greatest grief, lost my temper. Unfortunately I have been from a child given to occasional fits of passion. It is long since I have done so, but upon this occasion the suddenness of the shock, and the bitterness of my disappointment, carried me beyond myself, and I admit that I used the words that Lieutenant Gulston has repeated to you. But I declare that I had no idea whatever, even at that moment, of making any personal threat against her. What was in my mind was to endeavour in some way or other to prevent her marrying another man."

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