The Closed Cabinet

Anonymous

Table of Contents

The Closed Cabinet

Anonymous

I

It was with a little alarm and a good deal of pleasurable excitement that I looked forward to my first grown−up visit to Mervyn Grange. I had been there several times as a child, but never since I was twelve years old, and now I was over eighteen. We were all of us very proud of our cousins the Mervyns: it is not everybody that can claim kinship with a family who are in full and admitted possession of a secret, a curse, and a mysterious cabinet, in addition to the usual surplusage of horrors supplied in such cases by popular imagination. Some declared that a Mervyn of the days of Henry VIII had been cursed by an injured abbot from the foot of the gallows. Others affirmed that a dissipated Mervyn of the Georgian era was still playing cards for his soul in some remote region of the Grange. There were stories of white ladies and black imps, of bloodstained passages and magic stones. We, proud of our more intimate acquaintance with the family, naturally gave no credence to these wild inventions. The Mervyns, indeed, followed the accepted precedent in such cases, and greatly disliked any reference to the reputed mystery being made in their presence; with the inevitable result that there was no subject so pertinaciously discussed by their friends in their absence. My father's sister had married the late Baronet, Sir Henry Mervyn, and we always felt that she ought to have been the means of imparting to us a very complete knowledge of the family secret. But in this connection she undoubtedly failed of her duty. We knew that there had been a terrible tragedy in the family some two or three hundred years ago—that a peculiarly wicked owner of Mervyn, who flourished in the latter part of the sixteenth century, had been murdered by his wife who subsequently committed suicide. We knew that the mysterious curse had some connection with this crime, but what the curse exactly was we had never been able to discover. The history of the family since that time had indeed in one sense been full of misfortune. Not in every sense. A coal mine had been discovered in one part of the estate, and a populous city had grown over the corner of another part; and the Mervyns of to−day, in spite of the usual percentage of extravagant heirs and political mistakes, were three times as rich as their ancestors had been. But still their story was full of bloodshed and shame, of tales of duels and suicides, broken hearts and broken honor. Only these calamities seemed to have little or no relation to each other, and what the precise curse was that was supposed to connect or account for them we could not learn. When she first married, my aunt was told nothing about it. Later on in life, when my father asked her for the story, she begged him to talk upon a pleasanter subject; and being unluckily a man of much courtesy and little curiosity, he complied with her request. This, however, was the only part of the ghostly traditions of her husband's home upon which she was so reticent. The haunted chamber, for instance—which, of course, existed at the Grange—she treated with the greatest contempt. Various friends and relations had slept in it

at different times, and no approach to any kind of authenticated ghost−story, even of the most trivial description, had they been able to supply. Its only claim to respect, indeed, was that it contained the famous Mervyn cabinet, a fascinating puzzle of which I will speak later, but which certainly had nothing haunting or horrible about its appearance.

My uncle's family consisted of three sons. The eldest, George, the present baronet, was now in his thirties, married, and with children of his own. The second, Jack, was the black−sheep of the family. He had been in the Guards, but, about five years back, had got into some very disgraceful scrape, and had been obliged to leave the country. The sorrow and the shame of this had killed his unhappy mother, and her husband had not long afterwards followed her to the grave. Alan, the youngest son, probably because he was the nearest to us in age, had been our special favorite in earlier years. George was grown up before I had well left the nursery, and his hot, quick temper had always kept us youngsters somewhat in awe of him. Jack was four years older than Alan, and, besides, his profession had, in a way, cut his boyhood short. When my uncle and aunt were abroad, as they frequently were for months together on account of her health, it was Alan, chiefly, who had to spend his holidays with us, both as school−boy and as undergraduate. And a brighter, sweeter−tempered comrade, or one possessed of more diversified talents for the invention of games or the telling of stories, it would have been difficult to find.

For five years together now our ancient custom of an annual visit to Mervyn had been broken. First there had been the seclusion of mourning for my aunt, and a year later for my uncle; then George and his wife, Lucy,—she was a connection of our own on our mother's side, and very intimate with us all,—had been away for nearly two years on a voyage round the world; and since then sickness in our own family had kept us in our turn a good deal abroad. So that I had not seen my cousins since all the calamities which had befallen them in the interval, and as I steamed northwards I wondered a good deal as to the changes I should find. I was to have come out that year in London, but ill−health had prevented me; and as a sort of consolation Lucy had kindly asked me to spend a fortnight at Mervyn, and be present at a shooting−party, which was to assemble there in the first week of October.

I had started early, and there was still an hour of the short autumn day left when I descended at the little wayside station, from which a six−mile drive brought me to the Grange. A dreary drive I found it—the round, gray, treeless outline of the fells stretching around me on every side beneath the leaden, changeless sky. The night had nearly fallen as we drove along the narrow valley in which the Grange stood: it was too dark to see the autumn tints of the woods which clothed and brightened its sides, almost too dark to distinguish the old tower,—Dame Alice's tower as it was called,—which stood some half a mile farther on at its head. But the light shone brightly from the Grange windows, and all feeling of dreariness departed as I drove up to the door. Leaving maid and boxes to their fate, I ran up the steps into the old, well−remembered hall, and was informed by the dignified man−servant that her ladyship and the tea were awaiting me in the morning−room.

I found that there was nobody staying in the house except Alan, who was finishing the long vacation there: he had been called to the Bar a couple of years before. The guests were not to arrive for another week, so that I had plenty of opportunity in the interval to make up for lost time with my cousins. I began my observations that evening as we sat down to dinner, a cozy party of four. Lucy was quite unchanged—pretty, foolish, and gentle as ever. George showed the full five years' increase of age, and seemed to have acquired a somewhat painful control of his temper. Instead of the old petulant outbursts, there was at times an air of nervous, irritable self−restraint, which I found the less pleasant of the two. But it was in Alan that the most striking alteration appeared. I felt it the moment I shook hands with him, and the impression deepened that evening with every hour. I told myself that it was only the natural difference between boy and man, between twenty and twenty−five, but I don't think that I believed it. Superficially the change was not great. The slight−built, graceful figure; the deep gray eyes, too small for beauty; the clear−cut features, the delicate, sensitive lips, close shaven now, as they had been hairless then,—all were as I remembered them. But the face was paler and thinner than it had been, and there were lines round the eyes and at the corners of the mouth which were no more natural to twenty−five than they would have been to twenty. The old charm indeed—the sweet friendliness of manner, which was his own peculiar possession—was still there. He talked and laughed almost as much as formerly, but the talk was manufactured for

our entertainment, and the laughter came from his head and not from his heart. And it was when he was taking no part in the conversation that the change showed most. Then the face, on which in the old time every passing emotion had expressed itself in a constant, living current, became cold and impassive—without interest, and without desire. It was at such times that I knew most certainly that here was something which had been living and was dead. Was it only his boyhood? This question I was unable to answer.

Still, in spite of all, that week was one of the happiest in my life. The brothers were both men of enough ability and cultivation to be pleasant talkers, and Lucy could perform adequately the part of conversational accompanist, which, socially speaking, is all that is required of a woman. The meals and evenings passed quickly and agreeably; the mornings I spent in unending gossips with Lucy, or in games with the children, two bright boys of five and six years old. But the afternoons were the best part of the day. George was a thorough squire in all his tastes and habits, and every afternoon his wife dutifully accompanied him round farms and coverts, inspecting new buildings, trudging along half−made roads, or marking unoffending trees for destruction. Then Alan and I would ride by the hour together over moor and meadowland, often picking our way homewards down the glen−side long after the autumn evenings had closed in. During these rides I had glimpses many a time into depths in Alan's nature of which I doubt whether in the old days he had himself been aware. To me certainly they were as a revelation. A prevailing sadness, occasionally a painful tone of bitterness, characterized these more serious moods of his, but I do not think that, at the end of that week, I would, if I could, have changed the man, whom I was learning to revere and to pity, for the light−hearted playmate whom I felt was lost to me for ever.

II

The only feature of the family life which jarred on me was the attitude of the two brothers towards the children. I did not notice this much at first, and at all times it was a thing to be felt rather than to be seen. George himself never seemed quite at ease with them. The boys were strong and well grown, healthy in mind and body; and one would have thought that the existence of two such representatives to carry on his name and inherit his fortune would have been the very crown of pride and happiness to their father. But it was not so. Lucy indeed was devoted to them, and in all practical matters no one could have been kinder to them than was George. They were free of the whole house, and every indulgence that money could buy for them they had. I never heard him give them a harsh word. But there was something wrong. A constraint in their presence, a relief in their absence, an evident dislike of discussing them and their affairs, a total want of that enjoyment of love and possession which in such a case one might have expected to find. Alan's state of mind was even more marked. Never did I hear him willingly address his nephews, or in any way allude to their existence. I should have said that he simply ignored it, but for the heavy gloom which always overspread his spirits in their company, and for the glances which he would now and again cast in their direction—glances full of some hidden painful emotion, though of what nature it would have been hard to define. Indeed, Alan's attitude towards her children I soon found to be the only source of friction between Lucy and this otherwise much−loved member of her husband's family. I asked her one day why the boys never appeared at luncheon.

"Oh, they come when Alan is away," she answered; "but they seem to annoy him so much that George thinks it is better to keep them out of sight when he is here. It is very tiresome. I know that it is the fashion to say that George has got the temper of the family; but I assure you that Alan's nervous moods and fancies are much more difficult to live with."

That was on the morning—a Friday it was—of the last day which we were to spend alone. The guests were to arrive soon after tea; and I think that with the knowledge of their approach Alan and I prolonged our ride that afternoon beyond its usual limits. We were on our way home, and it was already dusk, when a turn of the path brought us face to face with the old ruined tower, of which I have already spoken as standing at the head of the valley. I had not been close up to it yet during this visit at Mervyn. It had been a very favorite haunt of ours as children, and partly on that account, partly perhaps in order to defer the dreaded close of our ride to the last

possible moment, I proposed an inspection of it. The only portion of the old building left standing in any kind of entirety was two rooms, one above the other. The tower room, level with the bottom of the moat, was dark and damp, and it was the upper one, reached by a little outside staircase, which had been our rendezvous of old. Alan showed no disposition to enter, and said that he would stay outside and hold my horse, so I dismounted and ran up alone.

The room seemed in no way changed. A mere stone shell, littered with fragments of wood and mortar. There was the rough wooden block on which Alan used to sit while he first frightened us with bogey−stories, and then calmed our excited nerves by rapid sallies of wild nonsense. There was the plank from behind which, erected as a barrier across the doorway, he would defend the castle against our united assault, pelting us with fir−cones and sods of earth. This and many a bygone scene thronged on me as I stood there, and the room filled again with the memories of childish mirth. And following close came those of childish terrors. Horrors which had oppressed me then, wholly imagined or dimly apprehended from half− heard traditions, and never thought of since, flitted around me in the gathering dusk. And with them it seemed to me as if there came other memories too,—memories which had never been my own, of scenes whose actors had long been with the dead, but which, immortal as the spirit before whose eyes they had dwelt, still lingered in the spot where their victim had first learnt to shudder at their presence. Once the ghastly notion came to me, it seized on my imagination with irresistible force. It seemed as if from the darkened corners of the room vague, ill−defined shapes were actually peering out at me. When night came they would show themselves in that form, livid and terrible, in which they had been burnt into the brain and heart of the long ago dead.

I turned and glanced towards where I had left Alan. I could see his figure framed in by the window, a black shadow against the gray twilight of the sky behind. Erect and perfectly motionless he sat, so motionless as to look almost lifeless, gazing before him down the valley into the illimitable distance beyond. There was something in that stern immobility of look and attitude which struck me with a curious sense of congruity. It was right that he should be thus—right that he should be no longer the laughing boy who a moment before had been in my memory. The haunting horrors of that place seemed to demand it, and for the first time I felt that I understood the change. With an effort I shook myself free from these fancies, and turned to go. As I did so, my eye fell upon a queer−shaped painted board, leaning up against the wall, which I well recollected in old times. Many a discussion had we had about the legend inscribed upon it, which in our wisdom we had finally pronounced to be German, chiefly because it was illegible. Though I had loudly professed my faith in this theory at the time, I had always had uneasy doubts on the subject, and now half smiling I bent down to verify or remove them. The language was English, not German; but the badly painted, faded Gothic letters in which it was written made the mistake excusable. In the dim light I had difficulty even now in deciphering the words, and felt when I had done so that neither the information conveyed nor the style of the composition was sufficient reward for the trouble I had taken. This is what I read:

"Where the woman sinned the maid shall win;
But God help the maid that sleeps within."

What the lines could refer to I neither had any notion nor did I pause then even in my own mind to inquire. I only remember vaguely wondering whether they were intended for a tombstone or for a doorway. Then, continuing my way, I rapidly descended the steps and remounted my horse, glad to find myself once again in the open air and by my cousin's side.

The train of thought into which he had sunk during my absence was apparently an absorbing one, for to my first question as to the painted board he could hardly rouse himself to answer.

"A board with a legend written on it? Yes, he remembered something of the kind there. It had always been there, he thought. He knew nothing about it,"—and so the subject was not continued.

The weird feelings which had haunted me in the tower still oppressed me, and I proceeded to ask Alan about that old Dame Alice whom the traditions of my childhood represented as the last occupant of the ruined building. Alan roused himself now, but did not seem anxious to impart information on the subject. She had lived there, he admitted, and no one had lived there since. "Had she not," I inquired, "something to do with the mysterious cabinet at the house? I remember hearing it spoken of as 'Dame Alice's cabinet.'

"So they say," he assented; "she and an Italian artificer who was in her service, and who, chiefly I imagine on account of his skill, shared with her the honor of reputed witchcraft."

"She was the mother of Hugh Mervyn, the man who was murdered by his wife, was she not?" I asked.

"Yes," said Alan, briefly.

"And had she not something to do with the curse?" I inquired after a short pause, and nervously I remembered my father's experience on that subject, and I had never before dared to allude to it in the presence of any member of the family. My nervousness was fully warranted. The gloom on Alan's brow deepened, and after a very short "They say so" he turned full upon me, and inquired with some asperity why on earth I had developed this sudden curiosity about his ancestress.

I hesitated a moment, for I was a little ashamed of my fancies; but the darkness gave me courage, and besides I was not afraid of telling Alan—he would understand. I told him of the strange sensations I had had while in the tower—sensations which had struck me with all that force and clearness which we usually associate with a direct experience of fact. "Of course it was a trick of imagination," I commented; "but I could not get rid of the feeling that the person who had dwelt there last must have had terrible thoughts for the companions of her life."

Alan listened in silence, and the silence continued for some time after I had ceased speaking.

"It is strange," he said at last; "instincts which we do not understand form the motive−power of most of our life's actions, and yet we refuse to admit them as evidence of any external truth. I suppose it is because we MUST act somehow, rightly or wrongly; and there are a great many things which we need not believe unless we choose. As for this old lady, she lived long—long enough, like most of us, to do evil; unlike most of us, long enough to witness some of the results of that evil. To say that, is to say that the last years of her life must have been weighted heavily enough with tragic thought."

I gave a little shudder of repulsion.

"That is a depressing view of life, Alan," I said. "Does our peace of mind depend only upon death coming early enough to hide from us the truth? And, after all, can it? Our spirits do not die. From another world they may witness the fruits of our lives in this one."

"If they do," he answered with sudden violence, "it is absurd to doubt the existence of a purgatory. There must in such a case be a terrible one in store for the best among us."

I was silent. The shadow that lay on his soul did not penetrate to mine, but it hung round me nevertheless, a cloud which I felt powerless to disperse.

After a moment he went on,—"Provided that they are distant enough, how little, after all, do we think of the results of our actions! There are few men who would deliberately instill into a child a love of drink, or wilfully deprive him of his reason; and yet a man with drunkenness or madness in his blood thinks nothing of bringing children into the world tainted as deeply with the curse as if he had inoculated them with it directly. There is no responsibility so completely ignored as this one of marriage and fatherhood, and yet how heavy it is and

far−reaching."

"Well," I said, smiling, "let us console ourselves with the thought that we are not all lunatics and drunkards."

"No," he answered; "but there are other evils besides these, moral taints as well as physical, curses which have their roots in worlds beyond our own,—sins of the fathers which are visited upon the children."

He had lost all violence and bitterness of tone now; but the weary dejection which had taken their place communicated itself to my spirit with more subtle power than his previous mood had owned.

"That is why," he went on, and his manner seemed to give more purpose to his speech than hitherto,—"that is why, so far as I am concerned, I mean to shirk the responsibility and remain unmarried."

I was hardly surprised at his words. I felt that I had expected them, but their utterance seemed to intensify the gloom which rested upon us. Alan was the first to arouse himself from its influence.

"After all," he said, turning round to me and speaking lightly, "without looking so far and so deep, I think my resolve is a prudent one. Above all things, let us take life easily, and you know what St. Paul says about 'trouble in the flesh,'—a remark which I am sure is specially applicable to briefless barristers, even though possessed of a modest competence of their own. Perhaps one of these days, when I am a fat old judge, I shall give my cook a chance if she is satisfactory in her clear soups; but till then I shall expect you, Evie, to work me one pair of carpet−slippers per annum, as tribute due to a bachelor cousin."

I don't quite know what I answered,—my heart was heavy and aching,—but I tried with true feminine docility to follow the lead he had set me. He continued for some time in the same vein; but as we approached the house the effort seemed to become too much for him, and we relapsed again into silence.

This time I was the first to break it. "I suppose," I said, drearily, "all those horrid people will have come by now."

"Horrid people," he repeated, with rather an uncertain laugh, and through the darkness I saw his figure bend forward as he stretched out his hand to caress my horse's neck. "Why, Evie, I thought you were pining for gayety, and that it was, in fact, for the purpose of meeting these 'horrid people' that you came here."

"Yes, I know," I said, wistfully; "but somehow the last week has been so pleasant that I cannot believe that anything will ever be quite so nice again."

We had arrived at the house as I spoke, and the groom was standing at our horses' heads. Alan got off and came round to help me to dismount; but instead of putting up his arm as usual as a support for me to spring from, he laid his hand on mine. "Yes, Evie," he said, "it has been indeed a pleasant time. God bless you for it." For an instant he stood there looking up at me, his face full in the light which streamed from the open door, his gray eyes shining with a radiance which was not wholly from thence. Then he straightened his arm, I sprang to the ground, and as if to preclude the possibility of any answer on my part, he turned sharply on his heel, and began giving some orders to the groom. I went on alone into the house, feeling, I knew not and cared not to know why, that the gloom had fled from my spirit, and that the last ride had not after all been such a melancholy failure as it had bid fair at one time to become.

III

In the hall I was met by the housekeeper, who informed me that, owing to a misunderstanding about dates, a gentleman had arrived whom Lucy had not expected at that time, and that in consequence my room had been

changed. My things had been put into the East Room,— the haunted room,—the room of the Closed Cabinet, as I remembered with a certain sense of pleased importance, though without any surprise. It stood apart from the other guest−rooms, at the end of the passage from which opened George and Lucy's private apartment; and as it was consequently disagreeable to have a stranger there, it was always used when the house was full for a member of the family. My father and mother had often slept there: there was a little room next to it, though not communicating with it, which served for a dressing−room. Though I had never passed the night there myself, I knew it as well as any room in the house. I went there at once, and found Lucy superintending the last arrangements for my comfort.

She was full of apologies for the trouble she was giving me. I told her that the apologies were due to my maid and to her own servants rather than to me; "and besides," I added, glancing round, "I am distinctly a gainer by the change."

"You know, of course," she said, lightly, "that this is the haunted room of the house, and that you have no right to be here?"

"I know it is the haunted room," I answered; "but why have I no right to be here?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "There is one of those tiresome Mervyn traditions against allowing unmarried girls to sleep in this room. I believe two girls died in it a hundred and fifty years ago, or something of that sort."

"But I should think that people, married or unmarried, must have died in nearly every room in the house," I objected.

"Oh, yes, of course they have," said Lucy; "but once you come across a bit of superstition in this family, it is of no use to ask for reasons. However, this particular bit is too ridiculous even for George. Owing to Mr. Leslie having come to−day, we must use every room in the house: it is intolerable having a stranger here, and you are the only relation staying with us. I pointed all that out to George, and he agreed that, under the circumstances, it would be absurd not to put you here."

"I am quite agreeable," I answered; "and, indeed, I think I am rather favored in having a room where the last recorded death appears to have taken place a hundred and fifty years ago, particularly as I should think that there can be scarcely anything now left in it which was here then, except, of course, the cabinet."

The room had, in fact, been entirely done up and refurnished by my uncle, and was as bright and modern−looking an apartment as you could wish to see. It was large, and the walls were covered with one of those white and gold papers which were fashionable thirty years ago. Opposite us, as we stood warming our backs before the fire, was the bed—a large double one, hung with a pretty shade of pale blue. Material of the same color covered the comfortable modern furniture, and hung from gilded cornices before the two windows which pierced the side of the room on our left. Between them stood the toilet−table, all muslin, blue ribbons, and silver. The carpet was a gray and blue Brussels one. The whole effect was cheerful, though I fear inartistic, and sadly out of keeping with the character of the house. The exception to these remarks was, as I had observed, the famous closed cabinet, to which I have more than once alluded. It stood against the same wall of the room as that in which the fireplace was, and on our right—that is, on that side of the fireplace which was farthest from the windows. As I spoke, I turned to go and look at it, and Lucy followed me. Many an hour as a child had I passed in front of it, fingering the seven carved brass handles, or rather buttons, which were ranged down its center. They all slid, twisted, or screwed with the greatest ease, and apparently like many another ingeniously contrived lock; but neither I nor any one else had ever yet succeeded in sliding, twisting, or screwing them after such a fashion as to open the closed doors of the cabinet. No one yet had robbed them of their secret since first it was placed there three hundred years ago by the old lady and her faithful Italian. It was a beautiful piece of workmanship, was this tantalizing cabinet. Carved out of some dark foreign wood, the doors and panels were richly inlaid with lapis− lazuli, ivory, and

mother−of−pearl, among which were twisted delicately chased threads of gold and silver. Above the doors, between them and the cornice, lay another mystery, fully as tormenting as was the first. In a smooth strip of wood about an inch wide, and extending along the whole breadth of the cabinet, was inlaid a fine pattern in gold wire. This at first sight seemed to consist of a legend or motto. On looking closer, however, though the pattern still looked as if it was formed out of characters of the alphabet curiously entwined together, you found yourself unable to fix upon any definite word, or even letter. You looked again and again, and the longer that you looked the more certain became your belief that you were on the verge of discovery. If you could approach the mysterious legend from a slightly different point of view, or look at it from another distance, the clew to the puzzle would be seized, and the words would stand forth clear and legible in your sight. But the clew never had been discovered, and the motto, if there was one, remained unread.

For a few minutes we stood looking at the cabinet in silence, and then Lucy gave a discontented little sigh. "There's another tiresome piece of superstition," she exclaimed; "by far the handsomest piece of furniture in the house stuck away here in a bedroom which is hardly ever used. Again and again have I asked George to let me have it moved downstairs, but he won't hear of it."

"Was it not placed here by Dame Alice herself?" I inquired a little reproachfully, for I felt that Lucy was not treating the cabinet with the respect which it really deserved.

"Yes, so they say," she answered; and the tone of light contempt in which she spoke was now pierced by a not unnatural pride in the romantic mysteries of her husband's family. "She placed it here, and it is said, you know, that when the closed cabinet is opened, and the mysterious motto is read, the curse will depart from the Mervyn family."

"But why don't they break it open?" I asked, impatiently. "I am sure that I would never have remained all my life in a house with a thing like that, and not found out in some way or another what was inside it."

"Oh, but that would be quite fatal," answered she. "The curse can only be removed when the cabinet is opened as Dame Alice intended it to be, in an orthodox fashion. If you were to force it open, that could never happen, and the curse would therefore remain for ever."

"And what is the curse?" I asked, with very different feelings to those with which I had timidly approached the same subject with Alan. Lucy was not a Mervyn, and not a person to inspire awe under any circumstances. My instincts were right again, for she turned away with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

"I have no idea," she said. "George and Alan always look portentously solemn and gloomy whenever one mentions the subject, so I don't. If you ask me for the truth, I believe it to be a pure invention, devised by the Mervyns for the purpose of delicately accounting for some of the disreputable actions of their ancestors. For you know, Evie," she added, with a little laugh, "the less said about the character of the family into which your aunt and I have married the better."

The remark made me angry, I don't know why, and I answered stiffly, that as far as I was acquainted with them, I at least saw nothing to complain of.

"Oh, as regards the present generation, no,—except for that poor, wretched Jack," acquiesced Lucy, with her usual imperturbable good− humor.

"And as regards the next?" I suggested, smiling, and already ashamed of my little temper.

"The next is perfect, of course,—poor dear boys." She sighed as she spoke, and I wondered whether she was really as unconscious as she generally appeared to be of the strange dissatisfaction with which her husband

seemed to regard his children. Anyhow the mention of them had evidently changed her mood, and almost directly afterwards, with the remark that she must go and look after her guests, who had all arrived by now, she left me to myself.

For some minutes I sat by the bright fire, lost in aimless, wandering thought, which began with Dame Alice and her cabinet, and which ended somehow with Alan's face, as I had last seen it looking up at me in front of the hall−door. When I had reached that point, I roused myself to decide that I had dreamt long enough, and that it was quite time to go down to the guests and to tea. I accordingly donned my best teagown, arranged my hair, and proceeded towards the drawing−room. My way there lay through the great central hall. This apartment was approached from most of the bedrooms in the house through a large, arched doorway at one end of it, which communicated directly with the great staircase. My bedroom, however, which, as I have said, lay among the private apartments of the house, opened into a passage which led into a broad gallery, or upper chamber, stretching right across the end of the hall. From this you descended by means of a small staircase in oak, whose carved balustrade, bending round the corner of the hall, formed one of the prettiest features of the picturesque old room. The barrier which ran along the front of the gallery was in solid oak, and of such a height that, unless standing close up to it, you could neither see nor be seen by the occupants of the room below. On approaching this gallery I heard voices in the hall. They were George's and Alan's, evidently in hot discussion. As I issued from the passage, George was speaking, and his voice had that exasperated tone in which an angry man tries to bring to a close an argument in which he has lost his temper. "For heaven's sake leave it alone, Alan; I neither can nor will interfere. We have enough to bear from these cursed traditions as it is, without adding one which has no foundation whatever to justify it—a mere contemptible piece of superstition."

"No member of our family has a right to call any tradition contemptible which is connected with that place, and you know it," answered Alan; and though he spoke low, his voice trembled with some strong emotion. A first impulse of hesitation which I had had I checked, feeling that as I had heard so much it was fairer to go on, and I advanced to the top of the staircase. Alan stood by the fireplace facing me, but far too occupied to see me. His last speech had seemingly aroused George to fury, for the latter turned on him now with savage passion.

"Damn it all, Alan!" he cried, "can't you be quiet? I will be master in my own house. Take care, I tell you; the curse may not be quite fulfilled yet after all."

As George uttered these words, Alan lifted his eyes to him with a glance of awful horror: his face turned ghastly white; his lips trembled for a moment; and then he answered back with one half− whispered word of supreme appeal—"George!" There was a long− drawn, unutterable anguish in his tone, and his voice, though scarcely audible, penetrated to every corner of the room, and seemed to hang quivering in the air around one after the sound had ceased. Then there was a terrible stillness. Alan stood trembling in every limb, incapable apparently of speech or action, and George faced him, as silent and motionless as he was. For an instant they remained thus, while I looked breathlessly on. Then George, with a muttered imprecation, turned on his heel and left the room. Alan followed him as he went with dull lifeless eyes; and as the door closed he breathed deeply, with a breath that was almost a groan.

Taking my courage in both hands, I now descended the stairs, and at the sound of my footfall he glanced up, started, and then came rapidly to meet me.

"Evie! you here," he said; "I did not notice you. How long have you been here?" He was still quite white, and I noticed that he panted for breath as he spoke.

"Not long," I answered, timidly, and rather spasmodically; "I only heard a sentence or two. You wanted George to do something about some tradition or other,—and he was angry,—and he said something about the curse."

While I spoke Alan kept his eyes fixed on mine, reading through them, as I knew, into my mind. When I had finished he turned his gaze away satisfied, and answered very quietly, "Yes, that was it." Then he went back to the fireplace, rested his arm against the high mantelpiece above it, and leaning his forehead on his arm, remained silently looking into the fire. I could see by his bent brow and compressed lips that he was engaged upon some earnest train of thought or reasoning, and I stood waiting—worried, puzzled, curious, but above all things, pitiful, and oh! longing so intensely to help him if I could. Presently he straightened himself a little, and addressed me more in his ordinary tone of voice, though without looking round. "So I hear they have changed your room."

"Yes," I answered. And then, flushing rather, "Is that what you and George have been quarreling about?" I received no reply, and taking this silence for assent, I went on deprecatingly, "Because you know, if it was, I think you are rather foolish, Alan. As I understand, two girls are said to have died in that room more than a hundred years ago, and for that reason there is a prejudice against putting a girl to sleep there. That is all. Merely a vague, unreasonable tradition."

Alan took a moment to answer.

"Yes," he said at length, speaking slowly, and as if replying to arguments in his own mind as much as to those which I had uttered. "Yes, it is nothing but a tradition after all, and that of the very vaguest and most unsupported kind."

"Is there even any proof that girls have not slept there since those two died?" I asked. I think that the suggestion conveyed in this question was a relief to him, for after a moment's pause, as if to search his memory, he turned round.

"No," he answered, "I don't think that there is any such proof; and I have no doubt that you are right, and that it is a mere prejudice that makes me dislike your sleeping there."

"Then," I said, with a little assumption of sisterly superiority, "I think George was right, and that you were wrong."

Alan smiled,—a smiled which sat oddly on the still pale face, and in the wearied, worn−looking eyes. "Very likely," he said; "I daresay that I am superstitious. I have had things to make me so." Then coming nearer to me, and laying his hands on my shoulders, he went on, smiling more brightly, "We are a queer−tempered, bad−nerved race, we Mervyns, and you must not take us too seriously, Evie. The best thing that you can do with our odd ways is to ignore them."

"Oh, I don't mind," I answered, laughing, too glad to have won him back to even temporary brightness, "as long as you and George don't come to blows over the question of where I am to sleep; which after all is chiefly my concern,—and Lucy's."

"Well, perhaps it is," he replied, in the same tone; "and now be off to the drawing−room, where Lucy is defending the tea−table single−handed all this time."

I obeyed, and should have gone more cheerfully had I not turned at the doorway to look back at him, and caught one glimpse of his face as he sank heavily down into the large arm−chair by the fireside.

However, by dinner−time he appeared to have dismissed all painful reflections from his mind, or to have buried them too deep for discovery. The people staying in the house were, in spite of my sense of grievance at their arrival, individually pleasant, and after dinner I discovered them to be socially well assorted. For the first hour or two, indeed, after their arrival, each glared at the other across those triple lines of moral fortification behind which every well−bred Briton takes refuge on appearing at a friend's country−house. But flags of truce were

interchanged over the soup, an armistice was agreed upon during the roast, and the terms of a treaty of peace and amity were finally ratified under the sympathetic influence of George's best champagne. For the achievement of this happy result Alan certainly worked hard, and received therefor many a grateful glance from his sister−in−law. He was more excited than I had ever seen him before, and talked brilliantly and well—though perhaps not as exclusively to his neighbors as they may have wished. His eyes and his attention seemed everywhere at once: one moment he was throwing remarks across to some despairing couple opposite, and the next he was breaking an embarrassing pause in the conversation by some rapid sally of nonsense addressed to the table in general. He formed a great contrast to his brother, who sat gloomy and dejected, making little or no response to the advances of the two dowagers between whom he was placed. After dinner the younger members of the party spent the evening by Alan's initiative, and chiefly under his direction, in a series of lively and rather riotous games such as my nursery days had delighted in, and my schoolroom ones had disdained. It was a great and happy surprise to discover that, grown up, I might again enjoy them. I did so, hugely, and when bedtime came all memories more serious than those of "musical chairs" or "follow my leader" had vanished from my mind. I think, from Alan's glance as he handed me my bed candle, that the pleasure and excitement must have improved my looks.

"I hope you have enjoyed your first evening of gayety, Evie," he said.

"I have," I answered, with happy conviction; "and really I believe that it is chiefly owing to you, Alan." He met my smile by another; but I think that there must have been something in his look which recalled other thoughts, for as I started up the stairs I threw a mischievous glance back at him and whispered, "Now for the horrors of the haunted chamber."

He laughed rather loudly, and saying "Good−night, and good−luck," turned to attend to the other ladies.

His wishes were certainly fulfilled. I got to bed quickly, and—as soon as my happy excitement was sufficiently calmed to admit of it— to sleep. The only thing which disturbed me was the wind, which blew fiercely and loudly all the earlier portion of the night, half arousing me more than once. I spoke of it at breakfast the next morning; but the rest of the world seemed to have slept too heavily to have been aware of it.

IV

The men went out shooting directly after breakfast, and we women passed the day in orthodox country−house fashion,—working and eating; walking and riding; driving and playing croquet; and above, beyond, and through all things, chattering. Beyond a passing sigh while I was washing my hands, or a moment of mournful remembrance while I changed my dress, I had scarcely time even to regret the quiet happiness of the week that was past. In the evening we danced in the great hall. I had two valses with Alan. During a pause for breath, I found that we were standing near the fireplace, on the very spot where he and George had stood on the previous afternoon. The recollection made me involuntarily glance up at his face. It looked sad and worried, and the thought suddenly struck me that his extravagant spirits of the night before, and even his quieter, careful cheerfulness of to−night, had been but artificial moods at best. He turned, and finding my eyes fixed on him, at once plunged into conversation, discussed the peculiarities of one of the guests, good−humoredly enough, but with so much fun as to make me laugh in spite of myself. Then we danced again. The plaintive music, the smooth floor, and the partner were all alike perfect, and I experienced that entire delight of physical enjoyment which I believe nothing but a valse under such circumstances can give. When it was over I turned to Alan, and exclaimed with impulsive appeal, "Oh, I am so happy,—you must be happy too!" He smiled rather uncertainly, and answered, "Don't bother yourself about me, Evie, I am all right. I told you that we Mervyns had bad nerves; and I am rather tired. That's all." I was too passionately determined just then upon happiness, and his was too necessary to mine for me not to believe that he was speaking the truth.

We kept up the dancing till Lucy discovered with a shock that midnight had struck, and that Sunday had begun,

and we were all sent off to bed. I was not long in making my nightly preparations, and had scarcely inserted myself between the sheets when, with a few long moans, the wind began again, more violently even than the night before. It had been a calm, fine day, and I made wise reflections as I listened upon the uncertainty of the north−country climate. What a tempest it was! How it moaned, and howled, and shrieked! Where had I heard the superstition which now came to my mind, that borne upon the wind come the spirits of the drowned, wailing and crying for the sepulture which had been denied them? But there were other sounds in that wind, too. Evil, murderous thoughts, perhaps, which had never taken body in deeds, but which, caught up in the air, now hurled themselves in impotent fury through the world. How I wished the wind would stop. It seemed full of horrible fancies, and it kept knocking them into my head, and it wouldn't leave off. Fancies, or memories—which?—and my mind reverted with a flash to the fearful thoughts which had haunted it the day before in Dame Alice's tower. It was dark now. Those ghastly intangible shapes must have taken full form and color, peopling the old ruin with their ageless hideousness. And the storm had found them there and borne them along with it as it blew through the creviced walls. That was why the wind's sound struck so strangely on my brain. Ah! I could hear them now, those still living memories of dead horror. Through the window crannies they came shrieking and wailing. They filled the chimney with spirit sobs, and now they were pressing on, crowding through the room,—eager, eager to reach their prey. Nearer they came;—nearer still! They were round my bed now! Through my closed eyelids I could almost see their dreadful shapes; in all my quivering flesh I felt their terrors as they bent over me,—lower, lower. . . .

With a start I aroused myself and sat up. Was I asleep or awake? I was trembling all over still, and it required the greatest effort of courage I had ever made to enable me to spring from my bed and strike a light. What a state my nerves or my digestion must be in! From my childhood the wind had always affected me strangely, and I blamed myself now for allowing my imagination to run away with me at the first. I found a novel which I had brought up to my room with me, one of the modern, Chinese−American school, where human nature is analyzed with the patient, industrious indifference of the true Celestial. I took the book to bed with me, and soon under its soothing influences fell asleep. I dreamt a good deal,— nightmares, the definite recollection of which, as is so often the case, vanished from my mind as soon as I awoke, leaving only a vague impression of horror. They had been connected with the wind, of that alone I was conscious, and I went down to breakfast, maliciously hoping that others' rest had been as much disturbed as my own.

To my surprise, however, I found that I had again been the only sufferer. Indeed, so impressed were most of the party with the quiet in which their night had been passed, that they boldly declared my storm to have been the creature of my dreams. There is nothing more annoying when you feel yourself aggrieved by fate than to be told that your troubles have originated in your own fancy; so I dropped the subject. Though the discussion spread for a few minutes round the whole table, Alan took no part in it. Neither did George, except for what I thought a rather unnecessarily rough expression of his disbelief in the cause of my night's disturbance. As we rose from breakfast I saw Alan glance towards his brother, and make a movement, evidently with the purpose of speaking to him. Whether or not George was aware of the look or action, I cannot say; but at the same moment he made rapidly across the room to where one of his principal guests was standing, and at once engaged him in conversation. So earnestly and so volubly was he borne on, that they were still talking together when we ladies appeared again some minutes later, prepared for our walk to church. That was not the only occasion during the day on which I witnessed as I thought the same by−play going on. Again and again Alan appeared to be making efforts to engage George in private conversation, and again and again the latter successfully eluded him.

The church was about a mile away from the house, and as Lucy did not like having the carriages out on a Sunday, one service a week as a rule contented the household. In the afternoon we took the usual Sunday walk. On returning from it, I had just taken off my outdoor things, and was issuing from my bedroom, when I found myself face to face with Alan. He was coming out of George's study, and had succeeded apparently in obtaining that interview for which he had been all day seeking. One glance at his face told me what its nature had been. We paused opposite each other for a moment, and he looked at me earnestly.

"Are you going to church?" he inquired at last, abruptly.

"No," I answered, with some surprise. "I did not know that any one was going this evening."

"Will you come with me?"

"Yes, certainly; if you don't mind waiting a moment for me to put my things on."

"There's plenty of time," he answered; "meet me in the hall."

A few minutes later we started.

It was a calm, cloudless night, and although the moon was not yet half−full, and already past her meridian, she filled the clear air with gentle light. Not a word broke our silence. Alan walked hurriedly, looking straight before him, his head upright, his lips twitching nervously, while every now and then a half−uttered moan escaped unconsciously from between them. At last I could bear it no longer, and burst forth with the first remark which occurred to me. We were passing a big, black, queer−shaped stone standing in rather a lonely uncultivated spot at one end of the garden. It was an old acquaintance of my childhood; but my thoughts had been turned towards it now from the fact that I could see it from my bedroom window, and had been struck afresh by its uncouth, incongruous appearance.

"Isn't there some story connected with that stone?" I asked. "I remember that we always called it the Dead Stone as children."

Alan cast a quick, sidelong glance in that direction, and his brows contracted in an irritable frown. "I don't know," he answered shortly; "they say that there is a woman buried beneath it, I believe."

"A woman buried there!" I exclaimed in surprise; "but who?"

"How should I know? They know nothing whatever about it. The place is full of stupid traditions of that kind." Then, looking suspiciously round at me, "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know; it was just something to say," I answered plaintively. His strange mood so worked upon my nerves, that it was all that I could do to restrain my tears. I think that my tone struck his conscience, for he made a few feverish attempts at conversation after that. But they were so entirely abortive that he soon abandoned the effort, and we finished our walk to church as speechlessly as we had begun it.

The service was bright, and the sermon perhaps a little commonplace, but sensible as it seemed to me in matter, and adequate in style. The peaceful evening hymn which followed, the short solemn pause of silent prayer at the end, soothed and refreshed my spirit. A hasty glance at my companion's face as he stood waiting for me in the porch, with the full light from the church streaming round him, assured me that the same influence had touched him too. Haggard and sad he still looked, it is true; but his features were composed, and the expression of actual pain had left his eyes.

Silent as we had come we started homeward through the waning moonlight, but this silence was of a very different nature to the other, and after a minute or two I did not hesitate to break it.

"It was a good sermon?" I observed, interrogatively.

"Yes," he assented, "I suppose you would call it so; but I confess that I should have found the text more impressive without its exposition."

"Poor man!"

"But don't you often find it so?" he asked. "Do you not often wish, to take this evening's instance, that clergymen would infuse themselves with something of St. Paul's own spirit? Then perhaps they would not water all the strength out of his words in their efforts to explain them."

"That is rather a large demand to make upon them, is it not?"

"Is it?" he questioned. "I don't ask them to be inspired saints. I don't expect St. Paul's breadth and depth of thought. But could they not have something of his vigorous completeness, something of the intensity of his feeling and belief? Look at the text of to− night. Did not the preacher's examples and applications take something from its awful unqualified strength?"

"Awful!" I exclaimed, in surprise; "that is hardly the expression I should have used in connection with those words."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. The text is very beautiful, of course, and at times, when people are tiresome and one ought to be nice to them, it is very difficult to act up to. But—"

"But you think that 'awful' is rather a big adjective to use for so small a duty," interposed Alan, and the moonlight showed the flicker of a smile upon his face. Then he continued, gravely, "I doubt whether you yourself realize the full import of the words. The precept of charity is not merely a code of rules by which to order our conduct to our neighbors; it is the picture of a spiritual condition, and such, where it exists in us, must by its very nature be roused into activity by anything that affects us. So with this particular injunction, every circumstance in our lives is a challenge to it, and in presence of all alike it admits of one attitude only: 'Beareth all things, endureth all things.' I hope it will be long before that 'all' sticks in your gizzard, Evie,— before you come face to face with things which nature cannot bear, and yet which must be borne."

He stopped, his voice quivering; and then after a pause went on again more calmly, "And throughout it is the same. Moral precepts everywhere, which will admit of no compromise, no limitation, and yet which are at war with our strongest passions. If one could only interpose some 'unless,' some 'except,' even an 'until,' which should be short of the grave. But we cannot. The law is infinite, universal, eternal; there is no escape, no repose. Resist, strive, endure, that is the recurring cry; that is existence."

"And peace," I exclaimed, appealingly. "Where is there room for peace, if that be true?"

He sighed for answer, and then in a changed and lower tone added, "However thickly the clouds mass, however vainly we search for a coming glimmer in their midst, we never doubt that the sky IS still beyond—beyond and around us, infinite and infinitely restful."

He raised his eyes as he spoke, and mine followed his. We had entered the wooded glen. Through the scanty autumn foliage we could see the stars shining faintly in the dim moonlight, and beyond them the deep illimitable blue. A dark world it looked, distant and mysterious, and my young spirit rebelled at the consolation offered me.

"Peace seems a long way off," I whispered.

"It is for me," he answered, gently; "not necessarily for you."

"Oh, but I am worse and weaker than you are. If life is to be all warfare, I must be beaten. I cannot always be fighting."

"Cannot you? Evie, what I have been saying is true of every moral law worth having, of every ideal of life worth striving after, that men have yet conceived. But it is only half the truth of Christianity. You know that. We must strive, for the promise is to him that overcometh; but though our aim be even higher than is that of others, we cannot in the end fail to reach it. The victory of the Cross is ours. You know that? You believe that?"

"Yes" I answered, softly, too surprised to say more. In speaking of religion he, as a rule, showed to the full the reserve which is characteristic of his class and country, and this sudden outburst was in itself astonishing; but the eager anxiety with which he emphasized the last words of appeal impressed and bewildered me still further. We walked on for some minutes in silence. Then suddenly Alan stopped, and turning, took my hand in his. In what direction his mind had been working in the interval I could not divine; but the moment he began to speak I felt that he was now for the first time giving utterance to what had been really at the bottom of his thoughts the whole evening. Even in that dim light I could see the anxious look upon his face, and his voice shook with restrained emotion.

"Evie," he said, "have you ever thought of the world in which our spirits dwell, as our bodies do in this one of matter and sense, and of how it may be peopled? I know," he went on hurriedly, "that it is the fashion nowadays to laugh at such ideas. I envy those who have never had cause to be convinced of their reality, and I hope that you may long remain among the number. But should that not be so, should those unseen influences ever touch your life, I want you to remember then, that, as one of the race for whom Christ died, you have as high a citizenship in that spirit land as any creature there: that you are your own soul's warden, and that neither principalities nor powers can rob you of that your birthright."

I think my face must have shown my bewilderment, for he dropped my hand, and walked on with an impatient sigh.

"You don't understand me. Why should you? I dare−say that I am talking nonsense—only—only—"

His voice expressed such an agony of doubt and hesitation that I burst out—

"I think that I do understand you a little, Alan. You mean that even from unearthly enemies there is nothing that we need really fear—at least, that is, I suppose, nothing worse than death. But that is surely enough!"

"Why should you fear death?" he said, abruptly; "your soul will live."

"Yes, I know that, but still—" I stopped with a shudder.

"What is life after all but one long death?" he went on, with sudden violence. "Our pleasures, our hopes, our youth are all dying; ambition dies, and even desire at last; our passions and tastes will die, or will live only to mourn their dead opportunity. The happiness of love dies with the loss of the loved, and, worst of all, love itself grows old in our hearts and dies. Why should we shrink only from the one death which can free us from all the others?"

"It is not true, Alan!" I cried, hotly. "What you say is not true. There are many things even here which are living and shall live; and if it were otherwise, in everything, life that ends in death is better than no life at all."

"You say that," he answered, "because for you these things are yet living. To leave life now, therefore, while it is full and sweet, untainted by death, surely that is not a fate to fear. Better, a thousand times better, to see the cord cut with one blow while it is still whole and strong, and to launch out straight into the great ocean, than to sit watching through the slow years, while strand after strand, thread by thread, loosens and unwinds itself,— each

with its own separate pang breaking, bringing the bitterness of death without its release.

His manner, the despairing ring in his voice, alarmed me even more than his words. Clinging to his arm with both hands, while the tears sprang to my eyes—

"Alan," I cried, "don't say such things,—don't talk like that. You are making me miserable."

He stopped short at my words, with bent head, his features hidden in the shadow thus cast upon them,—nothing in his motionless form to show what was passing within him. Then he looked up, and turned his face to the moonlight and to me, laying his hand on one of mine.

"Don't be afraid," he said; "it is all right, my little David. You have driven the evil spirit away." And lifting my hand, he pressed it gently to his lips. Then drawing it within his arm, he went on, as he walked forward, "And even when it was on me at its worst, I was not meditating suicide, as I think you imagine. I am a very average specimen of humanity,—neither brave enough to defy the possibilities of eternity nor cowardly enough to shirk those of time. No, I was only trying idiotically to persuade a girl of eighteen that life was not worth living; and more futilely still, myself, that I did not wish her to live. I am afraid, that in my mind philosophy and fact have but small connection with each other; and though my theorizing for your welfare may be true enough, yet,— I cannot help it, Evie,—it would go terribly hard with me if anything were to happen to you."

His voice trembled as he finished. My fear had gone with his return to his natural manner, but my bewilderment remained.

"Why SHOULD there anything happen to me?" I asked.

"That is just it," he answered, after a pause, looking straight in front of him and drawing his hand wearily over his brow. "I know of no reason why there should." Then giving a sigh, as if finally to dismiss from his mind a worrying subject—"I have acted for the best," he said, "and may God forgive me if I have done wrong."

There was a little silence after that, and then he began to talk again, steadily and quietly. The subject was deep enough still, as deep as any that we had touched upon, but both voice and sentiment were calm, bringing peace to my spirit, and soon making me forget the wonder and fear of a few moments before. Very openly did he talk as we passed on across the long trunk shadows and through the glades of silver light; and I saw farther then into the most sacred recesses of his soul than I have ever done before or since.

When we reached home the moon had already set; but some of her beams seemed to have been left behind within my heart, so pure and peaceful was the light which filled it.

The same feeling continued with me all through that evening. After dinner some of the party played and sang. As it was Sunday, and Lucy was rigid in her views, the music was of a sacred character. I sat in a low armchair in a dark corner of the room, my mind too dreamy to think, and too passive to dream. I hardly interchanged three words with Alan, who remained in a still darker spot, invisible and silent the whole time. Only as we left the room to go to bed, I heard Lucy ask him if he had a headache. I did not hear his answer, and before I could see his face he had turned back again into the drawing−room.

V

It was early, and when first I got to my room I felt little inclined for sleep. I wandered to the window, and drawing aside the curtains, looked out upon the still, starlit sky. At least I should rest quiet to−night. The air was very clear, and the sky seemed full of stars. As I stood there scraps of schoolroom learning came back to my mind.

That the stars were all suns, surrounded perhaps in their turn by worlds as large or larger than our own. Worlds beyond worlds, and others farther still, which no man might number or even descry. And about the distance of those wonderful suns too,—that one, for instance, at which I was looking,—what was it that I had been told? That our world was not yet peopled, perhaps not yet formed, when the actual spot of light which now struck my sight first started from the star's surface! While it flashed along, itself the very symbol of speed, the whole of mankind had had time to be born, and live, and die!

My gaze dropped, and fell upon the dim, half−seen outline of the Dead Stone. That woman too. While that one ray speeded towards me her life had been lived and ended, and her body had rotted away into the ground. How close together we all were! Her life and mine; our joys, sufferings, deaths—all crowded together into the space of one flash of light! And yet there was nothing there but a horrible skeleton of dead bones, while I—!

I stopped with a shudder, and turned back into the room. I wished that Alan had not told me what lay under the stone; I wished that I had never asked him. It was a ghastly thing to think about, and spoilt all the beauty of the night to me.

I got quickly into bed, and soon dropped asleep. I do not know how long I slept; but when I woke it was with the consciousness again of that haunting wind.

It was worse than ever. The world seemed filled with its din. Hurling itself passionately against the house, it gathered strength with every gust, till it seemed as if the old walls must soon crash in ruins round me. Gust upon gust; blow upon blow; swelling, lessening, never ceasing. The noise surrounded me; it penetrated my inmost being, as all−pervading as silence itself, and wrapping me in a solitude even more complete. There was nothing left in the world but the wind and I, and then a weird intangible doubt as to my own identity seized me. The wind was real, the wind with its echoes of passion and misery from the eternal abyss; but was there anything else? What was, and what had been, the world of sense and of knowledge, my own consciousness, my very self,—all seemed gathered up and swept away in that one sole−existent fury of sound.

I pulled myself together, and getting out of bed, groped my way to the table which stood between the bed and the fireplace. The matches were there, and my half−burnt candle, which I lit. The wind penetrating the rattling casement circled round the room, and the flame of my candle bent and flared and shrank before it, throwing strange moving lights and shadows in every corner. I stood there shivering in my thin nightdress, half stunned by the cataract of noise beating on the walls outside, and peered anxiously around me. The room was not the same. Something was changed. What was it? How the shadows leaped and fell, dancing in time to the wind's music. Everything seemed alive. I turned my head slowly to the left, and then to the right, and then round—and stopped with a sudden gasp of fear.

The cabinet was open!

I looked away, and back, and again. There was no room for doubt. The doors were thrown back, and were waving gently in the draught. One of the lower drawers was pulled out, and in a sudden flare of the candle−light I could see something glistening at its bottom. Then the light dwindled again, the candle was almost out, and the cabinet showed a dim black mass in the darkness. Up and down went the flame, and each returning brightness flashed back at me from the thing inside the drawer. I stood fascinated, my eyes fixed upon the spot, waiting for the fitful glitter as it came and went. What was there there? I knew that I must go and see, but I did not want to. If only the cabinet would close again before I looked, before I knew what was inside it. But it stood open, and the glittering thing lay there, dragging me towards itself.

Slowly at last, and with infinite reluctance, I went. The drawer was lined with soft white satin, and upon the satin lay a long, slender knife, hilted and sheathed in antique silver, richly set with jewels. I took it up and turned back to the table to examine it. It was Italian in workmanship, and I knew that the carving and chasing of the silver

were more precious even than the jewels which studded it, and whose rough setting gave so firm a grasp to my hand. Was the blade as fair as the covering, I wondered? A little resistance at first, and then the long thin steel slid easily out. Sharp, and bright, and finely tempered it looked with its deadly, tapering point. Stains, dull and irregular, crossed the fine engraving on its surface and dimmed its polish. I bent to examine them more closely, and as I did so a sudden stronger gust of wind blew out the candle. I shuddered a little at the darkness and looked up. But it did not matter: the curtain was still drawn away from the window opposite my bedside, and through it a flood of moonlight was pouring in upon floor and bed.

Putting the sheath down upon the table, I walked to the window to examine the knife more closely by that pale light. How gloriously brilliant it was! darkened now and again by the quickly passing shadows of wind−driven clouds. At least so I thought, and I glanced up and out of the window to see them. A black world met my gaze. Neither moon was there nor moonlight: the broad silver beam in which I stood stretched no farther than the window. I caught my breath, and my limbs stiffened as I looked. No moon, no cloud, no movement in the clear, calm, starlit sky; while still the ghastly light stretched round me, and the spectral shadows drifted across the room.

But it was not all dark outside: one spot caught my eye, bright with a livid unearthly brightness—the Dead Stone shining out into the night like an ember from hell's furnace! There was a horrid semblance of life in the light,—a palpitating, breathing glow,— and my pulses beat in time to it, till I seemed to be drawing it into my veins. It had no warmth, and as it entered my blood my heart grew colder, and my muscles more rigid. My fingers clutched the dagger−hilt till its jeweled roughness pressed painfully into my palm. All the strength of my strained powers seemed gathered in that grasp, and the more tightly I held the more vividly did the rock gleam and quiver with infernal life. The dead woman! The dead woman! What had I to do with her? Let her bones rest in the filth of their own decay,—out there under the accursed stone.

And now the noise of the wind lessens in my ears. Let it go on,— yes, louder and wilder, drowning my senses in its tumult. What is there with me in the room—the great empty room behind me? Nothing; only the cabinet with its waving doors. They are waving to and fro, to and fro—I know it. But there is no other life in the room but that—no, no; no other life in the room but that.

Oh! don't let the wind stop. I can't hear anything while it goes on;—but if it stops! Ah! the gusts grow weaker, struggling, forced into rest. Now—now—they have ceased.

Silence!

A fearful pause.

What is that that I hear? There, behind me in the room?

Do I hear it? Is there anything?

The throbbing of my own blood in my ears.

No, no! There is something as well,—something outside myself.

What is it?

Low; heavy; regular.

God! it is—it is the breath of a living creature! A living creature! here—close to me—alone with me!

The numbness of terror conquers me. I can neither stir nor speak. Only my whole soul strains at my ears to listen.

Where does the sound come from?

Close behind me—close.

Ah−h!

It is from there—from the bed where I was lying a moment ago! . . .

I try to shriek, but the sound gurgles unuttered in my throat. I clutch the stone mullions of the window, and press myself against the panes. If I could but throw myself out!—anywhere, anywhere— away from that dreadful sound—from that thing close behind me in the bed! But I can do nothing. The wind has broken forth again now; the storm crashes round me. And still through it all I hear the ghastly breathing—even, low, scarcely audible—but I hear it. I shall hear it as long as I live! . . .

Is the thing moving?

Is it coming nearer?

No, no; not that,—that was but a fancy to freeze me dead.

But to stand here, with that creature behind me, listening, waiting for the warm horror of its breath to touch my neck! Ah! I cannot. I will look. I will see it face to face. Better any agony than this one.

Slowly, with held breath, and eyes aching in their stretched fixity, I turn. There it is! Clear in the moonlight I see the monstrous form within the bed,—the dark coverlet rises and falls with its heaving breath. . . . Ah! heaven have mercy! Is there none to help, none to save me from this awful presence? . . .

And the knife−hilt draws my fingers round it, while my flesh quivers, and my soul grows sick with loathing. The wind howls, the shadows chase through the room, hunting with fearful darkness more fearful light; and I stand looking, . . . listening. . . .

. . . . . .

I must not stand here for ever; I must be up and doing. What a noise the wind makes, and the rattling of the windows and the doors. If he sleeps through this he will sleep through all. Noiselessly my bare feet tread the carpet as I approach the bed; noiselessly my left arm raises the heavy curtain. What does it hide? Do I not know? The bestial features, half−hidden in coarse, black growth; the muddy, blotched skin, oozing foulness at every pore. Oh, I know them too well! What a monster it is! How the rank breath gurgles through his throat in his drunken sleep. The eyes are closed now, but I know them too; their odious leer, and the venomous hatred with which they can glare at me from their bloodshot setting. But the time has come at last. Never again shall their passion insult me, or their fury degrade me in slavish terror. There he lies; there at my mercy, the man who for fifteen years has made God's light a shame to me, and His darkness a terror. The end has come at last,—the only end possible, the only end left me. On his head be the blood and the crime! God almighty, I am not guilty! The end has come; I can bear my burden no farther.

"Beareth all things, endureth all things."

Where have I heard those words? They are in the Bible; the precept of charity. What has that to do with me? Nothing. I heard the words in my dreams somewhere. A white−faced man said them, a white−faced man with pure eyes. To me?—no, no, not to me; to a girl it was—an ignorant, innocent girl, and she accepted them as an eternal, unqualified law. Let her bear but half that I have borne, let her endure but one−tenth of what I have endured, and then if she dare let her speak in judgment against me.

Softly now; I must draw the heavy coverings away, and bare his breast to the stroke,—the stroke that shall free me. I know well where to plant it; I have learned that from the old lady's Italian. Did he guess why I questioned him so closely of the surest, straightest road to a man's heart? No matter, he cannot hinder me now. Gently! Ah! I have disturbed him. He moves, mutters in his sleep, throws out his arm. Down; down; crouching behind the curtain. Heavens! if he wakes and sees me, he will kill me. No! alas! if only he would. I would kiss the hand that he struck me with; but he is too cruel for that. He will imagine some new and more hellish torture to punish me with. But the knife! I have got that; he shall never touch me living again. . . . He is quieter now. I hear his breath, hoarse and heavy as a wild beast's panting. He draws it more evenly, more deeply. The danger is past. Thank God!

God! What have I to do with Him? A God of Judgment. Ha, ha! Hell cannot frighten me; it will not be worse than earth. Only he will be there too. Not with him, not with him,—send me to the lowest circle of torment, but not with him. There, his breast is bare now. Is the knife sharp? Yes; and the blade is strong enough. Now let me strike—myself afterwards if need be, but him first. Is it the devil that prompts me? Then the devil is my friend, and the friend of the world. No. God is a God of love. He cannot wish such a man to live. He made him, but the devil spoilt him; and let the devil have his handiwork back again. It has served him long enough here; and its last service shall be to make me a murderess.

How the moonlight gleams from the blade as my arm swings up and back: with how close a grasp the rough hilt draws my fingers round it. Now.

A murderess?

Wait a moment. A moment may make me free; a moment may make me— that!

Wait.

Hand and dagger droop again. His life has dragged its slime over my soul; shall his death poison it with a fouler corruption still?

"My own soul's warden."

What was that? Dream memories again.

"Resist, strive, endure."

Easy words. What do they mean for me? To creep back now to bed by his side, and to begin living again to−morrow the life which I have lived to−day? No, no; I cannot do it. Heaven cannot ask it of me. And there is no other way. That or this; this or that. Which shall it be? Ah! I have striven, God knows. I have endured so long that I hoped even to do so to the end. But to−day! Oh! the torment and the outrage: body and soul still bear the stain of it. I thought that my heart and my pride were dead together, but he has stung them again into aching, shameful life. Yesterday I might have spared him, to save my own cold soul from sin; but now it is cold no longer. It burns, it burns and the fire must be slaked.

Ay, I will kill him, and have done with it. Why should I pause any longer? The knife drags my hand back for the stroke. Only the dream surrounds me; the pure man's face is there, white, beseeching, and God's voice rings in my heart—

"To him that overcometh."

But I cannot overcome. Evil has governed my life, and evil is stronger than I am. What shall I do? what shall I do? God, if Thou art stronger than evil, fight for me.

"The victory of the Cross is ours."

Yes, I know it. It is true, it is true. But the knife? I cannot loose the knife if I would. How to wrench it from my own hold? Thou God of Victory be with me! Christ help me!

I seize the blade with my left hand; the two−edged steel slides through my grasp; a sharp pain in fingers and palm; and then— nothing. . . .

. . . . . .

VI

When I again became conscious, I found myself half kneeling, half lying across the bed, my arms stretched out in front of me, my face buried in the clothes. Body and mind were alike numbed. A smarting pain in my left hand, a dreadful terror in my heart, were at first the only sensations of which I was aware. Slowly, very slowly, sense and memory returned to me, and with them a more vivid intensity of mental anguish, as detail by detail I recalled the weird horror of the night. Had it really happened,—was the thing still there,—or was it all a ghastly nightmare? It was some minutes before I dared either to move or look up, and then fearfully I raised my head. Before me stretched the smooth white coverlet, faintly bright with yellow sunshine. Weak and giddy, I struggled to my feet, and, steadying myself against the foot of the bed, with clenched teeth and bursting heart, forced my gaze round to the other end. The pillow lay there, bare and unmarked save for what might well have been the pressure of my own head. My breath came more freely, and I turned to the window. The sun had just risen, the golden tree−tops were touched with light, faint threads of mist hung here and there across the sky, and the twittering of birds sounded clearly through the crisp autumn air.

It was nothing but a bad dream then, after all, this horror which still hung round me, leaving me incapable of effort, almost of thought. I remembered the cabinet, and looked swiftly in that direction. There it stood, closed as usual, closed as it had been the evening before, as it had been for the last three hundred years, except in my dreams.

Yes, that was it; nothing but a dream,—a gruesome, haunting dream. With an instinct of wiping out the dreadful memory, I raised my hand wearily to my forehead. As I did so, I became conscious again of how it hurt me. I looked at it. It was covered with half−dried blood, and two straight clean cuts appeared, one across the palm and one across the inside of the fingers just below the knuckles. I looked again towards the bed, and, in the place where my hand had rested during my faint, a small patch of red blood was to be seen.

Then it was true! Then it had all happened! With a low shuddering sob I threw myself down upon the couch at the foot of the bed, and lay there for some minutes, my limbs trembling, and my soul shrinking within me. A mist of evil, fearful and loathsome, had descended upon my girlhood's life, sullying its ignorant innocence, saddening its brightness, as I felt, for ever. I lay there till my teeth began to chatter, and I realized that I was bitterly cold. To return to that accursed bed was impossible, so I pulled a rug which hung at one end of the sofa over me, and, utterly worn out in mind and body, fell uneasily asleep.

I was roused by the entrance of my maid. I stopped her exclamations and questions by shortly stating that I had had a bad night, had been unable to rest in bed, and had had an accident with my hand,—without further specifying of what description.

"I didn't know that you had been feeling unwell when you went to bed last night, miss," she said.

"When I went to bed last night? Unwell? What do you mean?"

"Only Mr. Alan has just asked me to let him know how you find yourself this morning," she answered.

Then he expected something, dreaded something. Ah! why had he yielded and allowed me to sleep here, I asked myself bitterly, as the incidents of the day before flashed through my mind.

"Tell him," I said, "what I have told you; and say that I wish to speak to him directly after breakfast." I could not confide my story to any one else, but speak of it I must to some one or go mad.

Every moment passed in that place was an added misery. Much to my maid's surprise I said that I would dress in her room—the little one which, as I have said, was close to my own. I felt better there; but my utter fatigue and my wounded hand combined to make my toilet slow, and I found that most of the party had finished breakfast when I reached the dining−room. I was glad of this, for even as it was I found it difficult enough to give coherent answers to the questions which my white face and bandaged hand called forth. Alan helped me by giving a resolute turn to the conversation. Once only our eyes met across the table. He looked as haggard and worn as I did: I learned afterwards that he had passed most of that fearful night pacing the passage outside my door, though he listened in vain for any indication of what was going on within the room.

The moment I had finished breakfast he was by my side. "You wish to speak to me? now?" he asked in a low tone.

"Yes; now," I answered, breathlessly, and without raising my eyes from the ground.

"Where shall we go? Outside? It is a bright day, and we shall be freer there from interruption."

I assented; and then looking up at him appealingly, "Will you fetch my things for me? I CANNOT go up to that room again."

He seemed to understand me, nodded, and was gone. A few minutes later we left the house, and made our way in silence towards a grassy spot on the side of the ravine where we had already indulged in more than one friendly talk.

As we went, the Dead Stone came for a moment into view. I seized Alan's arm in an almost convulsive grip. "Tell me," I whispered,— "you refused to tell me yesterday, but you must now,—who is buried beneath that rock?"

There was now neither timidity nor embarrassment in my tone. The horrors of that house had become part of my life for ever, and their secrets were mine by right. Alan, after a moment's pause, a questioning glance at my face, tacitly accepted the position.

"I told you the truth," he replied, "when I said that I did not know; but I can tell you the popular tradition on the subject, if you like. They say that Margaret Mervyn, the woman who murdered her husband, is buried there, and that Dame Alice had the rock placed over her grave,—whether to save it from insult or to mark it out for opprobrium, I never heard. The poor people about here do not care to go near the place after dark, and among the older ones there are still some, I believe, who spit at the suicide's grave as they pass."

"Poor woman, poor woman!" I exclaimed, in a burst of uncontrollable compassion.

"Why should you pity her?" demanded he with sudden sternness; "she WAS a suicide and a murderess too. It would be better for the public conscience, I believe, if such were still hung in chains, or buried at the cross−roads with a stake through their bodies."

"Hush, Alan, hush!" I cried hysterically, as I clung to him; "don't speak harshly of her: you do not know, you cannot tell, how terribly she was tempted. How can you?"

He looked down at me in bewildered surprise. "How can I?" he repeated. "You speak as if YOU could. What do you mean?"

"Don't ask me," I answered, turning towards him my face,—white, quivering, tear−stained. "Don't ask me. Not now. You must answer my questions first, and after that I will tell you. But I cannot talk of it now. Not yet."

We had reached the place we were in search of as I spoke. There, where the spreading roots of a great beech−tree formed a natural resting place upon the steep side of the ravine, I took my seat, and Alan stretched himself upon the grass beside me. Then looking up at me—"I do not know what questions you would ask," he said, quietly; "but I will answer them, whatever they may be."

But I did not ask them yet. I sat instead with my hands clasping my knee, looking opposite at the glory of harmonious color, or down the glen at the vista of far−off, dream−like loveliness, on which it opened out. The yellow autumn sunshine made everything golden, the fresh autumn breezes filled the air with life; but to me a loathsome shadow seemed to rest upon all, and to stretch itself out far beyond where my eyes could reach, befouling the beauty of the whole wide world. At last I spoke. "You have known of it all, I suppose; of this curse that is in the world,—sin and suffering, and what such words mean."

"Yes," he said, looking at me with wondering pity, "I am afraid so."

"But have you known them as they are known to some,—agonized, hopeless suffering, and sin that is all but inevitable? Some time in your life probably you have realized that such things are: it has come home to you, and to every one else, no doubt, except a few ignorant girls such as I was yesterday. But there are some,—yes, thousands and thousands,—who even now, at this moment, are feeling sorrow like that, are sinking deep, deeper into the bottomless pit of their soul's degradation. And yet men who know this, who have seen it, laugh, talk, are happy, amuse themselves—how can they, how can they?" I stopped with a catch in my voice, and then stretching out my arms in front of me—"And it is not only men. Look how beautiful the earth is, and God has made it, and lets the sun crown it every day with a new glory, while this horror of evil broods over and poisons it all. Oh, why is it so? I cannot understand it."

My arms drooped again as I finished, and my eyes sought Alan's. His were full of tears, but there was almost a smile quivering at the corners of his lips as he replied: "When you have found an answer to that question, Evie, come and tell me and mankind at large: it will be news to us all." Then he continued—"But, after all, the earth is beautiful, and the sun does shine: we have our own happiness to rejoice in, our own sorrows to bear, the suffering that is near to us to grapple with. For the rest, for this blackness of evil which surrounds us, and which we can do nothing to lighten, it will soon, thank God, become vague and far off to you as it is to others: your feeling of it will be dulled, and, except at moments, you too will forget."

"But that is horrible," I exclaimed, passionately; "the evil will be there all the same, whether I feel it or not. Men and women will be struggling in their misery and sin, only I shall be too selfish to care."

"We cannot go outside the limits of our own nature," he replied; "our knowledge is shallow and our spiritual insight dark, and God in His mercy has made our hearts shallow too, and our imagination dull. If, knowing and trusting only as men do, we were to feel as angels feel, earth would be hell indeed."

It was cold comfort, but at that moment anything warmer or brighter would have been unreal and utterly repellent to me. I hardly took in the meaning of his words, but it was as if a hand had been stretched out to me, struggling in the deep mire, by one who himself felt solid ground beneath him. Where he stood I also might some day stand,

and that thought seemed to make patience possible.

It was he who first broke the silence which followed. "You were saying that you had questions to ask me. I am impatient to put mine in return, so please go on."

It had been a relief to me to turn even to generalizations of despair from the actual horror which had inspired them, and to which my mind was thus recalled. With an effort I replied, "Yes, I want to ask you about that room—the room in which I slept, and— and the murder which was committed there." In spite of all that I could do, my voice sank almost to a whisper as I concluded, and I was trembling from head to foot.

"Who told you that a murder was committed there?" Something in my face as he asked the question made him add quickly, "Never mind. You are right. That is the room in which Hugh Mervyn was murdered by his wife. I was surprised at your question, for I did not know that anyone but my brothers and myself were aware of the fact. The subject is never mentioned: it is closely connected with one intensely painful to our family, and besides, if spoken of, there would be inconveniences arising from the superstitious terrors of servants, and the natural dislike of guests to sleep in a room where such a thing had happened. Indeed it was largely with the view of wiping out the last memory of the crime's locality, that my father renewed the interior of the room some twenty years ago. The only tradition which has been adhered to in connection with it is the one which has now been violated in your person—the one which precludes any unmarried woman from sleeping there. Except for that, the room has, as you know, lost all sinister reputation, and its title of 'haunted' has become purely conventional. Nevertheless, as I said, you are right—that is undoubtedly the room in which the murder was committed."

He stopped and looked up at me, waiting for more.

"Go on; tell me about it, and what followed." My lips formed the words; my heart beat too faintly for my breath to utter them.

"About the murder itself there is not much to tell. The man, I believe, was an inhuman scoundrel, and the woman first killed him in desperation, and afterwards herself in despair. The only detail connected with the actual crime of which I have ever heard, was the gale that was blowing that night—the fiercest known to this countryside in that generation; and it has always been said since that any misfortune to the Mervyns—especially any misfortune connected with the curse—comes with a storm of wind. That was why I so disliked your story of the imaginary tempests which have disturbed your nights since you slept there. As to what followed,"—he gave a sigh,—"that story is long enough and full of incident. On the morning after the murder, so runs the tale, Dame Alice came down to the Grange from the tower to which she had retired when her son's wickednesses had driven her from his house, and there in the presence of the two corpses she foretold the curse which should rest upon their descendants for generations to come. A clergyman who was present, horrified, it is said at her words, adjured her by the mercy of Heaven to place some term to the doom which she had pronounced. She replied that no mortal might reckon the fruit of a plant which drew its life from hell; that a term there should be, but as it passed the wisdom of man to fix it, so it should pass the wit of man to discover it. She then placed in the room this cabinet, constructed by herself and her Italian follower, and said that the curse should not depart from the family until the day when its doors were unlocked and its legend read.

"Such is the story. I tell it to you as it was told to me. One thing only is certain, that the doom thus traditionally foretold has been only too amply fulfilled."

"And what was the doom?"

Alan hesitated a little, and when he spoke his voice was almost awful in its passionless sternness, in its despairing finality; it seemed to echo the irrevocable judgment which his words pronounced: "That the crimes against God and each other which had destroyed the parents' life should enter into the children's blood, and that never

thereafter should there fail a Mervyn to bring shame or death upon one generation of his father's house.

"There were two sons of that ill−fated marriage," he went on after a pause, "boys at the time of their parents' death. When they grew up they both fell in love with the same woman, and one killed the other in a duel. The story of the next generation was a peculiarly sad one. Two brothers took opposite sides during the civil troubles; but so fearful were they of the curse which lay upon the family, that they chiefly made use of their mutual position in order to protect and guard each other. After the wars were over, the younger brother, while traveling upon some parliamentary commission, stopped a night at the Grange. There, through a mistake, he exchanged the report which he was bringing to London for a packet of papers implicating his brother and several besides in a royalist plot. He only discovered his error as he handed the papers to his superior, and was but just able to warn his brother in time for him to save his life by flight. The other men involved were taken and executed, and as it was known by what means information had reached the Government, the elder Mervyn was universally charged with the vilest treachery. It is said that when after the Restoration his return home was rumored the neighboring gentry assembled, armed with riding whips, to flog him out of the country if he should dare to show his face there. He died abroad, shame−stricken and broken−hearted. It was his son, brought up by his uncle in the sternest tenets of Puritanism, who, coming home after a lengthened journey, found that during his absence his sister had been shamefully seduced. He turned her out of doors, then and there, in the midst of a bitter January night, and the next morning her dead body and that of her new−born infant were found half buried in the fresh−fallen snow on the top of the wolds. The 'white lady' is still supposed by the villagers to haunt that side of the glen. And so it went on. A beautiful, heartless Mervyn in Queen Anne's time enticed away the affections of her sister's betrothed, and on the day of her own wedding with him, her forsaken sister was found drowned by her own act in the pond at the bottom of the garden. Two brothers were soldiers together in some Continental war, and one was involuntarily the means of discovering and exposing the treason of the other. A girl was betrayed into a false marriage, and her life ruined by a man who came into the house as her brother's friend, and whose infamous designs were forwarded and finally accomplished by that same brother's active though unsuspecting assistance. Generation after generation, men or women, guilty or innocent, through the action of their own will or in spite of it, the curse has never yet failed of its victims."

"Never yet? But surely in our own time—your father?" I did not dare to put the question which was burning my lips.

"Have you never heard of the tragic end of my poor young uncles?" he replied. "They were several years older than my father. When boys of fourteen and fifteen they were sent out with the keeper for their first shooting lesson, and the elder shot his brother through the heart. He himself was delicate, and they say that he never entirely recovered from the shock. He died before he was twenty, and my father, then a child of seven years old, became the heir. It was partly, no doubt, owing to this calamity having thus occurred before he was old enough to feel it, that his comparative skepticism on the whole subject was due. To that I suppose, and to the fact that he grew up in an age of railways and liberal culture."

"He didn't believe, then, in the curse?"

"Well, rather, he thought nothing about it. Until, that is, the time came when it took effect, to break his heart and end his life."

"How do you mean?"

There was silence for a little. Alan had turned away his head, so that I could not see his face. Then—

"I suppose you have never been told the true story of why Jack left the country?"

"No. Was he—is he—?"

"He is one victim of the curse in this generation, and I, God help me, am the other, and perhaps more wretched one."

His voice trembled and broke, and for the first time that day I almost forgot the mysterious horror of the night before, in my pity for the actual, tangible suffering before me. I stretched out my hand to his, and his fingers closed on mine with a sudden, painful grip. Then quietly—

"I will tell you the story," he said, "though since that miserable time I have spoken of it to no one."

There was a pause before he began. He lay there by my side, his gaze turned across me up the sunbright, autumn−tinted glen, but his eyes shadowed by the memories which he was striving to recall and arrange in due order in his mind. And when he did speak it was not directly to begin the promised recital.

"You never knew Jack," he said, abruptly.

"Hardly," I acquiesced. "I remember thinking him very handsome."

"There could not be two opinions as to that," he answered. "And a man who could have done anything he liked with life, had things gone differently. His abilities were fine, but his strength lay above all in his character: he was strong,—strong in his likes and in his dislikes, resolute, fearless, incapable of half measures—a man, every inch of him. He was not generally popular—stiff, hard, unsympathetic, people called him. From one point of view, and one only, he perhaps deserved the epithets. If a woman lost his respect she seemed to lose his pity too. Like a mediaeval monk, he looked upon such rather as the cause than the result of male depravity, and his contempt for them mingled with anger, almost, as I sometimes thought, with hatred. And this attitude was, I have no doubt, resented by the men of his own class and set, who shared neither his faults nor his virtues. But in other ways he was not hard. He could love; I, at least, have cause to know it. If you would hear his story rightly from my lips, Evie, you must try and see him with my eyes. The friend who loved me, and whom I loved with the passion which, if not the strongest, is certainly, I believe, the most enduring of which men are capable,—that perfect brother's love, which so grows into our being that when it is at peace we are scarcely conscious of its existence, and when it is wounded our very life−blood seems to flow at the stroke. Brothers do not always love like that: I can only wish that we had not done so.

VII

"Well, about five years ago, before I had taken my degree, I became acquainted with a woman whom I will call 'Delia,'—it is near enough to the name by which she went. She was a few years older than myself, very beautiful, and I believed her to be what she described herself—the innocent victim of circumstance and false appearance, a helpless prey to the vile calumnies of worldlings. In sober fact, I am afraid that, whatever her life may have been actually at the time that I knew her—a subject which I have never cared to investigate—her past had been not only bad enough irretrievably to fix her position in society, but bad enough to leave her without an ideal in the world, though still retaining within her heart the possibilities of a passion which, from the moment that it came to life, was strong enough to turn her whole existence into one desperate reckless straining after an object hopelessly beyond her reach. That was the woman with whom, at the age of twenty, I fancied myself in love. She wanted to get a husband, and she thought me—rightly—ass enough to accept the post. I was very young then even for my years,—a student, an idealist, with an imagination highly developed, and no knowledge whatever of the world as it actually is. Anyhow, before I had known her a month, I had determined to make her my wife. My parents were abroad at the time, George and Lucy here, so that it was to Jack that I imparted the news of my resolve. As you may imagine, he did all that he could to shake it. But I was immovable. I disbelieved his facts, and despised his contempt from the standpoint of my own superior morality. This state of things continued for several weeks, during the greater part of which time I was at Oxford. I only knew that while I was there, Jack had made Delia's

acquaintance, and was apparently cultivating it assiduously.

"One day, during the Easter vacation, I got a note from her asking me to supper at her house. Jack was invited too: we lodged together while my people were away.

"There is no need to dwell upon that supper. There were two or three women there of her own sort, or worse, and a dozen men from among the most profligate in London. The conversation was, I should think, bad even for that class; and she, the goddess of my idolatry, outstripped them all by the foul, coarse shamelessness of her language and behavior. Before the entertainment was half over, I rose and took my leave, accompanied by Jack and another man,— Legard was his name,—who I presume was bored. Just as we had passed through into the anteroom, which lay beyond the one in which we had been eating, Delia followed us, and laying her hand on Jack's arm, said that she must speak with him. Legard and I went into the outer hall, and we had not been there more than a minute when the door from the anteroom opened, and we heard Delia's voice. I remember the words well,—that was not the only occasion on which I was to hear them. 'I will keep the ring as a record of my love,' she said, 'and understand, that though you may forget, I never shall.' Jack came through, the door closed, and as we went out I glanced towards his left hand, and saw, as I expected to see, the absence of the ring which he usually wore there. It contained a gem which my mother had picked up in the East, and I knew that he valued it quite peculiarly. We always called it Jack's talisman.

"A miserable time followed, a time for me of agonizing wonder and doubt, during which regret for my dead illusion was entirely swallowed up in the terrible dread of my brother's degradation. Then came the announcement of his engagement to Lady Sylvia Grey; and a week later, the very day after I had finally returned to London from Oxford, I received a summons from Delia to come and see her. Curiosity, and the haunting fear about Jack, which still hung round me, induced me to consent to what otherwise would have been intolerably repellent to me, and I went. I found her in a mad passion of fury. Jack had refused to see her or to answer her letters, and she had sent for me, that I might give him her message,—tell him that he belonged to her and her only, and that he never should marry another woman. Angry at my interference, Jack disdained even to repudiate her claims, only sending back a threat of appealing to the police if she ventured upon any further annoyance. I wrote as she told me, and she emphasized my silence on the subject by writing back to me a more definite and explicit assertion of her rights. Beyond that for some weeks she made no sign. I have no doubt that she had means of keeping watch upon both his movements and mine; and during that time, as she relinquished gradually all hopes of inducing him to abandon his purpose, she was being driven to her last despairing resolve.

"Later, when all was over, Jack told me the story of that spring and summer. He told me how, when he found me immovable on the subject, he had resolved to stop the marriage somehow through Delia herself. He had made her acquaintance, and sought her society frequently. She had taken a fancy to him, and he admitted that he had availed himself of this fact to increase his intimacy with her, and, as he hoped ultimately, his power over her. But he was not conscious of ever having varied in his manner towards her of contemptuous indifference. This contradictory behavior,—his being constantly near her, yet always beyond her reach,—was probably the very thing which excited her fancy into passion, the one strong passion of the poor woman's life. Then came his deliberate demand that she should by her own act unmask herself in my sight. The unfortunate woman tried to bargain for some proof of affection in return, and on this occasion had first openly declared her feelings towards him. He did not believe her; he refused her terms; but when as her payment she asked for the ring which was so especially associated with himself, he agreed to give it to her. Otherwise hoping, no doubt against hope, dreading above all things a quarrel and final separation, she submitted unconditionally. And from the time of that evening, when Legard and I had overheard her parting words, Jack never saw her again until the last and final catastrophe.

"It was in July. My parents had returned to England, but had come straight on here. Jack and I were dining together with Lady Sylvia at her father's house—her brother, young Grey, making the fourth at dinner. I had arranged to go to a party with your mother, and I told the servants that a lady would call for me early in the evening. The house stood in Park Lane, and after dinner we all went out on to the broad balcony which opened

from the drawing− room. There was a strong wind blowing that night, and I remember well the vague, disquieted feeling of unreality that possessed me,— sweeping through me, as it were, with each gust of wind. Then, suddenly, a servant stood behind me, saying that the lady had come for me, and was in the drawing−room. Shocked that my aunt should have troubled herself to come so far, I turned quickly, stepped back into the room, and found myself face to face with Delia. She was fully dressed for the evening, with a long silk opera−cloak over her shoulders, her face as white as her gown, her splendid eyes strangely wide open and shining. I don't know what I said or did; I tried to get her away, but it was too late. The others had heard us, and appeared at the open window. Jack came forward at once, speaking rapidly, fiercely; telling her to leave the house at once; promising desperately that he would see her in his own rooms on the morrow. Well I remember how her answer rang out,—

"'Neither to−morrow nor another day: I will never leave you again while I live.'

"At the same instant she drew something swiftly from under her cloak, there was the sound of a pistol shot and she lay dead at our feet, her blood splashing upon Jack's shirt and hands as she fell."

Alan paused in his recital. He was trembling from head to foot; but he kept his eyes turned steadily downwards, and both face and voice were cold—almost expressionless.

"Of course there was an inquest," he resumed, "which, as usual, exercised its very ill−defined powers in inquiring into all possible motives for the suicide. Young Grey, who had stepped into the room just before the shot had been fired, swore to the last words Delia had uttered; Legard to those he had overheard the night of that dreadful supper: there were scores of men to bear witness to the intimate relations which had existed between her and Jack during the whole of the previous spring. I had to give evidence. A skillful lawyer had been retained by one of her sisters, and had been instructed by her on points which no doubt she had originally learnt from Delia herself. In his hands, I had not only to corroborate Grey and Legard, and to give full details of that last interview, but also to swear to the peculiar value which Jack attached to the talisman ring which he had given Delia; to the language she had held when I saw her after my return from Oxford; to her subsequent letter, and Jack's fatal silence on the occasion. The story by which Jack and I strove to account for the facts was laughed at as a clumsy invention, and my undisguised reluctance in giving evidence added greatly to its weight against my brother's character.

"The jury returned a verdict of suicide while of unsound mind, the result of desertion by her lover. You may imagine how that verdict was commented upon by every Radical newspaper in the kingdom, and for once society more than corroborated the opinions of the press. The larger public regarded the story as an extreme case of the innocent victim and the cowardly society villain. It was only among a comparatively small set that Delia's reputation was known, and there, in view of Jack's notorious and peculiar intimacy, his repudiation of all relations with her was received with contemptuous incredulity. That he should have first entered upon such relations at the very time when he was already courting Lady Sylvia was regarded even in those circles as a 'strong order,' and they looked upon his present attitude with great indignation, as a cowardly attempt to save his own character by casting upon the dead woman's memory all the odium of a false accusation. With an entire absence of logic, too, he was made responsible for the suicide having taken place in Lady Sylvia's presence. She had broken off the engagement the day after the catastrophe, and her family, a clan powerful in the London world, furious at the mud through which her name had been dragged, did all that they could to intensify the feeling already existing against Jack.

"Not a voice was raised in his defense. He was advised to leave the army; he was requested to withdraw from some of his clubs, turned out of others, avoided by his fast acquaintances, cut by his respectable ones. It was enough to kill a weaker man.

"He showed no resentment at the measure thus dealt out to him. Indeed, at the first, except for Sylvia's desertion of him, he seemed dully indifferent to it all. It was as if his soul had been stunned, from the moment that that wretched woman's blood had splashed upon his fingers, and her dead eyes had looked up into his own.

"But it was not long before he realized the full extent of the social damnation which had been inflicted upon him, and he then resolved to leave the country and go to America. The night before he started he came down here to take leave. I was here looking after my parents—George, whose mind was almost unhinged by the family disgrace, having gone abroad with his wife. My mother at the first news of what had happened had taken to her bed, never to leave it again; and thus it was in my presence alone, up there in my father's little study, that Jack gave him that night the whole story. He told it quietly enough; but when he had finished, with a sudden outburst of feeling he turned upon me. It was I who had been the cause of it all. My insensate folly had induced him to make the unhappy woman's acquaintance, to allow and even encourage her fatal love, to commit all the blunders and sins which had brought about her miserable ending and his final overthrow. It was by means of me that she had obtained access to him on that dreadful night; my evidence which most utterly damned him in public opinion; through me he had lost his reputation, his friends, his career, his country, the woman he loved, his hopes for the future; through me, above all, that the burden of that horrible death would lie for ever on his soul. He was lashing himself to fury with his own words as he spoke; and I stood leaning against the wall opposite to him, cold, dumb, unresisting, when suddenly my father interrupted. I think that both Jack and I had forgotten his presence; but at the sound of his voice, changed from what we had ever heard it, we turned to him, and I then for the first time saw in his face the death−look which never afterwards quitted it.

"'Stop, Jack,' he said; 'Alan is not to blame; and if it had not been in this way, it would have been in some other. I only am guilty, who brought you both into existence with my own hell− stained blood in your veins. If you wish to curse anyone, curse your family, your name, me if you will, and may God forgive me that you were ever born into the world!'"

Alan stopped with a shudder, and then continued, dully, "It was when I heard those words, the most terrible that a father could have uttered, that I first understood all that that old sixteenth− century tale might mean to me and mine,—I have realized it vividly enough since. Early the next morning, when the dawn was just breaking, Jack came to the door of my room to bid me good−by. All his passion was gone. His looks and tones seemed part and parcel of the dim gray morning light. He freely withdrew all the charges he had made against me the night before; forgave me all the share that I had had in his misfortunes; and then begged that I would never come near him, or let him hear from me again. 'The curse is heavy upon us both,' he said, 'and it is the only favor which you can do me.' I have never seen him since."

"But you have heard of him!" I exclaimed; "what has become of him?"

Alan raised himself to a sitting posture. "The last that I heard," he said, with a catch in his voice, "was that in his misery and hopelessness he was taking to drink. George writes to him, and does what he can; but I—I dare not say a word, for fear it should turn to poison on my lips,—I dare not lift a hand to help him, for fear it should have power to strike him to the ground. The worst may be yet to come; I am still living, still living: there are depths of shame to which he has not sunk. And oh, Evie, Evie, he is my own, my best−loved brother!"

All his composure was gone now. His voice rose to a kind of wail with the last words, and folding his arms on his raised knee, he let his head fall upon them, while his figure quivered with scarcely restrained emotion. There was a silence for some moments while he sat thus, I looking on in wretched helplessness beside him. Then he raised his head, and, without looking round at me, went on in a low tone: "And what is in the future? I pray that death instead of shame may be the portion of the next generation, and I look at George's boys only to wonder which of them is the happy one who shall some day lie dead at his brother's feet. Are you surprised at my resolution never to marry? The fatal prophecy is rich in its fulfillment; none of our name and blood are safe; and the day might come when I too should have to call upon my children to curse me for their birth,—should have to watch while the burden which I could no longer bear alone pressed the life from their mother's heart."

Through the tragedy of this speech I was conscious of a faint suggestion of comfort, a far−off glimmer, as of unseen home−lights on a midnight sky. I was in no mood then to understand, or to seek to understand, what it

was; but I know now that his words had removed the weight of helpless banishment from my spirit—that his heart, speaking through them to my own, had made me for life the sharer of his grief.

VIII

Presently he drew his shoulders together with a slight determined jerk, threw himself back upon the grass, and turning to me, with that tremulous, haggard smile upon his lips which I knew so well, but which had never before struck me with such infinite pathos, "Luckily," he said, "there are other things to do in life besides being happy. Only perhaps you understand now what I meant last night when I spoke of things which flesh and blood cannot bear, and yet which must be borne."

Suddenly and sharply his words roused again into activity the loathsome memory which my interest in his story had partially deadened. He noticed the quick involuntary contraction of my muscles, and read it aright. "That reminds me," he went on; "I must claim your promise. I have told you my story. Now, tell me yours."

I told him; not as I have set it down here, though perhaps even in greater detail, but incoherently, bit by bit, while he helped me out with gentle questions, quickly comprehending gestures, and patient waiting during the pauses of exhaustion which perforce interposed themselves. As my story approached its climax, his agitation grew almost equal to my own, and he listened to the close, his teeth clenched, his brows bent, as if passing again with me through that awful conflict. When I had finished, it was some moments before either of us could speak; and then he burst forth into bitter self−reproach for having so far yielded to his brother's angry obstinacy as to allow me to sleep the third night in that fatal room.

"It was cowardice," he said, "sheer cowardice! After all that has happened, I dared not have a quarrel with one of my own blood. And yet if I had not hardened my heart, I had reason to know what I was risking."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"Those other two girls who slept there," he said, breathlessly; "it was in each case after the third night there that they were found dead—dead, Evie, so runs the story, with a mark upon their necks similar in shape and position to the death−wound which Margaret Mervyn inflicted upon herself."

I could not speak, but I clutched his hand with an almost convulsive grip.

"And I knew the story,—I knew it!" he cried. "As boys we were not allowed to hear much of our family traditions, but this one I knew. When my father redid the interior of the east room, he removed at the same time a board from above the doorway outside, on which had been written—it is said by Dame Alice herself—a warning upon this very subject. I happened to be present when our old housekeeper, who had been his nurse, remonstrated with him warmly upon this act; and I asked her afterwards what the board was, and why she cared about it so much. In her excitement she told me the story of those unhappy girls, repeating again and again that, if the warning were taken away, evil would come of it."

"And she was right," I said, dully. "Oh, if only your father had left it there!"

"I suppose," he answered, speaking more quietly, "that he was impatient of traditions which, as I told you, he at that time more than half despised. Indeed he altered the shape of the doorway, raising it, and making it flat and square, so that the old inscription could not have been replaced, even had it been wished. I remember it was fitted round the low Tudor arch which was previously there."

My mind, too worn with many emotions for deliberate thought, wandered on languidly, and as it were

mechanically, upon these last trivial words. The doorway presented itself to my view as it had originally stood, with the discarded warning above it; and then, by a spontaneous comparison of mental vision, I recalled the painted board which I had noticed three days before in Dame Alice's tower. I suggested to Alan that it might have been the identical one—its shape was as he described. "Very likely," he answered, absently. "Do you remember what the words were?"

"Yes, I think so," I replied. "Let me see." And I repeated them slowly, dragging them out as it were one by one from my memory:

"Where the woman sinned the maid shall win;
But God help the maid that sleeps within."

"You see," I said, turning towards him slowly, "the last line is a warning such as you spoke of."

But to my surprise Alan had sprung to his feet, and was looking down at me, his whole body quivering with excitement. "Yes, Evie," he cried, "and the first line is a prophecy;—where the woman sinned the maid HAS won." He seized the hand which I instinctively reached out to him. "We have not seen the end of this yet," he went on, speaking rapidly, and as if articulation had become difficult to him. "Come, Evie, we must go back to the house and look at the cabinet—now, at once."

I had risen to my feet by this time, but I shrank away at those words. "To that room? Oh, Alan—no, I cannot."

He had hold of my hand still, and he tightened his grasp upon it. "I shall be with you; you will not be afraid with me," he said. "Come." His eyes were burning, his face flushed and paled in rapid alternation, and his hand held mine like a vice of iron.

I turned with him, and we walked back to the Grange, Alan quickening his pace as he went, till I almost had to run by his side. As we approached the dreaded room my sense of repulsion became almost unbearable; but I was now infected by his excitement, though I but dimly comprehended its cause. We met no one on our way, and in a moment he had hurried me into the house, up the stairs, and along the narrow passage, and I was once more in the east room, and in the presence of all the memories of that accursed night. For an instant I stood strengthless, helpless, on the threshold, my gaze fixed panic−stricken on the spot where I had taken such awful part in that phantom tragedy of evil; then Alan threw his arm round me, and drew me hastily on in front of the cabinet. Without a pause, giving himself time neither to speak nor think, he stretched out his left hand and moved the buttons one after another. How or in what direction he moved them I know not; but as the last turned with a click, the doors, which no mortal hand had unclosed for three hundred years, flew back, and the cabinet stood open. I gave a little gasp of fear. Alan pressed his lips closely together, and turned to me with eager questioning in his eyes. I pointed in answer tremblingly at the drawer which I had seen open the night before. He drew it out, and there on its satin bed lay the dagger in its silver sheath. Still without a word he took it up, and reaching his right hand round me, for I could not now have stood had he withdrawn his support, with a swift strong jerk he unsheathed the blade. There in the clear autumn sunshine I could see the same dull stains I had marked in the flickering candle−light, and over them, still ruddy and moist, were the drops of my own half−dried blood. I grasped the lapel of his coat with both my hands, and clung to him like a child in terror, while the eyes of both of us remained fixed as if fascinated upon the knife−blade. Then, with a sudden start of memory, Alan raised his to the cornice of the cabinet, and mine followed. No change that I could detect had taken place in that twisted goldwork; but there, clear in the sight of us both, stood forth the words of the magic motto:

"Pure blood shed by the blood−stained knife
Ends Mervyn shame, heals Mervyn strife."

In low steady tones Alan read out the lines, and then there was silence—on my part of stunned bewilderment, the bewilderment of a spirit overwhelmed beyond the power of comprehension by rushing, conflicting emotions. Alan pressed me closer to him, while the silence seemed to throb with the beating of his heart and the panting of his breath. But except for that he remained motionless, gazing at the golden message before him. At length I felt a movement, and looking up saw his face turned down towards mine, the lips quivering, the cheeks flushed, the eyes soft with passionate feeling. "We are saved, my darling," he whispered; "saved, and through you." Then he bent his head lower, and there in that room of horror, I received the first long lover's kiss from my own dear husband's lips.

. . . . . .

My husband, yes; but not till some time after that. Alan's first act, when he had once fully realized that the curse was indeed removed, was—throwing his budding practice to the winds—to set sail for America. There he sought out Jack, and labored hard to impart to him some of his own newfound hope. It was slow work, but he succeeded at last; and only left him when, two years later, he had handed him over to the charge of a bright−eyed Western girl, to whom the whole story had been told, and who showed herself ready and anxious to help in building up again the broken life of her English lover. To judge from the letters that we have since received, she has shown herself well fitted for the task. Among other things she has money, and Jack's worldly affairs have so prospered that George declares that he can well afford now to waste some of his superfluous cash upon farming a few of his elder brother's acres. The idea seems to smile upon Jack, and I have every hope this winter of being able to institute an actual comparison between our small boy, his namesake, and his own three− year−old Alan. The comparison, by the way, will have to be conditional, for Jacket—the name by which my son and heir is familiarly known—is but a little more than two.

I turn my eyes for a moment, and they fall upon the northern corner of the East Room, which shows round the edge of the house. Then the skeleton leaps from the cupboard of my memory; the icy hand which lies ever near my soul grips it suddenly with a chill shudder. Not for nothing was that wretched woman's life interwoven with my own, if only for an hour; not for nothing did my spirit harbor a conflict and an agony, which, thank God, are far from its own story. Though Margaret Mervyn's dagger failed to pierce my flesh, the wound in my soul may never wholly be healed. I know that that is so; and yet as I turn to start through the sunshine to the cedar shade and its laughing occupants, I whisper to myself with fervent conviction, "It was worth it."