

HUME FERGUS

THE WOODEN
HAND

Fergus Hume

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The Wooden Hand / A Detective Story

CHAPTER I

MISERY CASTLE

"Ah well, Miss Eva, I 'spose your pa'll come home to spile things as he allays have done. It ain't no wonder, I ses, as you sits moping by the winder, looking double your age, and you only twenty, as has no right to look forty, whatever you may say, though I took my dying alfred-david on its blessed truth."

This slightly incoherent and decidedly pessimistic speech was moaned, rather than spoken, by a lean-bodied, hard-faced, staring-eyed woman to a pretty girl, who did not look at the speaker. And small wonder. Mrs. Merry-inappropriate name-was unattractive to the eye. She was angular, grey-skinned, grey-eyed, grey-haired, and had thin, drooping lips almost as grey as the rest of her. In her black stuff gown-she invariably wore the most funereal dresses-with uneasy hands folded under a coarse apron, she stood before Eva Strode, uttering lamentations worthy of Jeremiah at his worst. But such dumpishness was characteristic of the woman. She delighted in looking on the black side of things, and the blacker they were, the more she relished them. Out of wrong-doing, and grief and things awry, she extracted a queer sort of pleasure, and felt never so happy as when the worst came to the worst. It seemed unfit that such a walking pageant of woe should be called Merry.

Eva, already depressed by the voice and sentiment of this lamentable dame, continued to look at the gaudy hollyhocks, even while she answered calmly, "I expect my father is the same as he was when he went to South Africa five years ago. I don't hope to find him an angel. I am certain he has not changed."

"If you're thinking of black angels," said the lively Merry, "you can have satisfactions from thinking him Beelzebub, for him he are."

"Don't call my father names. It does no good, Mrs. Merry."

"Beg pardon, miss, but it do relieve the heart and temper. And I will call him a leper, if that's a name, seeing as he'll never change his spots, however persuaded."

"What's the time?"

Mrs. Merry peered into the dial of a clock on the mantelpiece. "You might call it six, Miss Eva, and a lovely evening it is, though rain may spile it unexpected. Your pa 'ull be seated at the table in the next room at eight, let us hope, if nothing do happen to him, and I do pray on my bended knees, Miss Eva, as he won't growl at the meal, his habit allays when your poor dear ma-her ladyship was alive. Ah well," said Mrs. Merry with emphasis, "*she's* an angel now, and your pa ain't likely to trouble her again."

"Why, don't you think my father may come home? I mean, why do you fancy anything may happen to him?"

"Oh, I ain't got no cause, but what you might call the uncertainties of this vale of tears, Miss Eva. He have to drive ten mile here from the Westhaven station, and there's tramps about them lonely roads. Coming from South Africa, your pa 'ull naturally have diamonds to tempt the poor."

"I don't know what he has got," said Eva rather pettishly. "And no one, save you and me, know he is returning from Africa."

"No one, Miss Eva?" questioned the woman significantly.

Miss Strode coloured. "I told Mr. Hill."

"And he told his pa, and his pa, who have a long tongue, told all the village, I don't doubt. If ever there was a man as fiddled away his days in silliness," cried Merry, "it's that pink and white jelly-fish as you call Hills."

"Hill," corrected Miss Strode; then added colouring: "His son doesn't take after him."

"No," admitted the other grudgingly, "I will say as Mr. Allen is a tight lad. His mother gave him her blood and sense and looks; not that I say he's worthy of you, Miss Eva."

"Mrs. Merry," said Eva quietly, "you let your tongue run on too freely about my friends."

"Not the father Hills, if I die in saying it. He's no friend of yours, seeing he's your pa's; and as to Mr. Allen, I never had a sweetheart as I called friend, when you could call him something better."

Eva took no notice of this speech, but continued, "You are my old nurse, Mrs. Merry, and I allow you to talk openly."

"For your good, Miss Eva," put in Merry.

"For my good, I know," said the girl; "but you must not run down Allen's father or mine."

"As to *his* father, I say nothing but that he's a drivelling jelly-fish," said Mrs. Merry, who would not be suppressed; "but your own pa I know, worse luck, and I don't think much of him as a man, whatever I say about his being Beelzebub, which he is. Fifty years and more he is, fine-looking at that, though wickedness is in his aching bones. Not that I know of their aching," explained Mrs. Merry, "but if sin would make 'em smart, ache they do. You've been happy with me, Miss Eva, dear, in spite of a humble roof and your poor ma's death, four and a half year back. But your pa's come home to make trouble. Satan let loose is what I call him, and if I could stop his coming by twisting his wicked neck, I would."

"Mrs. Merry!" Eva rose quickly and flushed. "You forget yourself."

"There," said Mrs. Merry, casting up her eyes; "and I fed her with my own milk."

Eva, who was tenderly attached to the angular, dismal, chattering woman, could not withstand this remark. "Dear Nanny," she said, comforting the wounded heart, "I know you mean well, but my father *is* my father after all."

"Worse luck, so he is," sobbed Mrs. Merry, feeling for Eva's hand.

"I wish to think of him as kindly as I can, and—"

"Miracles won't make you do that," interrupted the woman, dropping her apron from her eyes, and glaring. "Miss Eva, I knew your pa when he was a bad boy, both him and me being neighbours, as you might say, though I did live in a cottage and he in a Manor House not two mile from here. He and that jelly-fish of a Hills were always together doing mischief, and setting neighbours by the ears, though I do say as your pa, being masterful, led that jelly-fish away. Then your pa ran away with Lady Jane Delham, your ma, as is dead, and treated her shameful. She come here to me, as an old friend, for friend I was, tho' humble," sobbed Mrs. Merry weeping again, "and you were born. Then your pa takes you away and I never set eyes on you and my lady till five years ago when he brought you here. To settle down and make you happy? No! not he. Away he goes gallivanting to South Africa where the blacks are, leaving a lady born and bred and his daughter just a bud, meaning yourself, to live with a common woman like me!"

"I have been very happy, Nanny, and my mother was happy also, when she was alive."

"Ah," said Mrs. Merry bitterly, "a queer sort of happiness, to be that way when your husband goes. I've had a trial myself in Merry, who's dead, and gone, I hope, where you'll find your pa will join him. But you'll see, Miss Eva, as your pa will come and stop your marrying Mr. Allen."

"I think that's very likely," said Eva sadly.

"What," said Mrs. Merry under her breath, and rising, "he's at it already is he? I thought so."

"I received a letter from him the other day," explained Eva; "knowing your prejudice against my father, I said nothing."

"Me not to be trusted, I 'spose, Miss Eva?" was the comment.

"Nonsense. I trust you with anything."

"And well you may. I fed you with my heart's blood, and foster sister you are to my boy Cain, though, Lord knows, he's as bad as his father was before him-the gipsy whelp that he is. Not on my side, though," cried Mrs. Merry. "I'm true English, and why I ever took up with a Romany rascal like Giles Merry, I don't know. But he's dead, I hope he is, though I never can be sure, me not knowing where's his grave. Come now," Mrs. Merry gave her face a wipe with the apron, "I'm talking of my own troubles, when yours is about. That letter-?"

"It is one in answer to mine. I wrote to Cape Town three months ago telling my father that I was engaged to Allen Hill. He wrote the other day-a week ago-from Southampton, saying he would not permit the marriage to take place, and bade me wait till he came home."

"Trouble! trouble," said Mrs. Merry, rocking; "I know the man. Ah, my dear, don't talk. I'm thinking for your good."

It was hot outside, though the sun was sinking and the cool twilight shadowed the earth. The hollyhocks, red and blue and white and yellow, a blaze of colour, were drooping their heads in the warm air, and the lawn looked brown and burnt for want of rain. Not a breath of wind moved the dusty sycamore trees which divided the cottage from the high-road, and the crimson hue of the setting sun steeped everything in its sinister dye. Perhaps it was this uncanny evening that made Eva Strobe view the home-coming of her father with such uneasiness, and the hostility and forebodings of Mrs. Merry did not tend to reassure her. With her hand on that dismal prophetess's shoulder, she stood silently looking out on the panting world bathed in the ruddy light. It was as though she saw the future through a rain of blood.

Misery Castle was the name of the cottage, and Mrs. Merry was responsible for the dreary appellation. Her life had been hard and was hard. Her husband had left her, and her son, following in his father's footsteps, was almost constantly absent in London, in more than questionable company. Mrs. Merry therefore called the cottage by as dismal a name as she could think of. Even Eva, who protested against the name, could not get the steadfastly dreary woman to change it. "Misery dwells in it, my dear lamb," said Mrs. Merry, "and Misery it shall be called. Castle it ain't from the building of it, but Castle it is, seeing the lot of sorrow that's in it. Buckingham Palace and the Tower wouldn't hold more, and more there will be, when that man comes home with his wicked sneering face, father though he be to you, my poor young lady."

It was a delightful cottage, with whitewashed walls covered with creepers, and a thatched roof, grey with wind and weather and the bleaching of the sun. The rustic porch was brilliant with red roses, and well-kept garden-beds bloomed with rainbow-hued flowers seasonable to the August month. To the right this domain was divided from a wide and gorse-covered common by an ancient wall of mellow-hued brick, useful for the training of peach-trees: to the left a low hedge, with unexpected gaps, ran between the flower-beds and a well-stocked orchard. This last extended some distance, and ended in a sunken fence, almost buried in nettles and rank weeds. Beyond stretched several meadows, in which cows wandered, and further still, appeared fields of wheat, comfortable farm-houses, clumps and lines of trees, until the whole fertile expanse terminated at the foot of low hills, so far away that they looked blue and misty. A smiling corn-land, quite Arcadian in its peace and beauty.

Along the front of the cottage and under the dusty sycamore trees ran a high-road which struck straightly across the common, slipped by Misery Castle, and took its way crookedly through Wargrove village, whence it emerged to twist and turn for miles towards the distant hills and still more distant London town. Being the king's highway it was haunted by tramps, by holiday vans filled with joyous folk, and by fashionable motor-cars spinning noisily at illegal speed. But neither motor-cars, nor vans, nor tramps, nor holidaymakers stopped at Wargrove village, unless for a moment or two at the one public-house on thirsty days. These went on ten miles further across the common to Westhaven, a rising watering-place at the Thames mouth. So it will be seen that the publicity of the highway afforded Eva a chance of seeing the world on wheels, and diversified her somewhat dull existence.

And it was dull, until a few months ago. Then Allen Hill came home from South America, where he had been looking after mines. The young people met and subsequently fell in love. Three months before the expected arrival of Mr. Strode they became engaged with the consent of Allen's parents but without the knowledge of Eva's father. However, being a dutiful daughter to a man who did not deserve such a blessing, she wrote and explained herself. The reply was the letter, mention of which she had made to Mrs. Merry. And Mrs. Merry prognosticated trouble therefrom.

"I know the man-I know the man," moaned Mrs. Merry, rocking herself, "he'll marry you to some one else for his ambitions, drat him."

"That he shall never do," flashed out Eva.

"You have plenty of spirit, Miss Eva, but he'll wear you out. He wore out Lady Jane, your ma, as is now where he will never go. And was it this that set you moping by the winder, my dear lamb?"

Eva returned to her former seat. "Not altogether." She hesitated, and then looked anxiously at her old nurse, who stood with folded arms frowning and rigid. "You believe in dreams, Mrs. Merry?"

"As I believe that Merry was a scoundrel, and that my boy will take after him, as he does," said the woman, nodding sadly; "misery ain't surer nor dreams, nor taxes which allays come bringing sorrow and summonses with 'em. So you dreamed last night?"

"Yes. You know I went to bed early. I fell asleep at eight and woke at nine, trembling."

"Ah!" Mrs. Merry drew nearer-"twas a baddish dream?"

"A horrible dream-it was, I think, two dreams."

"Tell it to me," said the old woman, her eyes glittering.

Eva struck her closed fist on the sill. "No," she cried passionately, "it's impossible to tell it. I wish to forget."

"You'll remember it well enough when the truth comes."

"Do you think anything will come of it?"

"It's as sure as sure," said Mrs. Merry.

Eva, less superstitious, laughed uneasily, and tried to turn the subject. "Allen will be at the gate soon," she said. "I'm walking to the common with him for an hour."

"Ah well," droned Mrs. Merry, "take your walk, Miss Eva. You won't have another when *he* comes home."

"Nurse!" Eva stamped her foot and frowned. "You make my father out to be a-"

"Whatever I make him out to be, I'll never get near what he is," said Mrs. Merry viciously. "I hate him. He ruined my Giles, not as Giles was much to boast of. Still, I could have talked him into being a stay-at-home, if your pa-there-there-let him be, say I. If his cup is full he'll never come home alive."

Eva started and grew deathly pale. "My dream-my dream," she said.

"Ah yes!" Mrs. Merry advanced and clutched the girl's wrist. "You saw him dead or dying, eh, eh?"

"Don't, nurse; you frighten me," said Miss Strode, releasing her wrist; then she thought for a moment. "My dream or dreams," said she after a pause, went something after this fashion. "I thought I was in the Red Deeps-"

"Five miles from here," muttered Mrs. Merry, hugging herself. "I know the place-who better? Red clay and a splash of water, however dry."

"Ah, you are thinking of the spring!" said Eva starting; "it was there I saw-oh no-no," and she closed her eyes to shut out the sight.

"What was it-what was it?" asked Mrs. Merry eagerly; "death?"

"He was lying face downward in the moist red clay beside the spring of the Red Deeps!"

"Who was lying?"

"I don't know. I seemed to see the place and the figure of a man in dark clothes lying face downward, with his hands twisted helplessly in the rank grasses. I heard a laugh too-a cruel laugh,

but in my dream I saw no one else. Only the dead man, face downward," and she stared at the carpet as though she saw the gruesome sight again.

"How do you know 'twas your father's corpse?" croaked the old woman.

"I didn't think it was-I didn't tell you it was," panted Eva, flushing and paling with conflicting emotions.

"Ah," interpreted Mrs. Merry, "some one he killed, perhaps."

"How dare you-how dare-? Nurse," she burst out, "I believe it *was* my father lying dead there-I saw a white-gloved right hand."

"Your pa, sure enough," said the woman grimly. "His wooden hand, eh? I know the hand. He struck me with it once. Struck me," she cried, rising and glaring, "with my own husband standing by. But Giles was never a man. So your pa was dead, wooden hand and all, in the Red Deeps? Did you go there to see, this day?"

"No, no," Eva shuddered, "it was only a dream."

"Part of one, you said."

Miss Strode nodded. "After I saw the body and the white glove on the wooden hand glimmering in the twilight-for twilight it was in my dream-I seemed to sink into darkness, and to be back in my bed-yes, in my bed in the room across the passage."

"Ah! you woke then?" said Mrs. Merry, disappointed.

"No, I swear I was not awake. I was in my bed asleep, dreaming, for I heard footsteps-many footsteps come to the door-to the front door, then five knocks-"

"Five," said the woman, surprised.

"Five knocks. One hard and four soft. Then a voice came telling me to take in the body. I woke with a cry, and found it was just after nine o'clock."

"Well, well," chuckled the old woman, "if Robert Strode is dead-"

"You can't be sure of that," said Eva fiercely, and regretted telling this dismal woman her dream.

"You saw the gloved hand-the wooden hand?"

"Bah! It is only a dream."

"Dreams come true. I've known 'em to come true," said Mrs. Merry, rising, "and to-morrow I go to the Red Deeps to see."

"But my father comes home to-night."

"No," said Mrs. Merry, with the mien of a sibyl, "he'll never come home agin to the house where he broke a woman's heart."

And she went out laughing and muttering of the Red Deeps.

CHAPTER II

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM

Eva Strode was an extremely pretty blonde. She had golden-brown hair which glistened in the sunshine, hazel eyes somewhat meditative in expression, and a complexion that Mrs. Merry, in her odd way, compared to mixed roses and milk. Her nose was delicate and straight, her mouth charming and sensitive, and if it drooped a trifle at the corners, she had good cause for so melancholy a twist. Her figure was so graceful that envious women, less favoured by Nature, suggested padding: but these same depreciators could say nothing against her hands and feet, which were exquisitely formed. Usually Eva, cunning enough to know that her beauty needed no adornment, dressed in the very plainest fashions. At the present moment she was arrayed in a pale blue dress of some coarse material, and wore a large straw hat swathed in azure tulle. An effective touch of more pronounced colour appeared in the knot of red ribbon at her throat and the bunch of crimson roses thrust into her waistband. She looked dainty, well-bred, charming, and even the malignant female eye would have found little to blame. But the female eye generally did find fault. Eva was much too pretty a girl to escape remark.

This vision of loveliness walked demurely down the garden path to gladden the eyes of a young man lingering at the gate. He, eagerly expecting the descent of Venus, quickly removed his Panama hat, and looked at the goddess with admiring eyes, eloquent of unspoken praise. Eva, feeling, rather than meeting, their fervid gaze, halted within the barrier and blushed as red as the roses in her belt. Then she ventured to look at her lover, and smiled a welcome.

Certainly the lover was not unworthy of the lass, so far as looks went. Allen Hill was as dark as Eva was fair. Indeed, he more resembled a Spaniard than an Englishman. His oval face, smooth and clean-shaven save for a small, smartly pointed moustache, was swarthy, his eyes were wonderfully black and large, and his closely clipped hair might be compared to the hue of the raven's wing. His slim figure was clothed in white flannels, so well cut and spotless that they conveyed a suspicion that the young gentleman was something of a dandy. He looked more like a poet than a mining engineer.

Yet an engineer he was, and had travelled over the greater part of the world with his eyes open. These looked languid enough as a rule, but they could blaze with a fighting light, as his associates in the lands at the back of Beyond knew. At thirty years of age Allen knew quite as much as was good for him, and knew also how to utilise his knowledge. In many lands he had seen fair women, but none had captured his heart as had this dewy, fragrant English rose.

Six months earlier the two had met at a garden party. Allen came and saw, and Eva-as women always do-conquered. The engineer's heart, being tinder, caught fire easily and began to blaze with a fiery flame not to be extinguished by reason. Eva herself, not being tame either, rather liked this Sabine courtship, and did not leave Allen long in doubt as to the way in which she regarded his audacious advances. The result was that in a few months they became engaged, and the flower-time of their love came almost as speedily as did that of Romeo and Juliet. But now, as Eva well knew, the common sense of the world was about to chill their ardour. She had this very evening to inform this eager, whole-hearted lover that her father refused to sanction the engagement. No easy task, seeing she loved the man with her whole heart and soul.

"My dear, my love," murmured Allen, as the gate closed behind the girl: and he would have embraced her in the public road, but that she dexterously evaded his widely spread arms.

"Not here-not here," she whispered hurriedly, and with a fine colour; "it's too public, you stupid boy."

The stupid boy, cheated of his treat, glared up and down the road, "I don't see any one," he grumbled.

"Eyes at those windows," said Eva, waving a slim hand towards a row of thatched cottages, "and tongues also."

"I am not ashamed of our love. I wish the whole world knew of it."

"The whole world probably does," rejoined Miss Strode, a trifle drily; "if any one saw you with those eyes and that look, and-oh, you ridiculous boy!" and she shook her finger at him.

"Oh, you coquette. Can't we-"

"On the common we can talk, if that is what you mean," said Eva, turning away to trip up the dusty road; "the common," she cried with a backward look which should have drawn the young man after her at a fine pace.

But Allen lingered for a moment. Deeply in love as he was, he had his own ideas regarding the management of the fair sex. He knew that when a woman is sure of her swain she is apt to be exacting, so as to check his ardour. On the other hand, if the swain hangs back, the maid comes forward with winsome looks. Hitherto, Allen had been all passion and surrender. Now he thought he would tease Eva a little, by not coming immediately to her beck and call. Therefore, while she skipped ahead-and without looking back, so sure was she that Allen followed-the young man lighted a cigarette, and when the smoke perfumed the air, looked everywhere save in the direction he desired to look. North, south, west looked Allen, but never east, where could be seen the rising sun of his love. But passion proved to be stronger than principle, and finally his eyes fastened on the shadowy figure of Eva pausing on the edge of the common. She was looking back now, and beckoned with persuasive finger. Allen made a step forward to follow the siren, then halted. A strange feeling took possession of him. Allen's mother was Scotch, and having the impressionable Celtic nature, he was quick to feel the influences of that unseen world which lies all round, invisible to dull eyes, and unfelt by material souls. At the moment, in spite of the warmth, he had what the Scotch call a "grue," and shivered where he stood. At his back sank the sun red and angry, peering through lines of black cloud suggestive of prison bars. The scarlet light flooded the landscape in a sinister manner, and dyed the flitting figure of Eva in crimson hues. She looked as though bathed in blood, and-as she was now speeding towards the trysting place-as though she fled from justice. Also, she ran from the red west into the gloom of the east, already shadowy with the coming night. Was there no parable in this? considered Allen, and shivered again.

"Indigestion," thought Allen, striving to throw off that weird feeling and trying to explain it in the most commonplace way. But he knew well that he had never in his life suffered from indigestion, and that the feeling-which had now passed away-was a hint of coming evil. "To me, I hope," murmured the young man, stepping out briskly, "not to Eva, poor darling."

When he joined the girl, he was quite his old fervid self, and felt his premonitions pass away in the charm of the hour. Even the sunset was less scarlet and more of a rosy tint like his new thoughts. He threw himself at the feet of his beloved, cast away his cigarette, and took her hand within his. For the moment Dan Cupid was king.

But was he? Eva did not appear to think so. She allowed her hand to remain in Allen's warm grip, but he felt no responsive pressure. The two were seated on a rustic bench within a circle of flowering gorse. The sward was green and smooth, worthy of the dancing feet of Titania's elves, and perhaps it might have been one of their ballrooms the lovers had invaded. In that case it would certainly prove unhappy ground to them. The fairies do not like mortals, however loving, who intrude on their privacy. The elves, however, not yet awakened by the moon, made no sign, and in that still place no sound could be heard. Overhead was the flushed sky, underfoot the emerald sward, and there were the lovers supplied with an admirable stage on which to play their parts. Allen was willing enough, and looked up adoringly into the face of his Juliet. But Eva's gaze was fixed on the orange-hued blossom of the gorse with a far-away look. And when she spoke, it certainly was not of love.

"Allen," she said, in a calm, level voice, "we have known each other for nearly a year."

"Call it a century," said Allen, kissing her hand. "I love you and you love me. Why talk of time? Love like ours lives in eternity."

"Hum," said Eva, although the ejaculation was not a pretty one, the question is, "Will it live at all?"

"Eva!" He raised himself on his elbow and stared; but the girl continued to speak without looking at him.

"Do you know my history, Allen?" she asked; then without waiting for his reply, went on in a passionless way: "My father is the last Strode of Wargrove. The manor house of our race is only a few miles away, and there the Strodes lived for centuries. My grandfather, however, was an extravagant man, and lost all the money. When my father returned from Oxford to take up his position in the world, he found that his father was dead and that the estate would have to be sold to pay the debts. In that way, Allen, the manor passed from our family."

"I have heard something of this, Eva," said the perplexed young man; "but why waste time in telling me of it now?"

"You will find the time will not be wasted," rejoined Eva, glancing down with something like pity; "let me go on. My father, brought up in a luxurious way, took what money there was left and went to seek work in London. He speculated, and knowing nothing about speculation he lost everything. Then your father, who was his friend at school and college, lent him some thousands, and my father, to better his position, married Lady Jane Delham, daughter of the Earl of Ipsen. I understand that the money which she brought with her, was lost also-in speculation."

"But why did your father speculate so much?" asked Allen.

"His one desire was to buy back the manor," said Eva. "He has much pride of race, and wants to end his days under the roof where he was born. But let me go on once more. The money was lost, and Lord Ipsen died. His title went to a distant cousin, who did not like my mother, consequently there was no chance of my father getting more money in that quarter. I was born under Mrs. Merry's roof; but till the age of seven I lived with my mother in a small Hampstead cottage. My father went on speculating. Sometimes he made money, at other times he lost it; but always, he followed the will-o'-the-wisp of fortune, hoping to get back his old home. He then went to South America, and took my mother with him. I was placed at school, and until I was fifteen I never saw my parents."

"Poor Eva, how lonely you must have been!"

"I *was* lonely, and yet-having seen so little of my parents I don't know that I missed them so very much. My father stopped in Peru till I was fifteen, and my mother with him. He came back poor, but with sufficient money to speculate again. He therefore placed my mother and me in Misery Castle."

"Ridiculous name," muttered Allen uneasily.

"A very appropriate name," said Eva with some bitterness, seeing how unhappy Mrs. Merry is. "She had a bad husband and has a bad son. My mother was also unhappy. Meeting her again after all those years, I did my best to comfort her. But her heart was broken."

"Your father?" asked Allen in a low voice.

"Who else?" replied Eva, flushing, and the water came to her eyes. "Oh! Allen, I do not wish to speak ill, or to think ill, of my father; but-no," she broke off, suppressing herself. "I cannot speak from what I have seen, and I judge no one, let alone my father, on what I have heard. Mrs. Merry thinks badly of my father, and my poor mother-ah! my poor mother! she said as little as she could. But her heart was broken, Allen; she died of a broken heart and a crushed spirit. I lost her five months after my father went to seek his fortune in South Africa, and since then I have lived alone with Mrs. Merry."

"Poor Eva!" said Hill tenderly, and repossessed himself of the hand which she had withdrawn. "But Mrs. Merry is good to you?"

"Very-very good," said Miss Strode with emphasis. "She was my nurse and foster-mother, Allen. When I was born my father came here for a time before taking the Hampstead cottage. Well,

Allen, that is my history. My father all these five years has paid Mrs. Merry for my board and lodging, and has sent home pocket-money for me. But all that time he has never written me a tender. letter."

"Not even when his wife died?"

"No. He wrote a few words of sympathy, but not those which a father should have written to a motherless girl. From what I know of him, and from what Mrs. Merry says, he is a hard, cold, self-concentrated man. I dread his coming more than I can tell you, Allen."

"If he ever does come," said the young man softly.

Eva started and looked down. "What do you mean by that?" she asked anxiously.

Allen met her gaze frankly and laughed. "Oh, you need not disturb yourself, my dear," he said with a shrug, "only you know my father and yours were always chums. Why, I don't know, as my father is certainly not the kind of man to suit such a one as you describe Mr. Strode to be. But they were chums at school and college, and my father knows a lot about yours. When I mentioned that your father was expected to-night, my father-it was at breakfast-said that Mr. Strode might not arrive after all. I did not ask him what he meant."

"Could Mr. Hill have heard from my father?"

"I can't say, and even if he did, I don't know why my father should suggest that Mr. Strode would not come home. But, Eva, you are pale."

"I feel pale," she said in a low voice. "Allen, sit beside me. I want to talk seriously-to tell you a dream."

The young man, nothing loath, promptly seated himself by her side and slipped a strong, tender arm round her slender waist. Eva's heart beat stronger when she found herself in such an assured haven. It seemed as though Allen, noble and firm and loving, would be able to shelter her from the coming storm. "And the storm will come," she said aloud.

"What is that?" asked Hill, not catching her meaning.

"It is my dream," she answered; and then, with her head on his shoulder, she told about her vision of the night. Allen was inclined to make light of it.

"You superstitious little darling," he said fondly, "the dream is easily accounted for. You were thinking of your father, and, being anxious about his arrival, dreamed what you did."

Eva released herself, rather offended. "I was thinking of my father, I admit," she said, "but I was not at all anxious. My father has been all over the world, and in wild parts, so he can look after himself very well. Besides, I never thought of the Red Deeps. And remember, Allen, I saw the right hand, gloved."

"That would seem to intimate that the dead man you saw in your dream was Mr. Strode," said Allen, kissing her; "but it's all nonsense, Eva."

"You don't think anything will happen?" she demanded, anxious to be reassured after Mrs. Merry's gloomy talk.

"No, I don't. I have known of lots of dreams quite vivid which never came true. I'm not a scientific chap," added Allen, laughing, "or I would be able to prove that this dream is only a reflex of your waking thoughts. Mr. Strode will arrive all right."

"And then we must part," sighed Eva.

This time it was Hill who started, and his face flushed. "I don't quite understand."

"You will soon. I told you the history of my life, Allen, so that I might lead up to this. I wrote to my father at Cape Town, telling him I loved you, and that Mr. Hill was pleased we should be engaged."

"My father was delighted," put in Allen quickly.

"So I said. My father never replied to my letter save in sending a cablegram stating he was coming home in the *Dunoon Castle*.. When he was at Southampton, he wrote, saying I was not to think of marrying you, and that he would tell me of his plans for my future when he returned to Wargrove. He decided to remain for a week in London, and yesterday he wired that he was coming home to-night. So you see, Allen," Eva rested her head on her lover's shoulder, "he will part us."

"No!" cried Hill, rising and looking very tall and strong and determined, "he will never do that. What reason-"

"My father is a man who will refuse to give his reason."

"Not to me," rejoined the other hotly. "Mr. Strode will not dare to dismiss me in so easy and off-hand a fashion. I love you, Eva, and I marry you, whatever your father may say. Unless," he caught her hands as she rose, and stared deep into her eyes, "unless you leave me."

"No! no! I never will do that, Allen. Come what may, I'll be true."

Then followed an interlude of kisses, and afterwards the two, hand in hand, walked across the common on their way to Misery Castle. It was not seven o'clock, but the twilight was growing darker. "Do you know what your father's plans are?" asked Allen, as they stepped out on to the deserted and dusty road.

"No. I know nothing save what I tell you. And my dream-"

"Dearest, put the dream out of your head. If it is any comfort to you, I'll go to the Red Deeps tonight. Do you think I'll find a dead body there?" he asked, laughing.

"Not if you go before nine o'clock. The dream was at nine last night."

"But your father will be home at eight, Eva?"

"I hope so," she murmured.

"You are so foolishly superstitious," said Allen, pressing her arm which was within his own; "you dear little goose, don't you see that if your father comes to Misery Castle at eight, he can't possibly be lying dead in the Red Deeps at nine. When did you last hear from him, Eva?"

"Yesterday morning. He wired that he would be down at eight this evening."

"Well then, he was alive then, and is stopping in town on business as you said. He will come to Westhaven by the train arriving at six-thirty and will drive over."

"The road passes the Red Deeps," insisted Eva.

"How obstinate you are, Eva," said Allen, contracting his forehead; "I tell you what I'll do to set your mind at rest; you know he is alive now?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I got that wire yesterday morning."

"Well then, I'll set off to the Red Deeps at once, and will get there just at eight. I may meet Mr. Strode coming along in the fly, and if so I'll follow it back to Misery Castle, so as to see him safely home. If I don't, I'll go to the Red Deeps, and if any attack is made on him, I'll be there to give him a hand."

"Thank you, Allen. I should be more at ease if you did that."

"Then it shall be done," said Allen, kissing her, "but I feel that I am encouraging you in superstitious fancies."

"My dream was so vivid."

"Pooh. Indigestion."

"Then Mr. Hill hinted that my father might not return."

"Well then, I'll ask him what he meant, and explain when we meet again."

"If we ever do meet," sighed Eva, stopping at the gate.

"You will be true to me, Eva?"

"Always-always-always. There-there," she kissed him under the friendly shelter of the sycamore and ran indoors.

Allen turned on his heel in high spirits, and set out for the Red Deeps. At first he laughed at Eva's dream and Eva's superstition. But as he walked on in the gathering darkness, he felt as though the future also was growing more gloomy. He recalled his own feelings of the girl's dress dappled with blood, and of her flying form. Again he felt the "grue," and cursed himself for an old woman. "I'll find nothing-nothing," he said, trying to laugh.

But the shadow of the dream, which was also the shadow of the future, fell upon him darker than ever.

CHAPTER III

THE NE'ER-DO-WHEEL

Anxious to make the best impression on her father, Eva Strode ran up to her room to put on an evening gown. Mr. Strode supplied her liberally with money, for whatever his faults may have been, he certainly was not mean; therefore she possessed a fairly extensive wardrobe. She did not see Mrs. Merry on entering the cottage, as that good lady was occupied in looking after the dinner in the little back-kitchen. The table was laid, however, and after making herself smart, Eva descended to add a few finishing touches in the shape of flowers.

Cheered by the view Allen took of her dream, and still more by the fact that he had gone to the Red Deeps, Eva arranged many roses, red and white, in a great silver bowl which had belonged to her mother. As a matter of fact, Eva had been born in Misery Castle, and being sickly as a baby, had been christened hurriedly in the cottage out of the bowl, an heirloom of the Delham family. Mrs. Merry had taken possession of it, knowing, that if Lady Jane took it away, her husband would speedily turn it into money. Therefore, Mrs. Merry being a faithful guardian, the bowl was still in the cottage, and on this night Eva used it as a centrepiece to the prettily decorated table. And it did look pretty. The cloth was whiter than snow, the silver sparkled and the crystal glittered, while the roses blooming in the massive bowl added a touch of needed colour.

There were evidences of Eva's taste in the small dining-room. Mrs. Merry had furnished it, certainly, but Eva had spent much of her pocket-money in decorating the room. Everything was charming and dainty and intensely feminine. Any one could see at a glance that it was a true woman's room. And Eva in her black gauze dress, bare-necked and bare-armed, flitted gracefully about the tiny apartment. Her last act was to light the red-shaded lamp which hung low over the table. The window she left open and the blind up, as the night was hot, and the breeze which cooled the room made the place more bearable.

"It's quite pretty," said Eva, standing back against the door to get the effect of the glittering table and the red light and the flowers. "If father is dissatisfied he must be hard to please," she sighed, "and from what Nanny says, I fear he is. A quarter to eight, he'll be here soon. I'd better see when the dinner will be ready."

But before doing so, she went to the front door and listened for the sound of wheels. She certainly heard them, but the vehicle was driving towards, and not from, the common. Apparently Mr. Strode was not yet at hand, so she went to the kitchen. To her surprise she heard voices. One was that of Mrs. Merry, querulous as usual, and the other a rich, soft, melodious voice which Eva knew only too well. It was that of her foster-brother Cain.

This name was another of Mrs. Merry's eccentricities. Her husband, showing the brute within him a year after marriage, had disillusioned his poor wife very speedily. He was drunk when the boy was born, and still drunk when the boy was christened; Mrs. Merry therefore insisted that the boy would probably take after his father, and requested that the name of Cain should be given to him. The curate objected, but Mrs. Merry being firm and the curate weak, the boy was actually called after Adam's eldest son. Had the rector been at home such a scandal-as he regarded it-would not have occurred, but Mr. Quain was absent on a holiday, and returned to find an addition to his flock in the baby person of Cain Merry. The lad grew up handsome enough, but sufficiently wild and wicked to justify his mother's choice of a name. Yet he had his good moments, and might have improved had not his mother nagged him into wrong-doing.

"Well, Cain," said Eva, entering the kitchen, "so you're back?"

"Like a bad penny," cried Mrs. Merry, viciously stabbing some potatoes with a fork; "six months he's been away, and-"

"And I'd remained longer if I'd thought of getting this welcome, mother," growled Cain sulkily. "But I might have known."

He was a remarkably handsome lad of eighteen, almost as dark as Allen Hill. As Mr. Merry had gipsy blood in his veins, it was probable that Cain inherited the nature and looks of some splendid Romany ancestor. With his smooth dark skin, under which the rich red blood mantled, his eyes large and black as night, and clearly-cut features, Cain looked as handsome as a picture. Not even the rough dress he wore, which was that of a labourer, could disguise his fine figure and youthful grace. He looked like a young panther, sleek, beautiful, and dangerous. Cap on head, he leaned against the jamb of the outer door-his mother would not allow him to come further-and seemed a young Apollo, so slim and graceful did he appear. But Mrs. Merry, gesticulating with the fork, had no eye for his good looks. He reminded her too much of the absent Merry, who was just such a splendid outlaw, when he won her to a bitterly regretted marriage. Cain, meeting with so unpleasant a reception, was sulky and inclined to be defiant, until Eva entered. Then he removed his cap, and became wonderfully meek. He was fond of his foster-sister, who could do much with him.

"When did you come back, Cain?" she asked.

"Ten minutes ago, and mother's been ragging me ever since," he replied; "flesh and blood can't stand it, Miss Eva, I'll go."

"No you won't," struck in Mrs. Merry, "you'll stop and give the mother who bore you-worse luck-the pleasure of your company."

Cain grinned in a sleepy manner. "Not much pleasure for me."

"Nor for me, you great hulking creature," said Mrs. Merry, threatening him with a fork. "I thought you'd grow up to be a comfort to me, but look at you-"

"If you thought I'd be a comfort, why did you call me Cain, mother?"

"Because I knew what you'd turn out," contradicted Mrs. Merry, "just like your father, oh, dear me, just like him. Have you seen anything of your father, Cain?"

"No," said Cain stolidly, "and I don't want to."

"That's right, deny the author of your being. Your father, who was always a bad one, left me fifteen years ago, just after you were born. The cottage was not then my own, or he'd never have left me. But there, thank heaven," cried Mrs. Merry, throwing up her eyes to the smoky ceiling, "father didn't die and leave me well off, till Giles went! Since that I've heard nothing of him. He was reported dead-"

"You said you heard nothing of him, mother," put in Cain, smiling.

"Don't show your teeth in that way at your mother," snapped Mrs. Merry, "what I say, I say, and no mistake. Your father was reported dead, and as he's left me for seven years and more, I could marry again, if I were such a fool. But I haven't, hoping you'd be a comfort to the mother who brought you into the world. But you were always a bad boy, Cain. You played truant from school, you ran away to become a navvy at thirteen, and again and again you came back in rags."

"I'm not in rags now," said Cain, restive under this tongue.

"Then you must have stolen the clothes," retorted his mother; "I'll be bound you didn't come by them honestly: not as they're much."

While this pleasant conversation was going on Eva stood mute. She knew of old how impossible it was to stop Mrs. Merry's tongue, and thought it best to let her talk herself out. But the last speech made Cain laugh, and he was cool enough to wink at Eva. She knew Cain so intimately, and really liked him so much in spite of his wickedness, that she did not take offence, but strove to turn from him the wrathful speech of his mother.

"I am sure Cain has turned over a new leaf," she said, smiling.

"He's turned over volumes of 'em," groaned Mrs. Merry, dashing down a pot on the range, "but each page is worst nor the last. Oh, I know what I'm saying," she went on triumphantly. "I was a farmer's daughter and had three years' schooling, not to speak of having mixed with the aristocracy

in the person of your dear ma, Miss Eva, and your own blessed self as is always a lady. But Cain—oh, look at him."

"He looks very well," said Eva, "and he looks hungry. Don't you think you might give him a meal, Mrs. Merry?"

"Kill the fatted calf, as you might say," suggested Cain impudently.

"Calf!" screeched Mrs. Merry, "you're one yourself, Cain, to talk like that with Miss Eva present. Ain't you got no respect?"

"Miss Eva knows I mean no harm," said the goaded Cain.

"Of course you don't," said Miss Strode; "come, Mrs. Merry, the boy's home for good now."

"For bad, you mean."

"I'm not home at all," said Cain unexpectedly. "I'm working at Westhaven, but I came over just to see my mother. If she don't want me I can go back to those who do," and he turned to go.

"No. Stop," cried Mrs. Merry, whose bark was worse than her bite. "I shan't let a growing lad like you tramp back all them ten miles with a starving inside. Wait till I get this dinner off my mind, and the pair of us will sit down like Christians to eat it."

Eva stared and laughed. "You forget nurse: this dinner is for my father. He should be here in a few minutes."

Mrs. Merry turned grey. "I ain't forgot your dream, my dear. He'll never eat it for want of breath, nor you for sorrow. Now, Cain—"

Miss Strode, who had a temper of her own, stamped a pretty slippered foot imperiously. "Hold your tongue, Mrs. Merry," she cried, the colour rising in her cheeks, "my father will arrive."

The old woman glanced at the American clock which stood on the mantelpiece. The small hand pointed to eight. "He ain't come yet."

"Cain," said Eva, turning, still flushed, to the lad, "you came along the Westhaven road?"

Cain nodded. "Twenty minutes ago, Miss Eva," said he.

"Did you see my father? No, you don't remember my father. Did you see a fly coming along?"

"No. But then I didn't come along the road all the time. I took a short cut across country, Miss Eva. I'll just have a meal with mother, and then go back to my business."

"And what is your business, I'd like to know?" questioned Mrs. Merry sharply; "a fine business it must be to take you from your mother."

"I'm in a circus."

"What, riding on horses in tights!" cried Mrs. Merry aghast.

"No such luck. I'm only a groom. I got the billet when I was in London, and glad enough I was, seeing how hard up I've been. It's Stag's Circus and a good show. I hope you'll come over to Shanton to-morrow, Miss Eva; there's a performance at night, and you'll see some riding. Ah, Miss Lorry can ride a bit!"

"Miss who?" asked Eva, who, with the kitchen door open, was straining her ears to hear if Mr. Strode was coming.

"Some low female, I'll be bound," snorted Mrs. Merry. "I've seen 'em dancing in pink stockings and raddling their brazen cheeks with paint. She's no better than she ought to be, not she, say what you like."

Cain grew angry. "You're quite wrong, mother," said he. "Miss Lorry is very much respected. She rides her own horse, White Robin, and has appeared before crowned heads. She's billed as the Queen of the Arena, and is a thing of beauty."

"Ha!" said Mrs. Merry sharply, "and you love her. Ho! You that told me you loved that freckle-faced, snub-nosed Jane Wasp, the daughter o' that upsetting Wasp policeman, with his duty-chatter, and—"

"I don't love any one," said Cain, putting on his cap; "and if you talk like that I'll go."

"To marry a circus rider. Never enter my doors again if you do. I've got this cottage and fifty pounds a year, inherited from my father, to leave, remember."

"Dear nurse," said Eva soothingly, "Cain has no idea of marrying."

"Miss Lorry wouldn't have me if I had," said Cain sadly, though his black eyes flashed fire; "why, Lord Saltars is after her."

"What!" shrieked Mrs. Merry, turning sharply. "Miss Eva's cousin?"

Cain looked astonished. "Is he your cousin?" he asked.

"Yes, Cain—a distant cousin. He is the eldest son of Lord Ipsen. My mother was the daughter of the last Earl. Is he in Westhaven?"

"Yes, miss. He follows the circus everywhere, for love of her." "We don't want to hear about those things," said Mrs. Merry sharply; "leave your Lorries and rubbish alone, and go and wash in my room. I'll get the dinner ready soon, and then we can sit down for a chat."

"Another bullying," grumbled Cain, throwing down his cap and preparing to take a seat. But he never did. At that moment there came a long shrill whistle with several modulations like a bird's note. Cain started, and cocked his handsome head on one side. The whistle was repeated, upon which, without a word either to his mother or Miss Strode, he dashed out of the kitchen.

"There," said Mrs. Merry, waving the fork, "to treat his own lawful mother in that way—to say nothing of you, Miss Eva."

"He'll come back soon," replied Eva.

"Oh, he will, if there's money and food about. But he'll get neither, after behaving in that way. That my son should belong to a circus! Ah, I always said Cain was born for the gallows, like his father."

"But you don't know if his father—"

"I know what I know," replied Mrs. Merry with dignity, "which is to say, nothing. But Giles is what Giles was, and has everything likely to bring him to a rope's end. I'll be the wife of one hanged man," added the old woman with relish, "and the mother of another. Then my cup of misery will be full enough. But, bless me, Miss Eva, don't stay here, getting that pretty dress all greasy. Go and wait for your pa in the doring-room, and I'll bring in the dinner as soon as I hear him swearing—for swear he will, if he arrive."

"Of course he'll arrive," said Eva impatiently, looking at the clock, which now indicated five minutes past eight; "he's a little late."

Mrs. Merry shook her head. "He'll not come. He's in the Red Deeps, lying face downward in the mud."

Eva grew angry at this persistent pessimism, but nothing she could say or do, was able to change Mrs. Merry's opinion. Finding that more talk with the prophetess only made her angry, Eva returned to the front of the house, and, sitting in the drawing-room, took up the last fashionable novel which she had borrowed. But not all the talent of the author was able to enchain her attention. She kept thinking of her father and of the Red Deeps, and kept also looking at the clock. It was drawing to nine when she went again to the front door, subsequently to the gate.

There was no sign of Cain coming back. He had appeared like a ghost and had vanished as one. Why the whistle should have made him turn pale and take so abrupt a departure, Eva was not able to say. Moreover, the non-arrival of her father fully occupied her attention. She could not believe that her dream, vivid as it had been, would prove true and set down her nervous fears, which were now beginning to get the upper hand, to Mrs. Merry's chatter. That old woman appeared at her elbow while she leaned over the gate, looking down the road.

"He ain't come," croaked Mrs. Merry. "Bless you, deary, of course he ain't. I know where he is, and you saw him in your dream."

"Nonsense," said Eva, and ran out on to the road. A few people were passing—mostly villagers, but Eva was well known and no one was surprised at seeing her hatless. Even if any one had expressed surprise, she was too anxious to trouble much about public opinion.

"Aaron," she asked an old man who came trudging down from the common, "did you see my father coming along in a fly?"

"Why, miss," said Aaron scratching his shock head, "it's a matter of five year since I saw your father, and I don't rightly know as I'd tell him. But I ain't seen nothing but carts this evening, ay, and you might say bicycles."

"No fly?"

"Not one, miss. Good-evening. I dare say your father will walk, miss, by reason of the hot evening."

This suggestion was the very reverse of what Mr. Strode would do, he being a gentleman mindful of his own comfort. However, after the rustic had departed, Eva ran up as far as the common. There was no sign of any vehicle, so she returned to the cottage. Mrs. Merry met her at the door.

"The dinner spiling," said Mrs. Merry crossly; "do come and eat some, Miss Eva, and I'll keep the dishes hot."

"No, I'll wait till my father comes. Is Cain back?"

"Not a sign of him. But, lor bless you, deary, I never expected it, not me. He's gone to his circuses; to think that a son of mine-"

But the girl was in no humour to hear the lamentations of Mrs. Merry over the decay of her family, and returned to the drawing-room. There she sat down again and began to read-or try to.

Mrs. Merry came in at half-past nine, and brought a cup of tea, with a slice of toast. Eva drank the tea, but declined the toast, and the old woman retired angrily, to remove the spoilt dinner. Then Eva played a game of patience, and at ten threw down the cards in despair. The non-arrival of her father, coupled with her dream, made her restless and uneasy. "I wish Allen would return," she said aloud. But Allen never appeared, although by now he had ample time to reach the Red Deeps and to return therefrom. It was in Eva's mind to go to Mr. Hill's house, which was at the further end of Wargrove village, but a mindful thought of Mr. Hill's jokes, which were usually irritating, made her hesitate. She therefore went back to the kitchen, and spoke to Mrs. Merry, who was crooning over the fire.

"What are you doing?" she asked snappishly, for her nerves, poor girl, were worn thin by this time.

"I'm waiting for the body," said Mrs. Merry grimly.

Eva bit her lip to keep down her anger, and returned to the drawing-room, where she wandered hopelessly up and down. While straining her ears she heard footsteps and ran to the door. It proved to be a telegraph boy, dusty and breathless. Eva snatched the wire from him, although she was surprised at its late arrival. As she opened the envelope, the boy explained needlessly-

"It come at four," he said, "and I forgot to bring it, so the Head sent me on all these ten mile, miss, at this hour by way of punishment. And I ain't had no supper," added the injured youth.

But Eva did not heed him. She was reading the wire, which said that Mr. Strode had postponed his departure from town till the morrow, and would then be down by mid-day. "There's no reply," said Eva curtly, and went to the kitchen for the fifth time that evening. The messenger boy grumbled at not getting a shilling for his trouble, quite forgetting that the late arrival of the wire was due to his own carelessness. He banged the front gate angrily, and shortly rode off on his red-painted bicycle.

"My father's coming to-morrow," said Eva, showing the telegram.

Mrs. Merry read it, and gave back the pink paper. "Let them believe it as does believe," said she, "but he'll not come."

"But the wire is signed by himself, you stupid woman," said Eva.

"Well and good," said Mrs. Merry, "but dreams are dreams, whatever you may say, deary. Your pa was coming before and put it off; now he put it off again, and-"

"Then you believe he sent the wire. There, there, I know you will contradict me," said Miss Strode crossly, "I'm going to bed."

"You'll be woke up soon," cried Mrs. Merry after her; "them knocks-"

Eva heard no more. She went to her room, and, wearied out by waiting and anxiety, retired speedily to bed. Mrs. Merry remained seated before the kitchen fire, and even when twelve struck she did not move. The striking of the clock woke Eva. She sat up half asleep, but was speedily wide awake. She heard footsteps, and listened breathlessly. A sharp knock came to the front door. Then four soft knocks. With a cry she sprang from her bed, and ran to the door. Mrs. Merry met her, and kept her back.

"They've brought him home, miss," she said; "the dream's come true."

CHAPTER IV

MYSTERY

Mr. Hill's house at the far end of the village was an eccentric building. Originally it had been a labourer's cottage, and stood by itself, a stone-throw away from the crooked highway which bisected Wargrove. On arriving in the neighbourhood some twenty-five years before, Mr. Hill had bought the cottage and five acres of land around. These he enclosed with a high wall of red brick, and then set to work to turn the cottage into a mansion. As he was his own architect, the result was a strange mingling of styles.

The original cottage remained much as it was, with a thatched roof and whitewashed walls. But to the left, rose a round tower built quite in the mediæval style, to the right stretched a two-story mansion with oriel windows, a terrace and Tudor battlements. At the back of this, the building suddenly changed to a bungalow with a tropical verandah, and the round tower stood at the end of a range of buildings built in the Roman fashion with sham marble pillars, and mosaic encrusted walls. Within, the house was equally eccentric. There was a Spanish patio, turned, for the sake of the climate, into a winter garden and roofed with glass. The dining-room was Jacobean, the drawing-room was furnished in the Louis Quatorze style, Mr. Hill's library was quite an old English room with casements and a low roof. There were many bedrooms built in the severe graceful Greek fashion, a large marble swimming-bath after the ancient Roman type, and Mr. Hill possessed a Japanese room, all bamboo furniture and quaintly pictured walls, for his more frivolous moods. Finally there was the music-room with a great organ, and this room was made in the similitude of a church. On these freaks and fancies Mr. Hill spent a good deal of money, and the result was an *olla-podrida* of buildings, jumbled together without rhyme or reason. Such a mansion-if it could be called so-might exist in a nightmare, but only Mr. Hill could have translated it into fact. Within and without, the place was an example of many moods. It illustrated perfectly the mind of its architect and owner.

Allen's father was a small, delicate, dainty little man with a large head and a large voice, which boomed like a gong when he was angry. The man's head was clever and he had a fine forehead, but there was a streak of madness in him, which led him to indulge himself in whatever mood came uppermost. He did not exercise the least self-control, and expected all around him to give way to his whims, which were many and not always agreeable. Some one called Mr. Hill a brownie, and he was not unlike the pictures of that queer race of elves. His body was shapely enough, but as his legs were thin and slightly twisted, these, with his large head, gave him a strange appearance. His face was clean-shaven, pink and white, with no wrinkles. He had a beautifully formed mouth and a set of splendid teeth. His fair hair, slightly-very slightly-streaked with grey, he wore long, and had a trick of passing his hand through it when he thought he had said anything clever. His hands were delicate-real artistic hands-but his feet were large and ill-formed. He strove always to hide these by wearing wide trousers. Both in winter and summer he wore a brown velvet coat and white serge trousers, no waistcoat, and a frilled shirt with a waist-band of some gaudy Eastern stuff sparkling with gold thread and rainbow hues. When he went out, he wore a straw hat with a gigantic brim, and as he was considerably under the ordinary height, he looked strange in this headgear. But however queer his garb may have been in the daytime, at night Mr. Hill was always accurately attired in evening dress of the latest cut, and appeared a quiet, if somewhat odd, English gentleman.

This strange creature lived on his emotions. One day he would be all gaiety and mirth; the next morning would see him silent and sad. At times he played the organ, the piano, the violin; again he would take to painting; then he would write poems, and anon his mood would change to a religious one. Not that he was truly religious. He was a Theosophist, a Spiritualist, sometimes a Roman Catholic, and at times a follower of Calvin. Lately he fancied that he would like to be a

Buddhist. His library, a large one, was composed of various books bought in different moods, which illustrated-like his house-the queer jumbled mind of the man. Yet with all his eccentricity Mr. Hill was far from being mad. He was clever at a bargain, and took good care of the wealth, which he had inherited from his father, who had been a stockbroker. At times Mr. Hill could talk cleverly and in a businesslike way; at others, he was all fantasy and vague dreams. Altogether an irritating creature. People said they wondered how Mrs. Hill could put up with such a changeling in the house.

Mrs. Hill put up with it-though the general public did not know this-simply for the sake of Allen, whom she adored. It was strange that Allen, tall, stalwart, practical, and quiet, with a steadfast mind and an open nature, should be the son of the freakish creature he called father. But the young man was in every way his mother's son. Mrs. Hill was tall, lean, and quiet in manner. Like Mrs. Merry, she usually wore black, and she moved silently about the house, never speaking, unless she was spoken too. Originally she had been a bright girl, but marriage with the brownie had sobered her. Several times during her early married life she was on the point of leaving Hill, thinking she had married a madman, but when Allen was born, Mrs. Hill resolved to endure her lot for the sake of the boy. Hill had the money, and would not allow the control of it to pass out of his hands. Mrs. Hill had come to him a pauper, the daughter of an aristocratic scamp who had gambled away a fortune. Therefore, so that Allen might inherit his father's wealth, which was considerable, the poor woman bore with her strange husband. Not that Hill was unkind. He was simply selfish, emotional, exacting, and irritating. Mrs. Hill never interfered with his whims, knowing from experience that interference would be useless. She was a cypher in the house, and left everything to her husband. Hill looked after the servants, arranged the meals, ordered the routine, and danced through life like an industrious butterfly.

As to Allen, he had speedily found that such a life was unbearable, and for the most part remained away. He had early gone to a public school, and had left it for college; then he had studied in London to be an engineer and took the first opportunity to procure work beyond the seas. He wrote constantly to his mother, but hardly ever corresponded with his father. When he came to England he stopped at "The Arabian Nights" – so the jumbled house was oddly named by its odd owner-but always, he had gone away in a month. On this occasion the meeting with Eva kept him in Wargrove, and he wished to be sure of her father's consent to the match before he went back to South America. Meantime his partner carried on the business in Cuzco. Mr. Hill was not ill pleased that Allen should stop, as he was really fond of his son in his own elfish way. Also he approved of the engagement to Eva, for whose beauty he had a great admiration.

On the morning after Mr. Strode's expected arrival, the three people who dwelt in "The Arabian Nights" were seated in the Jacobean dining-room. Mr. Hill, in his invariable brown velvet coat with a rose in his buttonhole and a shining morning face, was devouring *pâté-de-foie-gras* sandwiches, and drinking claret. At times he took a regular English egg-and-bacon coffee and marmalade breakfast, but he varied his meals as much as he did his amusements. One morning, bread and milk; the next he would imitate Daniel and his friends to the extent of living on pulse and water; then a Continental roll and coffee would appeal to him; and finally, as on the present occasion, he would eat viands more suited to a luncheon than to a breakfast. However, on this especial morning he announced that he was in a musical mood, and intended to compose during the day.

"Therefore," said Mr. Hill, sipping his claret and trifling with his sandwiches, "the stomach must not be laden with food. This," he touched the sandwiches, "is nourishment to sustain life, during the struggle with melody, and the wine is of a delicate thin nature which maketh the heart glad without leading to the vice of intoxication. Burgundy, I grant you, is too heavy. Champagne might do much to raise the airy fancy, but I believe in claret, which makes blood; and the brain during the agonies of composition needs a placid flow of blood."

Mrs. Hill smiled wearily at this speech and went on eating. She and Allen were engaged in disposing of a regular English meal, but neither seemed to enjoy the food. Mrs. Hill, silent and

unemotional, ate like one who needs food to live, and not as though she cared for the victuals. Allen looked pale and haggard. His face was white, and there were dark circles under his eyes as though he had not slept.

"Late hours," said his father, staring at him shrewdly; "did I not hear you come in at two o'clock, Allen?"

"Yes, sir;" Allen always addressed his parent in this stiff fashion. "I was unavoidably late."

Mrs. Hill cast an anxious look at his face, and her husband finished his claret before making any reply. Then he spoke, folding up his napkin as he did so. "When I gave you a latchkey," said Mr. Hill in his deep, rich voice, "I did not expect it to be used after midnight. Even the gayest of young men should be in bed before that unholy hour."

"I wasn't very gay," said Allen listlessly; "the fact is, father, I sprained my ankle last night four miles away."

"In what direction."

"The Westhaven direction. I was going to the Red Deeps, and while going I twisted my ankle. I lay on the moor-I was half way across when I fell-for a long time waiting for help. As none came, I managed to crawl home, and so reached here at two. I came on all fours."

"Humph," said Hill, "it's lucky Wasp didn't see you. With his ideas of duty he would have run you in for being drunk."

"I think I could have convinced Wasp to the contrary," said Allen drily; "my mother bathed my ankle, and it is easier this morning."

"But you should not have come down to breakfast," said Mrs. Hill.

"It would have put my father out, had I not come, mother."

"Quite so," said Mr. Hill; "I am glad to hear that you try to behave as a son. Besides, self-denial makes a man," added Mr. Hill, who never denied himself anything. "Strange, Allen, I did not notice that you limped-and I am an observant man."

"I was seated here before you came down," his son reminded him.

"True," said Mr. Hill, rising; "it is one of my late mornings. I was dreaming of an opera. I intend, Allen, to compose an opera. Saccharissa," thus he addressed Mrs. Hill, who was called plain Sarah, "do you hear? I intend to immortalise myself."

"I hear," said Saccharissa, quite unmoved. She had heard before, of these schemes to immortalise Mr. Hill.

"I shall call my opera 'Gwendoline,'" said Mr. Hill, passing his hand through his hair; "it will be a Welsh opera. I don't think any one has ever composed a Welsh opera, Allen."

"I can't call one to mind, sir," said Allen, his eyes on his plate.

"The opening chorus," began Mr. Hill, full of his theme, "will be-"

"One moment, sir," interrupted Allen, who was not in the mood for this trifling, "I want to ask you a question."

"No! no! no! You will disturb the current of my thoughts. Would you have the world lose a masterpiece, Allen?"

"It is a very simple question, sir. Will you see Mr. Strode to-day?"

Hill, who was looking out of the window and humming a theme for his opening chorus, turned sharply. "Certainly not. I am occupied."

"Mr. Strode is your oldest and best friend," urged Allen.

"He has proved that by taking money from me," said Hill, with a deep laugh. "Why should I see him?"

"I want you to put in a good word for me and Eva. Of course," Allen raised his eyes abruptly and looked directly at his father, "you expected to see him this morning?"

"No, I didn't," snapped the composer. "Strode and I were friends at school and college, certainly, but we met rarely in after life. The last time I saw him was when he brought his wife down here."

"Poor Lady Jane," sighed Mrs. Hill, who was seated with folded hands.

"You may well say that, Saccharissa. She was wedded to a clown-"

"I thought Mr. Strode was a clever and cultured man," said Allen drily.

"He should have been," said Mr. Hill, waving his hand and then sticking it into the breast of his shirt. "I did my best to form him. But flowers will not grow in clay, and Strode was made of stodgy clay. A poor creature, and very quarrelsome."

"That doesn't sound like stodgy clay, sir."

"He varied, Allen, he varied. At times the immortal fire he buried in his unfruitful soil would leap out at my behest; but for the most part Strode was an uncultured yokel. The lambent flame of my fancy, my ethereal fancy, played on the mass harmlessly, or with small result. I could not submit to be bound even by friendship to such a clod, so I got rid of Strode. And how did I do it? I lent him two thousand pounds, and not being able to repay it, shame kept him away. Cheap at the price-cheap at the price. Allen, how does this theme strike you for an opening chorus of Druids-modern Druids, of course? The scene is at Anglesea-"

"Wait, father. You hinted the other morning that Mr. Strode would never come back to Wargrove."

"Did I?" said Mr. Hill in an airy manner; "I forget."

"What grounds had you to say that?"

"Grounds-oh, my dear Allen, are you so commonplace as to demand grounds. I forget my train of thought just then-the fancy has vanished: but I am sure that my grounds were such as you would not understand. Why do you ask?"

"I may as well be frank," began Allen, when his father stopped him.

"No. It is so obvious to be frank. And to-day I am in an enigmatic mood-music is an enigma, and therefore I wish to be mysterious."

"I may as well be frank," repeated Allen doggedly, and doggedness was the only way to meet such a trifler as Mr. Hill. "I saw Eva last night, and she related a dream she had."

"Ah!" Mr. Hill spun round vivaciously-"now you talk sense. I love the psychic. A dream! Can Eva dream? – such a matter-of-fact girl."

"Indeed she's no such thing, sir," said the indignant lover.

"Pardon me. You are not a reader of character as I am. Eva Strode at present possesses youth, to cover a commonplace soul. When she gets old and the soul works through the mask of the face, she will be a common-looking woman like your mother."

"Oh!" said Allen, at this double insult. But Mrs. Hill laid her hand on his arm, and the touch quietened him. It was useless to be angry with so irresponsible a creature as Mr. Hill. "I must tell you the dream," said Allen with an effort, "and then you can judge if Eva is what you say."

"I wait for the dream," replied Mr. Hill, waving his arm airily; "but it will not alter my opinion. She is commonplace, that is why I agreed to your engagement. You are commonplace also-you take after your mother."

Mrs. Hill rose quite undisturbed. "I had better go," she said.

"By all means, Saccharissa," said Hill graciously; "to-day in my music mood I am a butterfly. You disturb me. Life with me must be sunshine this day, but you are a creature of gloom."

"Wait a moment, mother," said Allen, catching Mrs. Hill's hand as she moved quietly to the door, "I want you to hear Eva's dream."

"Which certainly will not be worth listening to," said the butterfly. Allen passed over this fresh piece of insolence, although he secretly wondered how his mother took such talk calmly. He recounted the dream in detail. "So I went to the Red Deeps at Eva's request," he finished, "to see if her dream was true. I never thought it would be, of course; but I went to pacify her. But when I left the road to take a short cut to the Red Deeps, about four miles from Wargrove, I twisted my ankle, as I said, and after waiting, crawled home, to arrive here at two o'clock."

"Why do you tell me this dream-which is interesting, I admit?" asked Mr. Hill irritably, and with a rather dark face.

"Because you said that Mr. Strode would never come home. Eva's dream hinted at the same thing. Why did you-?"

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Mr. Hill, sitting down with a smile. "I will endeavour to recall my mood when I spoke." He thought for a few minutes, then touched his forehead. "The mood taps here," said he playfully. "Allen, my son, you don't know Strode; I do. A truculent ruffian, determined to have money at any cost."

"I always heard he was a polished gentleman," objected Allen.

"Oh, quite so. The public school life and university polish gave him manners for society: I don't deny that. But when you scratched the skin, the swashbuckler broke out. Do you know how he came to lose his right hand, Allen? No. I could tell you that, but the story is too long, and my brain is not in its literary vein this day. If I could sing it, I would, but the theme is prosaic. Well, to come to the point, Allen, Strode, though a gentleman, is a swashbuckler. Out in Africa he has been trying to make money, and has done so at the cost of making enemies."

"Who told you so?"

"Let me see-oh, his lawyer, who is also mine. In fact, I introduced him to Mask, my solicitor. I went up a few months ago to see Mask about some business, and asked after Strode; for though the man is a baron of the middle ages and a ruffian, still he is my friend. Mask told me that Strode was making money and enemies at the same time. When you informed me, Allen, that Strode was coming home in the *Dunoon Castle*., and that he had arrived at Southampton, I thought some of his enemies might have followed him, and might have him arrested for swindling. In that case, he certainly would not arrive."

"But how do you know that Mr. Strode would swindle?"

"Because he was a man with no moral principles," retorted Mr. Hill; "your mother here will tell you the same."

"I did not like Mr. Strode," said Mrs. Hill calmly; "he was not what I call a good man. Eva takes after Lady Jane, who was always a delightful friend to me. I was glad to hear you were engaged to the dear girl, Allen," she added, and patted his hand.

"It is strange that your observation and Eva's dream should agree."

"Pardon me," said Mr. Hill, rising briskly, "they do not agree. I suggested just now that Strode might be followed by his Cape Town enemies and arrested for swindling. Eva dreamed that he was dead."

"Then you don't agree with her dream?" asked Allen, puzzled.

"Interesting, I admit; but-oh no" – Hill shrugged his shoulders- "Strode can look after himself. Whosoever is killed, he will be safe enough. I never knew a man possessed of such infernal ingenuity. Well, are you satisfied? If not, ask me more, and I'll explain what I can. Ah, by the way, there's Wasp coming up the garden." Hill threw open the window and hailed the policeman. "I asked Wasp to come and see me, Allen, whenever he had an interesting case to report. I intend to write a volume on the physiology of the criminal classes. Probably Wasp, wishing to earn an honest penny, has come to tell me of some paltry crime not worth expending five shillings on-that's his price. Ah, Wasp, what is it?"

The policeman, a stout little man, saluted. "Death, sir."

"How interesting," said Mr. Hill, rubbing his hands; "this is indeed news worth five shillings. Death?"

"Murder."

Allen rose and looked wide-eyed at the policeman. "Mr. Strode?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Strode. Murdered-found dead at the Red Deeps."

"Face downward in the mud?" whispered Allen. "Oh, the dream-the dream!" and he sank back in his chair quite overwhelmed.

"You seem to know all about it, Mr. Allen," said Wasp, with sudden suspicion.

CHAPTER V

A STRANGE LOSS

Wasp was a bulky little man with a great opinion of his own importance. In early years he had been in the army, and there, had imbibed stern ideas of duty. Shortly after joining the police force he was sent to Wargrove, and, with an underling, looked after the village and the surrounding district. Married while young, he now possessed a family of ten, who dwelt with Mrs. Wasp in a spick-and-span house on the verge of the common. Everything about Wasp's house was spotless. The little policeman had drilled his wife so thoroughly, that she performed her duties in quite a military way, and thought Wasp the greatest of men mentally, whatever he may have been physically. The ten children were also drilled to perfection, and life in the small house was conducted on garrison lines. The family woke early to the sound of the bugle, and retired to bed when 'Lights out' was sounded. It was quite a model household, especially as on Sunday, Wasp, a fervid churchman, walked at the head of his olive-branches with Mrs. Wasp to St. Peter's church.

The pay was not very large, but Wasp managed to make money in many ways. Lately he had been earning stray crowns from Mr. Hill by detailing any case which he thought likely to interest his patron. Hitherto these had been concerned with thieving and drunkenness and poaching-things which Mr. Hill did not care about. But on this occasion Wasp came to 'The Arabian Nights' swelling with importance, knowing that he had a most exciting story to tell. He was therefore not at all pleased when Allen, so to speak, took the words out of his official mouth. His red face grew redder than ever, and he drew up his stiff little figure to its full height, which was not much. "You seem to know all about it, Mr. Allen," said Wasp tartly.

"It is certainly strange that Miss Strode should dream as she did," said Hill, who had turned a trifle pale; "what do you think, Saccharissa?"

Mrs. Hill quoted from her husband's favourite poet: "'There are more things in heaven and earth-'"

"That's poetry, we want sense," said Hill interrupting testily; "my music mood has been banished by this news. I now feel that I am equal to being a Vidocq. Allen, henceforth I am a detective until the murderer of my friend Strode is in the dock. Where is the criminal," added Hill, turning to the policeman, "that I may see him?"

"No one knows who did it, sir," said Wasp, eyeing Allen suspiciously.

"What are the circumstances?"

"Mr. Allen, your son here, seems to know all about them," said Wasp stiffly.

Allen, who was resting his head on the white cloth of the table, looked up slowly. His face seemed old and worn, and the dark circles under his eyes were more marked than ever. "Didn't Miss Strode tell you her dream, Wasp?" he asked.

The policeman snorted. "I've got too much to do in connection with this case to think of them rubbishy things, sir," said he; "Mrs. Merry did say something, now you mention it. But how's a man woke up to dooty at one in the morning to listen to dreams."

"Were you woke at one o'clock, Wasp?" asked Mr. Hill, settling himself luxuriously; "tell me the details, and then I will go with you to see Miss Strode and the remains of one, whom I always regarded as a friend, whatever his shortcomings might have been. Allen, I suppose you will remain within and nurse your foot."

"No," said Allen rising painfully. "I must see Eva."

"Have you hurt your foot, sir?" asked Wasp, who was paying particular attention to Allen.

"Yes; I sprained it last night," said Allen shortly.

"Where, may I ask, sir?"

"On Chilvers Common."

"Ho!" Wasp stroked a ferocious moustache he wore for the sake of impressing evil-doers; "that's near the Red Deeps?"

"About a mile from the Red Deeps, I believe," said Allen, trying to ease the pain of his foot by resting it.

"And what were you doing there, may I ask, sir?" This time it was not Allen who replied, but his mother. The large, lean woman suddenly flushed and her stolid face became alive with anger. She turned on the little man-well named Wasp from his meddlesome disposition and desire to sting when he could-and seemed like a tigress protecting her cub. "Why do you ask?" she demanded; "do you hint that my son has anything to do with this matter?"

"No, I don't, ma'am," replied Wasp stolidly, "but Mr. Allen talked of the corp being found face downward in the mud. We did find it so-leastways them as found the dead, saw it that way. How did Mr. All-"

"The dream, my good Wasp," interposed Hill airily. "Miss Strode dreamed a dream two nights ago, and thought she saw her father dead in the Red Deeps, face downward. She also heard a laugh-but that's a detail. My son told us of the dream before you came. It is strange it should be verified so soon and so truly. I begin to think that Miss Strode has imagination after all. Without imagination," added the little man impressively, "no one can dream. I speak on the authority of Coleridge, a poet," he smiled pityingly on the three-"of whom you probably know nothing."

"Poets ain't in the case," said Wasp, "and touching Mr. Allen-"

The young engineer stood up for himself. "My story is short," he said, "and you may not believe it, Wasp."

"Why shouldn't I?" demanded the policeman very suspiciously.

Allen shrugged his shoulders. "You have not imagination enough," he answered, copying his father; "it seems to me that you believe I am concerned in this matter."

"There ain't no need to incriminate yourself, sir."

"Spare me the warning. I am not going to do so. If you want to know the truth it is this: Miss Strode dreamed the other night that her father was lying dead in the Red Deeps. After vainly endeavouring to laugh her out of the belief that the dream was true, I went last night to the Red Deeps to convince her that all was well. I struck across the moor from the high-road, and catching my foot in some bramble bushes I twisted my ankle. I could not move, and my ankle grew very painful. For hours I waited, on the chance that some one might come past, but Chilvers Common being lonely, as you know, I could not get help. Therefore, shortly before midnight-though I can hardly tell the exact time, my watch having been stopped when I fell-I managed to crawl home. I arrived about two o'clock, and my mother was waiting up for me. She bathed my ankle and I went to bed."

"It couldn't have been very bad, sir, if you're down now," said Wasp bluntly, and only half satisfied with Allen's explanation.

"I forced myself to come down, as my father does not like any one to be absent from meals," was the reply.

"Right, Mr. Wasp-right," said Hill briskly, "you need not go on suspecting my son. He has nothing to do with this matter, the more so as he is engaged to Miss Strode."

"And I certainly should end all my chances of marrying Miss Strode by killing her father," said Allen sharply; "I think you take too much upon yourself, Wasp."

The policeman excused himself on the plea of zeal, but saw that he had gone too far, and offered an apology. "But it was your knowing the position of the body that made me doubtful," he said.

"That is the dream," said Mrs. Hill quietly; "but you can now tell us all that has taken place."

Hill looked astonished at his wife and a trifle annoyed. She was not usually given to putting herself forward-as he called it-but waited to take her tune from him. He would have interposed and

asked the question himself, so as to recover the lead in his own house, but that Wasp, anxious to atone for his late error, replied at once, and addressed himself exclusively to Mrs. Hill.

"Well, ma'am, it's this way," he said, drawing himself up stiffly and saluting apologetically. "I was wakened about one o'clock by a message that I was wanted at Misery Castle, – a queer name as you know, ma'am–"

"We all know about Mrs. Merry and her eccentricities," said Mrs. Hill, who, having an eccentric person in the house, was lenient towards the failings of others; "go on."

"Well, ma'am, Jackson, who is under me, was at the other end of the village before midnight, but coming past Misery Castle on his rounds he saw Mrs. Merry waiting at the gate. She said that Mr. Strode had been brought home dead by three men-labourers. They, under the direction of Miss Eva, took the body in and laid it on a bed. Then Miss Eva sent them away with money. That was just about twelve o'clock. The men should have come to report to me, or have seen Jackson, but they went back to their own homes beyond the common, Westhaven way. I'm going to ask them what they mean by doing that and not reporting to the police," said Wasp sourly. "Well then, ma'am, Jackson saw the body and reported to me at one in the morning. I put on my uniform and went to Misery Castle. I examined the remains and called up Jackson. We made a report of the condition of the body, and sent it by messenger to Westhaven. The inspector came this morning and is now at Misery Castle. Being allowed to go away for a spell, having been on duty all night over the body, I came here to tell Mr. Hill, knowing he'd like to hear of the murder."

"I'm glad you came," said Hill, rubbing his hands, "a fine murder; though," his face fell, "I had rather it had been any one but my old friend. I suppose you don't know how he came by his death?"

"He was shot, sir."

"Shot?" echoed Allen, looking up, "and by whom?"

"I can't say, nor can any one, Mr. Allen. From what Mrs. Merry says, and she asked questions of those who brought the body home, the corp was found lying face downward in the mud near the Red Deeps spring. Why he should have gone there–the dead man, I mean, sir–I can't say. I hear he was coming from London, and no doubt he'd drive in a fly to Wargrove. But we'll have to make inquiries at the office of the railway station, and get to facts. Some one must hang for it."

"Don't, Wasp; you're making my mother ill," said Allen quickly.

And indeed Mrs. Hill looked very white. But she rallied herself and smiled quietly in her old manner. "I knew Mr. Strode," she said, "and I feel his sad end keenly, especially as he has left a daughter behind him. Poor Eva," she added, turning to Allen, "she is now an orphan."

"All the more reason that I should make her my wife and cherish her," said Allen quickly. "I'll go to the cottage," he looked at his father; "may I take the pony chaise? – my foot–"

"I was thinking of going myself," said Hill hesitating, "but as you are engaged to the girl, it is right you should go. I'll drive you." Allen looked dubious. Mr. Hill thought he could drive in the same way that he fancied he could do all things: but he was not a good whip, and Allen did not want another accident to happen. However, he resolved to risk the journey, and, thanking his father, went out of the room. While the chaise was getting ready, Allen, looking out of the window, saw his father leave the grounds in the company of Wasp. Apparently both were going to Misery Castle. He turned to his mother who was in the room. "What about my father driving?" he asked. "I see he has left the house."

"Probably he has forgotten," said Mrs. Hill soothingly; "you know how forgetful and whimsical he is."

"Do I not?" said Allen with a sigh, "and don't you?" he added, smiling at the dark face of his mother. "Well, I can drive myself. Will you come also, mother, and comfort Eva?"

"Not just now. I think that is your task. She is fond of me, but at present you can do her more good. And I think, Allen," said Mrs. Hill, "that you might bring her back. It is terrible that a young girl should be left alone in that small cottage with so dismal a woman as Mrs. Merry. Bring her back."

"But my father?"

"I'll make it right with him," said Mrs. Hill determinedly.

Allen looked at her anxiously. His mother had a firm, dark face, with quiet eyes steady and unwavering in their gaze. It had often struck him as wonderful, how so strong a woman-apparently-should allow his shallow father to rule the house. On several occasions, as he knew, Mrs. Hill had asserted herself firmly, and then Hill, after much outward anger, had given way. There was a mystery about this, and on any other occasion Allen would have asked his mother why she held so subordinate a position, when, evidently, she had all the strength of mind to rule the house and her husband and the whole neighbourhood if necessary. But at present he was too much taken up with the strange fulfilment of Eva's dream, and with the thought of her sorrow, to trouble about so petty a thing. He therefore remained silent and only spoke when the chaise came to the door in charge of a smart groom.

"I'll tell you everything when I return," he said, and hastily kissing his mother he moved slowly out of the room. Mrs. Hill stood smiling and nodding at the window as he drove away, and then returned to her needlework. She was always at needlework, and usually wrought incessantly, like a modern Penelope, without displaying any emotion. But today, as she worked in the solitude of her own room, her tears fell occasionally. Yet, as she did not like Strode, the tears could not have been for his untimely death. A strange, firm, self-reliant woman was Mrs. Hill; and although she took no active part in the management of the house, the servants secretly looked on her as the real ruler. Mr. Hill, in spite of his bluster, they regarded as merely the figurehead.

On the way to Misery Castle, Allen chatted with Jacobs, a smart-looking lad, who had been transformed from a yokel into a groom by Mr. Hill. Jacobs had heard very little of the affair, but admitted that he knew the crime had been committed. "My brother was one of them as brought the corp home, sir," he said, nodding.

"Why did your brother and the others not report to Wasp?"

Jacobs grinned. "Mr. Wasp have himself to thank for that, sir," said he, "they were all frightened as he'd say they did it, and don't intend to come forward unless they have to."

"All zeal on Mr. Wasp's part, Jacobs," said Allen, smiling faintly, "I can quite understand the hesitation, however. How did your brother find the body?"

"Well, sir," Jacobs scratched his head, "him and Arnold and Wake was coming across Chilvers Common last night after they'd been to see the circus at Westhaven, and they got a thirst on them. There being no beer handy they went to the spring at the Red Deepes to get water. There they found Mr. Strode's body lying in the mud. His face was down and his hands were stretched. They first saw the corpse by the white glove, sir, on the right hand."

"The wooden hand," said Allen absently.

"What, sir? Is it a wooden hand?" asked Jacobs eagerly.

"Yes. Didn't you know? – no-" Allen checked himself, "of course you wouldn't know. You can't remember Mr. Strode when he was here last."

"It's not that, sir," began Jacobs thoughtfully, "but here we are at the gate. I'll tell you another time, Mr. Allen."

"Tell me what?" asked Allen, as he alighted painfully.

"No matter, sir. It ain't much," replied the lad, and gathering up the reins he jumped into the trap. "When will I come back?"

"In an hour, and then you can tell me whatever it is."

"Nothing-nothing," said the groom, and drove off, looking thoughtful.

It seemed to Allen that the lad had something to say to him relating to the wooden hand, but, thinking he would learn about the matter during the homeward drive, he dismissed the affair from his mind and walked up the path.

He found the front door closed, and knocked in vain. Finding that no one came, he strolled round to the back, and discovered Mrs. Merry talking to a ragged, shock-headed, one-eyed boy of about thirteen. "Just you say that again," Mrs. Merry was remarking to this urchin.

The boy spoke in a shrill voice and with a cockney accent. "Cain sez to me, as he'll come over and see you to-morrer!"

"And who are you to come like this?" asked Mrs. Merry.

"I'm Butsey, and now you've as you've heard twice what Cain hes t'saiy, you can swear, without me waiting," and after this insult the urchin bolted without waiting for the box on the ear, with which Mrs. Merry was prepared to favour him. Allen, quick in his judgments, saw that this was a true specimen of a London gamin, and wondered how such a brat had drifted to Wargrove. As a rule the London guttersnipe sticks to town as religiously as does the London sparrow.

"If I had a child like that," gasped Mrs. Merry as the boy darted round the corner of the cottage, "I'd put him in a corner and keep him on bread and water till the sin was drove out of him. Ah, Mr. Allen, that's you. I'm glad you've come to the house of mourning, and well may I call this place Misery Castle, containing a corp as it do. But I said the dream would come true, and true it came. Five knocks at the door, and the corp with three men bearing it. Your pa's inside, looking at the body, and Miss Eva weeping in the doring-room."

Allen brushed past the garrulous woman, but halted on the doorstep, to ask why she had not come to the front door. Mrs. Merry was ready at once with her explanation. "That door don't open till the corp go out," she said, wiping her hands on her apron. "Oh, I know as you may call it superstition whatever you may say, Mr. Allen, but when a corp enter at one door nothing should come between its entering and its going out. If anything do, that thing goes with the corp to the grave," said Mrs. Merry impressively; "police and doctor and your pa and all, I haven't let in by the front, lest any one of them should die. Not as I'd mind that Wasp man going to his long home, drat him with his nasty ways, frightening Miss Eva."

Waiting to hear no more, Hill went through the kitchen and entered the tiny drawing-room. The blinds were down and on the sofa he saw Eva seated, dressed in black. She sprang to her feet when she saw him. "Oh, Allen, I am so glad you have come. Your father said you could not, because of your foot."

"I sprained it, Eva, last night when—"

"Yes. Your father told me all. I wondered why you did not come back, Allen, to relieve my anxiety. Of course you did not go to the Red Deeps?"

"No," said Allen sitting down, her hand within his own, "I never got so far, dearest. So your dream came true?"

"Yes. Truer than you think—truer than you can imagine," said Eva in a tone of awe. "Oh, Allen, I never believed in such things; but that such a strange experience should come to me," — she covered her face and wept, shaken to the core of her soul; Allen soothed her gently, and she laid her head on his breast, glad to have such kind arms around her. "Yes, my father is dead," she went on, "and do you know, Allen, wicked girl that I am, I do not feel so filled with sorrow as I ought to be? In fact" — she hesitated, then burst out, "Allen, I *am* wicked, but I feel relieved—"

"Relieved, Eva?"

"Yes! had my father come home alive everything would have gone wrong. You and I would have been parted, and-and-oh, I can't say what would have happened. Yet he is my father after all, though he treated my mother so badly, and I knew so little about him. I wish-oh, I wish that I could feel sorry, but I don't-I don't."

"Hush, hush! dearest," said Allen softly, "you knew little of your father, and it's natural under the circumstances you should not feel the loss very keenly. He was almost a stranger to you, and—"

While Allen was thus consoling her, the door opened abruptly and Hill entered rather excited. "Eva," he said quickly, "you never told me that your father's wooden hand had been removed."

"It has not been," said Eva; "it was on when we laid out his body."

"It's gone now, then," said Hill quietly, and looking very pale; "gone."

CHAPTER VI

THE WARNING

On hearing this announcement of the loss, Eva rose and went to the chamber of death. There, under a sheet, lay the body of her father looking far more calm in death, than he had ever looked in life. But the sheet was disarranged on the right side, and lifting this slightly, she saw that what Mr. Hill said was true. The wooden hand had been removed, and now there remained but the stump of the arm. A glance round the room showed her that the window was open, but she remembered opening it herself. The blind was down, but some one might have entered and thieved from the dead. It was an odd loss, and Eva could not think why it should have taken place.

When she returned to the tiny drawing-room, Allen and his father were in deep conversation. They looked up when the girl entered.

"It is quite true," said Eva, sitting down; "the hand is gone."

"Who can have stolen it?" demanded Allen, wrinkling his brow.

"And why should it be stolen?" asked Hill pointedly.

Eva pressed her hands to her aching head. "I don't know," she said wearily. "When Mrs. Merry and I laid out the body at dawn this morning the hand was certainly there, for I noted the white glove all discoloured with the mud of the Red Deeps. We pulled down the blind and opened the window. Some one may have entered."

"But why should some one steal?" said Hill uneasily; "you say the hand was there at dawn?"

"Yes." Eva rose and rang the bell. "We can ask Mrs. Merry."

The old woman speedily entered, and expressed astonishment at the queer loss. "The hand was there at nine," she said positively. "I went to see if everything was well, and lifted the sheet. Ah, dear me, Mr. Strode, as was, put a new white glove on that wooden hand every morning, so that it might look nice and clean. Whatever would he have said, to see the glove all red with clay? I intended," added Mrs. Merry, "to have put on a new glove, and I sent Cain to buy it."

"What?" asked Eva, looking up, "is Cain back?"

"Yes, deary. He came early, as the circus is passing through this place on to the next town, Shanton. Cain thought he'd pick up the caravans on the road, so came to say good-bye."

Eva remembered Cain's odd behaviour, and wondered if he had anything to do with the theft. But the idea was ridiculous. The lad was bad enough, but he certainly would not rob the dead. Moreover-on the face of it-there was no reason he should steal so useless an object as a wooden hand. What with the excitement of the death, and the fulfilment of the dream, not to mention that she felt a natural grief for the death of her father, the poor girl was quite worn out. Mr. Hill saw this, and after questioning Mrs. Merry as to the theft of the glove, he went away.

"I shall see Wasp about this," he said, pausing at the door, "there must be some meaning in the theft. Meanwhile I'll examine the flower-bed outside the window."

Mrs. Merry went with him, but neither could see any sign of foot-marks on the soft mould. The thief-if indeed a thief had entered the house, had jumped the flower-bed, and no marks were discoverable on the hard gravel of the path. "There's that boy," said Mrs. Merry.

"What boy?" asked Hill, starting.

"A little rascal, as calls himself Butsey," said the old woman, folding her hands as usual under her apron. "London street brat I take him to be. He came to say Cain would be here to-morrow."

"But Cain is here to-day," said Mr. Hill perplexed.

"That's what makes me think Butsey might have stolen the wooden hand," argued Mrs. Merry. "Why should he come here else? I didn't tell him, as Cain had already arrived, me being one as knows

how to hold my tongue whatever you may say, Mr. Hills" – so Mrs. Merry named her companion. "I would have asked questions, but the boy skipped. I wonder why he stole it?"

"You have no proof that he stole it at all," said Hill smartly; "but I'll tell Wasp what you say. When does the inquest take place?"

"To-morrow, as you might say," snapped Mrs. Merry crossly; "and don't bring that worriting Wasp round here, Mr. Hills. Wasp he is by name and Wasp by nature with his questions. If ever you-"

But Mr. Hill was beyond hearing by this time. He always avoided a chat with Mrs. Merry, as the shrillness of her voice-so he explained-annoyed him. The old woman stared after his retreating figure and she shook her head. "You're a bad one," she soliloquised; "him as is dead was bad too. A pair of ye-ah-but if there's trouble coming, as trouble will come, do what you may-Miss Eva shan't suffer while I can stop any worriting."

Meanwhile Eva and Allen were talking seriously. "My dream was fulfilled in the strangest way, Allen," the girl said. "I dreamed, as I told you, the night before last at nine o'clock-"

"Well?" questioned the young man seeing she hesitated.

Eva looked round fearfully. "The doctor says, that, judging by the condition of the body, my father must have been shot at that hour."

"Last night you mean," said Allen hesitatingly.

"No. This is Friday. He was shot on Wednesday at nine, and the body must have lain all those long hours at the Red Deeps. Of course," added Eva quickly, "no one goes to the Red Deeps. It was the merest chance that those labourers went last night and found the body. So you see, Allen, my father must have been killed at the very time I dreamed of his death."

"It is strange," said young Hill, much perturbed. "I wonder who can have killed him?"

Eva shook her head. "I cannot say, nor can any one. The inspector from Westhaven has been here this morning making inquiries, but, of course, I can tell him nothing-except about the telegram."

"What telegram?"

"Didn't I mention it to you?" said the girl, raising her eyes which were fixed on the ground disconsolately; "no-of course I didn't. It came after you left me-at nine o'clock-no it was at half-past nine. The wire was from my father, saying he would be down the next day. It had arrived at Westhaven at four, and should have been delivered earlier but for the forgetfulness of the messenger."

"But, Eva, if the wire came from your father yesterday, he could not have been shot on Wednesday night."

"No, I can't understand it. I told Inspector Garrit about the wire, and he took it away with him. He will say all that he learns about the matter at the inquest to-morrow. And now my father's wooden hand has been stolen-it is strange."

"Very strange," assented Allen musingly. He was thinking of what his father had said about Mr. Strode's probable enemies. "Eva, do you know if your father brought any jewels from Africa-diamonds, I mean?"

"I can't say. No diamonds were found on his body. In fact his purse was filled with money and his jewellery had not been taken."

"Then robbery could not have been the motive for the crime."

"No, Allen, the body was not robbed." She rose and paced the room. "I can't understand my dream. I wonder if, when I slept, my soul went to the Red Deeps and saw the crime committed."

"You did not see the crime committed?"

"No; I saw the body, however, lying in the position in which it was afterwards found by Jacobs and the others. And then the laugh-that cruel laugh as though the assassin was gloating over his cruel work-the man who murdered my father was laughing in my dream."

"How can you tell it was a man?"

"The laugh sounded like that of a man."

"In your dream? I don't think a jury will take that evidence."

Eva stopped before the young man and looked at him determinedly. "I don't see why that part of my dream should not come true, if the other has already been proved true. It's all of a piece."

To this remark young Hill had no answer ready. Certainly the dream had come true in one part, so why not in another? But he was too anxious about Eva's future to continue the discussion. "What about you, darling?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied, and sat down beside him again. "I can think of nothing until the inquest has taken place. When I learn who has killed my father, I shall be more at ease."

"That is only right and natural; but—"

"Don't mistake me, Allen," she interrupted vehemently. "I saw so little of my father, and, through my mother, knew so much bad about him, that I don't mourn his death as a daughter ought to. But I feel that I have a duty to perform. I must learn who killed him, and have that person sent to the scaffold."

Allen coloured and looked down. "We can talk about that when we have further facts before us. Inspector Garrit, you say, is making inquiries?"

"Yes; I have given him the telegram, and also the address of my father's lawyer, which I found in a letter in his pocket."

"Mr. Mask?"

"Yes; Sebastian Mask—do you know him?"

"I know of him. He is my father's lawyer also, and so became Mr. Strode's man of business. Yes, it is just as well Garrit should see him. When your father arrived in London he probably went to see Mask, to talk over business. We might learn something in that quarter."

"Learn what?" asked Eva bluntly.

Allen did not answer at once. "Eva," he said after a pause, "do you remember I told you that my father said Mr. Strode might not arrive. Well, I asked him why he said so, and he declared that from what he knew of your father, Mr. Strode was a man likely to have many enemies. It struck me that this crime may be the work of one of these enemies. Now Mask, knowing all your father's business, may also know about those who wished him ill."

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