GARVICE CHARLES

ONLY ONE LOVE; OR, WHO WAS THE HEIR

Charles Garvice

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

One summer's evening a young man was tramping through the Forest of Warden. "Forest of Warden" sounds strange, old-fashioned, almost improbable; but, thank Heaven, there yet remain, in over-crowded England, some spots, few and far between though they may be, still untouched by the greedy fingers of the destroyers, whom men call Progress and Civilization.

To this grand old forest, for instance, whose dim shades echo the soft pit-pat of the deer and the coo of the wood-pigeon, comes not the tourist, with hideous knapsack and suit of startling check; no panting locomotive belches out its cloud of coal smoke to dim the brightness of the sky and choke the elms and oaks which reared their stately heads before their fell enemy, the steam engine, was dreamt of.

So remote and unfrequented is the forest that there is scarcely a road from end to end of its umbrageous length, for the trail made by the rough carts of the woodmen and charcoal burners could scarcely be dignified by the title of thoroughfare, and a few footpaths that wind about the glades are so faint and seldom used as to be scarcely distinguished from the undergrowth of ferny moss around.

Along one of the footpaths the young man tramped, occasionally stopping for a moment to look up at the sky which shone redly through the openings of the trees or to watch some frightened hare scamper across the glade.

Every now and then a herd of deer would flit through the undergrowth, turning toward him distended eyes of alarm and curiosity, for of the two kinds of men with whom they were acquainted – charcoal burners and woodmen – he was neither; nor did he belong to the tribe of tourists, for he carried no knapsack, and instead of the inevitable check and knickerbockers, was clad in a loose Cheviot suit, which, though well worn, bore about it the unmistakable stamp of Saville Row.

That he was young and light-hearted was evident from the fact that he broke out into an occasional snatch of an air from the last new popular *opera bouffe*, notwithstanding that the evening was closing in and he had most completely and emphatically lost his way.

Now, to lose your way in a forest reads rather romantic and entertaining than otherwise, but like shipwreck, or falling into the hands of Greek banditti, it is a much pleasanter thing on paper than in reality.

A bed of moss, though very charming in the daytime, is not nearly so comfortable as a spring mattress, and is sure to be damp, and primeval oaks, majestic and beautiful as they are, do not keep out the draught. The worst room in the worst inn is preferable to a night's lodging in the grandest of forests.

But, though he had never been in the Warden Forest before, the young man knew it would be midsummer madness to hope for an inn and was wandering along on the chance of coming across some woodman's hut, or by meeting a stray human being of whom he could inquire his way.

He was tired – he had been walking since morning, and he was hungry and athirst, but he tramped on, and smoked and sang as carelessly as if he were strolling down the shady side of Pall Mall.

Slowly the sun set, and the glades, which had been dusky an hour ago, grew dark. The faint footpath grew still more indistinct, the undergrowth denser and more difficult for persons walking.

The pedestrian fought on for some time, but at last, as he stumbled over one of the gnarled roots which a grand chestnut had thrust up through the ground, he stopped and, looking round, shook his head.

"A regular babe in the wood, by Jove!" he exclaimed. "I shall have to make a night of it, I expect. Wonder whether the robins will be good enough to cover me over in the proper nursery-book style? Is it any good halloing, I wonder? I tried that an hour ago, much to the disgust of the live animals; and I don't think I can kick up a row at this time of night. Let's see how the 'bacca goes. Hem! about three – perhaps four pipes. I wish I had something to eat and drink; what a fool I was to leave that piece of steak at breakfast. Steak! I mustn't think of it – that way madness lies. Well, this looks about as sheltered a spot as I could find – I'll turn in. I wonder if anybody has, ever since the world began, hit upon a short cut? I never have, and hang me if I'll try it again. By George! the grass is wet already. Such a likely place for snakes – find my pocket full when I wake, no doubt."

Then, with a laugh, he dropped down amongst the long brake; but the idea of going to bed in a forest, at the early hour of nine, was too much for him, and instead of composing himself to rheumatic slumber, he began to sing:

"Oh, wake and call me early, mother,
Call me early, mother, dear."

Scarcely had he finished the line when there came through the darkness, as if in response, a short, sharp bark of a dog.

The wanderer leapt to his feet as if something had bitten him, and after listening intently for a moment, exclaimed:

"Another chance, by Jove!" and sent up a shout that, ringing through the stillness, echoed from tree to tree, and at last called forth the answering bark from the distant dog.

Knocking out his pipe as he ran, he made his way as best he could toward the sound, shouting occasionally and listening warily to the dog's response.

At last, after many a stumble, he found himself in a narrow glade, at the end of which, faintly defined against the patch of sky, stood the figure of a man.

"Saved, by George!" exclaimed the youth, with mock melodramatic emphasis.

"Halloa! Hi! Wait a moment there, will you?" he shouted.

The figure stopped and turned its head, then, after what seemed a moment's hesitation, brought back the dog, which was running toward the belated youth, and suddenly disappeared.

The wanderer pulled up and stared about the glade with an astonishment which immediately gave place to wrath.

"Confound his impudence!" he exclaimed, fiercely. "I'll swear he saw me! What on earth did he mean by going off like that? Did the fool think I was a ghost? I'll show him I'm a ghost that carries a big stick if I come up with him. Confound him, where – " Then, as a sudden thought struck him, he set off running down the glade, barking like a dog.

No live, real dog could withstand such an invitation. The dog ahead set up an angry echo, through which the youth could hear the man's angry attempt to silence the animal, and guided by the two voices, the wanderer struck into a footpath, and running at a good pace, came suddenly into a small clearing, in which stood a small wooden hut, before the door of which man and dog were standing as if on guard.

For a moment the two men stood and regarded each other in silence, the youth hot and angry, the man calm and grim.

Each, in his way, was a fine specimen of his class; the man, with his weather-beaten face and his thick-set limbs, clad in woodman's garb; the youth, with his frankly handsome countenance and patrician air.

"What the deuce do you mean by leaving a man in the lurch like this?" demanded the young man, angrily. "Did you take me for a ghost?"

The woodman, half leaning on his long-handled axe, regarded him grimly.

"No. I don't come at every man's beck and call, young sir. What's your will with me?"

"Why didn't you stop when I called to you just now?" retorted the youth, ignoring the question.

"Because it didn't suit me," said the man, not insolently, but with simple, straightforward candor. "You are answered, young sir; now, what do you want?"

The young man looked at him curiously, conquering his anger.

"Well, I've lost my way," he said, after a moment's pause.

"Where are you going?" was the quiet response.

"To Arkdale."

The woodman raised his eyes, and looked at him for a moment.

"Arkdale? Yes, you are out of the way. Arkdale lies to the west. Follow me, young sir, and I'll show you the road."

"Stop a moment," said the other; "though you declined to wait for me just now, you would not refuse to give me a glass of water, I suppose."

The man turned, he had already strode forward, and laid his hand on the latch of the cottage door.

The young man was following as a matter of course; but the woodman, with his hand still on the latch, pointed to a wooden seat under the window.

"Take your seat there, sir," he said, with grim determination.

The other stared, and the hot blood rose to his face; but he threw himself on the bench.

"Very well," he said; "I see you still think me a ghost; you'll be more easy when you see me drink. Look sharp, my good fellow."

The woodman, not a whit moved by this taunt, entered the cottage, and the young man heard a bolt shot into its place.

A few moments passed, and then the man came out with a plate and a glass.

"Thanks," said the young man. "What's this?"

"Cider – cake," was the curt answer.

"Oh, thanks," repeated the other; "jolly good cider, too. Come, you're not half a bad fellow. Do you know I meant to give you a hiding when I came up to you?"

"Very like," said the man, calmly. "Will you have any more?"

"Another glass, thanks."

With his former precaution in the way of bolting and barring, the man entered the cottage and reappeared with a refilled glass.

This the young man drank more leisurely, staring with unconcealed curiosity at his entertainer.

It was a kind of stare that would embarrass six men out of ten, and madden the remaining four; but the woodman bore it with the calm impassiveness of a wooden block, and stood motionless as a statue till the youth set down the glass, then he raised his hand and pointed to the west.

"Yonder lies Arkdale."

"Oh! How far?"

"Four miles and a half by the near road. Follow me, and I will put you into it."

"All right, lead on," said the other; but as he rose he turned, and while refilling his pipe stared at the closely locked cottage.

"Comfortable kind of crib that, my man."

The woodman nodded curtly.

"You are a woodman?"

Another nod.

"And poacher too, eh? No offense," he added, coolly. "I only supposed so from the close way in which you keep your place locked up."

"Suppose what you please," retorted the woodman, if words so calmly spoken could be called a retort. "Yonder lies your road, you'd best be taking to it."

"No hurry," retorted the young man, thrusting his hands in his pockets and smiling at the ill-concealed impatience which struggled through the grave calm on the weather-beaten face. "Well, I'm coming. You're not half such a bad sort, after all. What have you got inside there that you keep so close, eh? Some of the crown jewels or some of the Queen's venison? Take my advice, old fellow – if you don't want people to be curious, don't show such anxiety to keep 'em out of your crib."

The man, pacing on ahead, knit his brows as if struck by the idea.

"Curious folk don't come this way, young sir," he said, reluctantly.

"So I should think," retorted the other. "Well, I'm not one of the curious, though you think I am. I don't care a button what you've got there. Will you have a pipe? I've got some 'bacca."

The man shook his head, and they walked on in silence for some minutes, the footpath winding in and out like a dimly-defined serpent. Presently it widened, and the woodman stopped short and pointed down the leafy lane.

"Follow this path," he said, "until you come to a wood pile; take the path to the left of it, and it will bring you to Arkdale. Good-night, young sir."

"Here, stop!" said the young man, and he held out his hand with a dollar in it. "Here's a trifle to drink my health with."

The woodman looked at the coin, then shook his head slowly; and with another "good-night" turned and tramped off.

Not at all abashed the young man restored the coin to his pocket, laughed, and strode on.

The woodman walked back a few yards, then stopped, and looked after the stalwart figure until it deepened in the gloom, a thoughtful, puzzled expression upon his face, as if he were trying to call up some recollection.

With a shake of his head, denoting failure, he made his way to the cottage, unlocked it and entered.

The door opened into what appeared to be the living room. It was small and plainly furnished, after the manner of a woodman's hut, and yet, after a moment's glance, a stranger would have noticed a subtle air of refinement in common with better habitations.

The table and chairs were of plain deal, the walls were of pine, stained and varnished, but there was a good thick carpet on the floor, and on one side of the room hung a bookcase filled with well-bound volumes.

Beside the table, on which was spread the supper, stood a chair, more luxurious than its fellows, and covered with a pretty chintz. The knife and fork laid opposite this chair was of a better quality than the others on the table; and beside the knife and fork lay a white napkin and a daintily engraved glass; the other drinking vessels on the table were of common delf. As the woodman entered, a woman, who was kneeling at a fire in an adjoining room, looked round through the doorway.

"Is't you, Gideon?"

"Yes," he answered. "Where is Una?"

"Una? Isn't she with you? I heard voices. Who was it?"

"Where is Una?" he said, ignoring her question.

"In the clearing, I suppose," said the woman. "She went out a few minutes ago. I thought she went to meet you?"

The man opened the door and called the dog, who had been wandering round the room in an uneasy fashion.

"Go, Dick," he said. "Go fetch her!"

Then he came and stood by the fire thoughtfully.

"No," he said, "it was not Una. I wish she wouldn't leave the cot after dusk."

"Why not? What's the fear? What has happened? Who was that I heard with you?"

"A stranger," he said, "a young gentleman lost his way. How long has she been gone?"

"Not ten minutes. A young gentleman. Think of that! How came he here?"

"Lost his way. He followed me through the Chase. He has gone on to Arkdale."

"Lost his way," repeated the woman. "Poor fellow! Five miles it is to Arkdale! A gentleman! A gentleman, did thee say?"

"Ay," responded the man, frowning. "An outspoken one, too; I heard him at the bottom of the Chase and thought to give him the slip, but he was cunning, he teased the dog and ran us down. I had hard work to get rid of him; he looked sore tired. No matter, he's gone," and he gave a sigh of relief. "'Tis the first stranger that has come upon us since she came."

"Lost his way," murmured the woman, as she lifted a saucepan from the fire, "and a gentleman. It is a rare sight in Warden Forest. Why, Gideon, what has happened to thee?" and saucepan in hand, she stared at her husband's cloudy brow.

"Tut – nothing!" he answered, thrusting a projecting log into the fire with his foot. "The young man's face seemed – as I thought – 'twas but a passing fancy – but I thought it was familiar. It was the voice more than the face. And a bold face it was. I wish," he broke off, "that the lass would come in. From to-night I will have no more wanderings after sunset! One stranger follows another, and it is not safe for her to be out so late – "

"Hush!" interrupted the woman, holding up a forefinger. "Here she comes."

"Not a word!" said Gideon, warningly.

As he spoke the door opened, the dog bounded in with a short yelp of satisfaction, and close behind him, framed like a picture in the dark doorway, stood a young girl.

CHAPTER II

She had evidently run some distance, for she stood panting and breathless, the color coming and going on her face, which shone out of the hood which half covered her head.

She was dressed in a plain cotton dress which a woodman's daughter might wear, and which was short enough in the skirt to reveal a shapely foot, and scant enough in the sleeves to show a white, shapely arm.

But no one would have wasted time upon either arm or foot after a glance at her face.

To write it down simply and curtly, it was a beautiful face; but such a description is far too meager and insufficient. It requires an artist, a Rembrandt or a Gainsborough, to describe it, no pen-and-ink work can do it. Beautiful faces can be seen by the score by anyone who chooses to walk through Hyde Park in the middle of the season, but such a face as this which was enframed by the doorway of the woodman's hut is not seen in twenty seasons.

It was a face which baffles the powers of description, just as a sunset sky laughs to scorn the brush of the ablest painter. It was neither dark nor fair, neither grave nor sad, though at the moment of its entrance a smile played over it as the moonbeams play over a placid lake.

To catalogue in dry matter-of-fact fashion, the face possessed dark brown eyes, bright brown hair, and red, ripe lips; but no catalogue can give the spirit of the face, no description convey an idea of the swift and eloquent play of expression which, like a flash of sunlight, lit up eyes and lips.

Beautiful! The word is hackneyed and worn out. Here was a face more than beautiful, it was soulful. Like the still pool in the heart of a wood, it mirrored the emotion of the heart as faithfully as a glass would reflect the face. Like a glass – joy, sorrow, pleasure, mirth, were reflected in the eloquent eyes and mobile lips.

Of concealment the face was entirely ignorant; no bird of the forest in which she lived could be more frank, innocent of guile, and ignorant of evil.

With her light summer cloak held round her graceful figure, she stood in the doorway, a picture of grace and youthful beauty.

For a moment she stood silent, looking from the woodman to his wife questioningly, then she came into the room and threw the hood back, revealing a shapely head, shining, bronze-like, in the light of the lamp.

"Did you send Dick for me, father?" she said, and her voice, like her face, betokened a refinement uncommon in a woodman's daughter. "I was not far off, only at the pool to hear the frogs' concert. Dick knows where to find me now, he comes straight to the pond, though he hates frogs' music; don't you, Dick?"

The dog rubbed his nose against her hand and wagged his tail, and the girl took her seat at the table.

To match face and voice, her mien and movements were graceful, and she handled the dinner-napkin like – a lady. It was just that, expressed in a word. The girl was not only beautiful – but a lady, in appearance, in tone, in bearing – and that, notwithstanding she wore a plain cotton gown in a woodman's hut, and called the woodman "father."

"You did not come by your usual path, father," she said, turning from the deerhound, who sat on his haunches and rested his nose in her lap, quite content if her hand touched his head, say once during the meal.

"No, Una," he replied, and though he called her by her Christian name, and without any prefix there was a subtle undertone in his voice and in his manner of addressing her, which seemed to infer something like respect. "No, I went astray."

"And you were late," she said. "Was anything the matter?" she added, turning her eyes upon him, with, for the first time, an air of interrogation.

"Matter? No," he said, raising himself and coming to the table. "What should be? Yes, I came home by another path, and I don't think you must come to meet me after dark, Una," he added, with affected carelessness.

"No?" she asked, looking from one to the other with a smile of surprise. "Why not? Do you think I should get lost, or have you seen any wolves in Warden Forest, father? I know every path from end to end, and wolves have left merry England forever."

"Not quite," said Gideon, absently.

"Yes, quite," and she laughed. "What Saxon king was it who offered fivepence for every wolf's head? We were reading about it the other night, don't you remember?"

"Reading! you are always reading," said the woman, as she put a smoking dish on the table, and speaking for the first time. "It's books, books, from morn to night, and your father encourages you. The books will make thee old before thy time, child, and put no pence in thy father's pocket."

"Poor father!" she murmured, and leaning forward, put her arms round his neck. "I wish I could find in the poor, abused books the way to make him rich."

Gideon had put up his rough hand to caress the white one nestling against his face, but he let his hand drop again and looked at her with a slight cloud on his brow.

"Rich! who wants to be rich? The word is on your lips full oft of late, Una. Do *you* want to be rich?"

"Sometimes," she answered. "As much for your sake as mine. I should like to be rich enough for you to rest, and" – looking round the plainly furnished but comfortable room – "and a better house and clothes."

"I am not weary," he said, his eyes fixed on her with a thoughtful air of concealed scrutiny. "The cot is good enough for me, and the purple and fine linen I want none of. So much for me; now for yourself, Una?"

"For myself?" she said. "Well, sometimes I think, when I have been reading some of the books, that I should like to be rich and see the world."

"It must be such a wonderful place! Not so wonderful as I think it, perhaps, and that's just because I have never seen anything of it. Is it not strange that for all these years I have never been outside Warden?"

"Strange?" he echoed, reluctantly.

"Yes; are other girls so shut in and kept from seeing the world that one reads so pleasantly of?"

"Not all. It would be well for most of them if they were. It has been well for you. You have not been unhappy, Una?"

"Unhappy! No! How could one be unhappy in Warden? Why, it's a world in itself, and full of friends. Every living thing in it seems a friend, and an old friend, too. How long have we lived in Warden, father?"

"Eighteen years."

"And I am twenty-one. Mother told me yesterday. Where did we live before we came to Warden?"

"Don't worry your father, Una," said Mrs. Rolfe, who had been listening and looking from one to the other with ill-concealed anxiety; "he is too weary to talk."

"Forgive me, father. It was thoughtless of me. I should have remembered that you have had a hard day, while I have been idling in the wood, and over my books; it was stupid of me to trouble you. Won't you sit down again and – and I will promise not to talk."

"Say no more, Una. It grieves me to think that you might not be content, that you were not happy; if you knew as much of the world that raves and writhes outside as I do, you would be all too thankful that you are out of the monster's reach, and that all you know of it is from your books, which – Heaven forgive them – lie all too often! See now, here is something I found in Arkdale;" and as he spoke he drew from the capacious pocket of his velveteen jacket a small volume.

The girl sprang to her feet – not clumsily, but with infinite grace – and leaned over his shoulder eagerly.

"Why, father, it is the poems you promised me, and it was in your pocket all the while I was wearying you with my foolish questions."

"Tut, tut! Take your book, child, and devour it, as usual."

Once or twice Gideon looked up, roused from his reverie by the rustling of the trees as the gusts shook them, and suddenly the sky was rent by a flash of lightning and a peal of thunder, followed by the heavy rattle of the rainstorm.

"Hark at the night, father!" she said, raising her eyes from the book, but only for a moment.

"Ay, Una," he said, "some of the old elms will fall to-night. Woodman Lightning strikes with a keen ax."

Suddenly there came another sound which, coming in an interval of comparative quiet, caused Una to look up with surprise.

"Halloa there! open the door."

Gideon sprang to his feet, his face pale with anger.

"Go to your room, Una," he said.

She rose and moved across the room to obey, but before she had passed up the stairs the woodman had opened the door, and the voice came in from the outside, and she paused almost unconsciously.

"At last! What a time you have been! I've knocked loud enough to wake the dead. For Heaven's sake, open the door and let me in. I'm drenched to the skin."

"This is not an inn, young sir."

"No, or it would soon come to ruin with such a landlord. It's something with four walls and a roof, and I must be content with that. You don't mean to say that you won't let me come in?"

"I do not keep open house for travelers."

"Oh, come," exclaimed the young man, with a short laugh. "It's your own fault that I am back here; you told me the wrong turning. I'll swear I followed your directions. I must have been walking in a circle; anyhow I lost my way, and here I am, and, with all your churlishness, you can't refuse me shelter on such a night as this."

"The storm has cleared. It is but an hour's walk to Arkdale; I will go with you."

"That you certainly will not, to-night, nor any other man," was the good-humored retort. "I've had enough of your confounded forest for to-night. Why, man, are you afraid to let me in? It's a nasty thing to have to do, but – " and with a sudden thrust of his strong shoulder he forced the door open and passed the threshold.

But the woodman recovered from the surprise in a moment and, seizing him by the throat, was forcing him out again, when, with a low cry, Una sprang forward and laid her hand on his arm.

At her touch Gideon's hands dropped to his side. The stranger sprang upright, but almost staggered out with discomfited astonishment.

For the first time in her life she stood face to face with a man other than a woodman or a charcoal-burner. And as she looked her heart almost stopped beating, the color died slowly from her face. Was it real, or was it one of the visionary heroes of her books created into life from her own dreaming brain?

With parted lips she waited, half longing, half dreading, to hear him speak.

It seemed ages before he found his voice, but at last, with a sudden little shake of the head, as if he were, as he would have expressed it, "pulling himself together," he took off his wide hat and slowly turned his eyes from the beautiful face of the girl to the stern and now set face of the woodman.

"Why didn't you tell me that you had a lady – ladies with you?" half angrily, half apologetically. Then he turned quickly, impulsively, to Una. "I hope you will forgive me. I had no idea that there was anyone here excepting himself. Of course I would rather have got into the first ditch than have

disturbed you. I hope, I do hope you believe that, though I can't hope you'll forgive me. Good-night," and inclining his head he turned to the door.

Una, who had listened with an intent, rapt look on her face, as one sees a blind man listen to music, drew a little breath of regret as he ceased speaking, and then, with a little, quick gesture, laid her hand on her father's arm.

It was an imploring touch. It said as plainly as if she had spoken:

"Do not let him go."

"Having forced your way into my house you – may remain."

"Thanks. I should not think of doing so. Good-night."

"No; you must not go. He does not mean it. You have made him angry. Please do not go!"

The young man hesitated, and the woodman, with a gesture that was one of resigned despair, shut the door.

Then he turned and pointed to the next room.

"There's a fire there," he said.

"I'd rather be out in the wood by far," he said, "than be here feeling that I have made a nuisance of myself. I'd better go."

But Gideon Rolfe led the way into the next room, and after another look from Mrs. Rolfe to Una, the young man followed.

Una stood in the center of the room looking at the door behind which he had disappeared, like one in a dream. Then she turned to Mrs. Rolfe.

"Shall I go, mother?"

"Yes. No. Wait till your father comes in."

After the lapse of ten minutes the woodman and the woodman's guest re-entered. The latter had exchanged his wet clothes for a suit of Gideon's, which, though it was well-worn velveteen, failed to conceal the high-bred air of its present wearer.

Meanwhile Mrs. Rolfe had been busily spreading the remains of the supper.

"'Tis but plain fare, sir," she said; "but you are heartily welcome."

"Thanks. It looks like a banquet to me," he added, with the short laugh which seemed peculiar to him. "I haven't tasted food, as tramps say, since morning."

"Dear! dear!" exclaimed the wife.

Una, calling up a long line of heroes, thought first of Ivanhoe, then – and with a feeling of satisfaction – of Hotspur.

Figure matched face. Though but twenty-two, the frame was that of a trained athlete – stalwart, straight-limbed, muscular; and with all combined a grace which comes only with birth and breeding.

Wet and draggled, he looked every inch a gentleman – in Gideon's suit of worn velveteen he looked one still.

Silent and motionless, Una watched him.

"Yes," he said, "I got some lunch at the inn – 'Spotted Boar' at Wermesley – about one o'clock, I suppose. I have never felt so hungry in my life."

"Wermesley?" said the wife. "Then you came from – "

"London, originally. I got out at Wermesley, meaning to walk to Arkdale; but that appears to be easier said than done, eh?"

Gideon did not answer; he seemed scarcely to hear.

"I can't think how I missed the way," he went on. "I found the charcoal burner's hut, and hurried off to the left – "

"To the right, I said," muttered Gideon.

"Right, did you? Then I misunderstood you. Anyhow, I lost the right path, and wandered about until I came back to this cottage."

"And you were going to stay at Arkdale? 'Tis but a dull place," said Mrs. Rolfe.

"No; I meant taking the train from there to Hurst Leigh – Hurst Leigh," repeated the young man. "Do you know it? Ah," he went on, "don't suppose you would; it's some distance from here. Pretty place. I am going to see a relative. My name is Newcombe – Jack Newcombe I am generally called – and I am going on a visit to Squire Davenant."

Gideon Rolfe sprang to his feet, suddenly, knocking his chair over, and strode into the lamplight.

The young man looked up in surprise.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

With an effort Gideon Rolfe recovered himself.

"I – I want a light," he said; and leaning over the lamp, he lit his pipe. Then turning toward the window, he said: "Una, it is late; go to bed now."

She rose at once and kissed the old couple, then pausing a moment, held out her hand to the young man, who had risen, and stood regarding her with an intent, but wholly respectful look.

But before their hands could join, the woodman stepped in between them, and waving her to the stairs with one hand, forced the youth into his seat with the other.

CHAPTER III

A hearty meal after a long fast invariably produces intense sleepiness.

No sooner had the young gentleman who was called, according to his own account, Jack Newcombe, finished his supper than he began to show palpable signs of exhaustion.

He felt, indeed, remarkably tired, or be sure he would have demanded the reason of the woodman's refusal to allow his daughter to shake hands.

For once in a way, Jack – who was also called "The Savage" by his intimate friends – allowed the opportunity for a quarrel to slide by, and very soon also allowed the pipe to slide from his mouth, and his body from the chair.

Rousing himself with a muttered apology, he found that the woodman alone remained, and that he was sitting apparently forgetful of his guest's presence.

"Did you speak?" said Jack, rubbing his eyes, and struggling with a very giant of a yawn. Gideon looked round.

"You are tired," he said, slowly.

"Rather," assented the Savage, with half-closed eyes; "it must have been the wind. I can't keep my head up."

The woodman rose, and taking down from a cupboard a bundle of fox-skins, arranged them on the floor, put a couple of chair-cushions at the head to serve as pillows, and threw a riding-cloak – which, by the way, did not correspond with a woodman's usual attire, and pointed to the impromptu bed.

"Thanks," said Jack, getting up and taking off his coat and boots.

"It is a poor bed," remarked the woodman, but the Savage interrupted him with a cheerful though sleepy assurance that it needed no apologies.

"I could sleep on a rail to-night," he said, "and that looks comfortable enough for a king! Fine skins! Good-night!" and he held out his hand.

Gideon looked at it, but refusing it, nodded gravely.

"You won't shake hands!" exclaimed the Savage, with a little flush and an aggrieved tone. "Come, isn't that carrying the high and imposing rather too far, old fellow? Makes one feel more ashamed than ever, you know. Perhaps I'd better march, after all."

"No," said Gideon, slowly. "It is not that I owe you any ill-will for your presence here. You are welcome, but I cannot take your hand. Good-night," and he went to the stairs.

At the door, however, he paused, and looked over his shoulder.

"Did you say that – Squire Davenant was your uncle, Mr. Newcombe?"

"Eh – uncle? Well, scarcely. It's rather difficult to tell what relationship there is between us. He's a sort of cousin, I believe," answered Jack, carelessly, but yet with a touch of gravity that had something comical about it. "Rum old boy, isn't he? You know him, don't you?"

Gideon shook his head.

"Oh, I thought you did by the way you looked when I mentioned his name just now. Good thing you don't, for you might have something to say about him that is not pleasant, and though the old man and I are not turtle doves just now, I'm bound to stand up for him for the sake of old times."

"You have quarreled?" the old man said; but the Savage had already curled himself up in the fox-skins, and was incapable of further conversation.

Gideon Rolfe crossed the room, and holding the candle above his head, looked down at the sleeper.

"Yes," he muttered, "it's the same face – they are alike! Faces of angels and the hearts of devils. What fate has sent him here to-night?"

Though Jack Newcombe was by no means one of those impossible, perfect heroes whom we have sometimes met in history, and was, alas! as full of imperfections as a sieve is of holes, he was a gentleman, and for a savage, was possessed of a considerable amount of delicacy.

"Seems to me," he mused, "that the best thing I can do is to take my objectionable self out of the way before any of the good folks put in an appearance. The old fellow will be sure to order me off the premises directly after the breakfast; and I, in common gratitude, ought to save him the trouble."

To resolve and to act were one and the same thing with Jack Newcombe. Going into the adjoining room, he got out of the woodman's and into his own clothes, and carefully restored the skins and the cloak to the cupboard. Then he put the remainder of the loaf into his pocket, to serve as breakfast later on, then paused.

"Can't go without saying good-by, and much obliged," he muttered.

A bright idea struck him; he tore the blank leaf from an old letter which he happened to have with him, and after a few minutes' consideration – for epistolary composition was one of the Savage's weakest points – scribbled the following brief thanks, apology, and farewell:

"Very much obliged for your kindness, and sorry to have been such a bore; shouldn't have intruded if I'd known ladies were present. Will you oblige me by accepting the inclosed" – he hesitated a moment, put back the sovereign which he had taken from his pocket, and filled up the line – "for your wife."

Instead of the coin, he wrapped up a ring, which he took from his little finger.

He smiled, as he wrapped it up, for he remembered that the wife had particularly large hands; and he thought, cunningly, "*she* will get it."

Having placed this packet on the top of the cheese, he took a last look round the room, glanced toward the stairs rather wistfully – it was neither the woodman nor his wife that he longed to see – gently unbarred the door, and started on his road.

Choosing a sheltered spot, the Savage pulled out his crust, ate it uncomplainingly, and then lay down at full length, with his soft hat over his eyes, and while revolving the strange events of the preceding night, and striving to recall the face of the young girl, fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

A more beautiful spot for a siesta he could not have chosen. At his feet stretched the lake, gleaming like silver in the sun, and set in a frame of green leaves and forest flowers; above his head, in his very ears, the thrushes and linnets sang in concert, all the air was full of the perfumes of a summer morning, rendered sweeter by the storm of the preceding night, which had called forth the scent of the ferns and the honeysuckle.

As he lay, and dreamt with that happy-go-lucky carelessness of time and the daily round of duties which is one of the privileges of youth, there rose upon the air a song other than that of the birds.

It was a girl's voice, chanting softly, and evidently with perfect unconsciousness; faintly at first, it broke upon the air, then more distinctly, and presently, from amongst the bushes that stood breast high round the sleeping Savage, issued Una.

The night had had dreams for her, dreams in which the handsome face, with its bold, daring eyes, and quick, sensitive mouth, had hovered before her closed eyes and haunted her, and now here he lay at her feet.

How tired he must be to sleep there, and how hungry! for, though she had not seen the note – nor the ring – she knew that he had gone without breakfast.

"Poor fellow!" she murmured – "his face is quite pale – and – ah – !" she broke off with a sudden gasp, and bent forward; a wasp, which had been buzzing around his head for some time, swept his cheek.

Too fearful of waking him to sweep the insect aside, she knelt and watched with clasped hands and shrinking heart; so intent in her dread that the wasp should alight on his cheek and sting him as almost to have forgotten her fear that he should awake.

At last the dreaded climax occurred; the wasp settled on his lips; with a low, smothered cry, she stretched out her hand, and, with a quick movement, swept the wasp off. But, lightly as her finger had touched his lips, it had been sufficient to wake him, and, with a little start, he opened his eyes, and received into them, and through them to his heart the girl's rapt gaze.

For a minute neither moved; he lest he should break the dream; she, because, bird-like, she was fascinated; then, the minute passed, she rose, and drew back, and glided into the brake.

The Savage with a wild throb of the heart, saw that his dream had grown into life, raised himself on his elbow and looked after her, and, as he did so, his eye caught a small basket which she had set down beside him.

"Stay," he called, and in so gentle a voice that his friends who had christened him the Savage would have instantly changed it to the Dove.

"Stay! Please stay. Your basket."

"Why did you run from me?" asked the Savage, in a low voice. "Did you think that I should hurt you?"

"Hurt me? No, why should you?" and her eyes met his with innocent surprise.

"Why should I, indeed! I should have been very sorry if you had gone, because I wanted to thank you for your kindness last night."

"You have not to thank me," she said, slowly.

"Yes," he assented, quietly. "But for you – " then he stopped, remembering that it was scarcely correct to complain of her father's inhospitality; "I behaved very badly. I always do," he added – for the first time in his life with regret.

"Do you?" she said, doubtfully. "You were wet and tired last night, and – and you must not think ill of my father; he – "

"Don't say another word. I was treated better than I deserved."

"Why did you go without breakfast this morning?" she said, suddenly.

"I brought it with me," he replied. "You forgot the loaf!" and he smiled.

"Dry bread!" she said, pityingly. "I am so sorry. If I had but known, I would have brought you some milk."

"Oh, I have done very well," he said, his curt way softened and toned down.

"And now you are going to Arkdale?" she said, gently.

"That is, after I have gone to rest for a little while longer; I am in no hurry; won't you sit down, Una? Keep me company."

To her there seemed nothing strange in the speech; gravely and naturally she sat down at the foot of an oak.

"You think the forest is lonely?" she said.

"I do, most decidedly. Don't you?"

"No; but that is because I am used to it and have known no other place."

"Always lived here?" he said, with interest.

"Ever since I was three years old."

"Eighteen years! Then you are twenty-one?" murmured Jack.

"Yes; how old are you?" she asked, calmly.

"Twenty-two."

"Twenty-two. And you have lived in the world all the time?"

"Yes – very much so," he replied.

"And you are going back to it. You will never come into the forest again, while I shall go on living here till I die, and never see the world in which you have lived. Does that sound strange to you?"

"Do you mean to say that you have never been outside this forest?" he said, raising himself on his elbow to stare at her.

"Yes. I have never been out of Warden since we came into it."

"But – why not?" he demanded.

"I do not know," she replied, simply.

"But there must be some reason for it? Haven't you been to Arkdale or Wermesley?"

"No," she said, smiling. "Tell me what they are like. Are they gay and full of people, with theaters and parks, and ladies riding and driving, and crowds in the streets?"

"Oh, this is too much!" under his breath. "No, no – a thousand times no!" he exclaimed; "they are the two most miserable holes in creation! There are no parks, no theaters in Arkdale or Wermesley. You might see a lady on horseback – one lady in a week! They are two county towns, and nothing of that kind ever goes on in them. You mean London, and – and places like that when you speak of theaters and that sort of thing!"

"Yes, London," she says, quietly. "Tell me all about that – I have read about it in books."

"Books!" said the Savage, in undisguised contempt; "what's the use of *them!* You must see life for yourself – books are no use. They give it to you all wrong; at least, I expect so; don't know much about them myself."

"Tell me," she repeated, "tell me of the world outside the forest; tell me about yourself."

"About myself? Oh, that wouldn't interest you."

"Yes," she said, simply, "I would rather hear about yourself than about anything else."

"Look here, I don't know what to tell you."

"Tell me all you can think of," she said, calmly; "about your father and mother."

"Haven't got any," he said; "they're both dead."

"I am sorry," she said.

"Yes, they're dead," he said; "they died long ago."

"And have you any brothers and sisters?"

"No; I have a cousin, though," and he groaned.

"I am so glad," she said, in a low voice.

"Don't be. I'm not. He's a – I don't like him; we don't get on together, you know."

"You quarrel, do you mean?"

"Like Kilkenny cats," assented the Savage.

"Then he must be a bad man," she said, simply.

"No," he said, quietly; "everybody says that I am the bad one. I'm a regular bad lot, you know."

"I don't think that you are bad," she said.

"You don't; really not! By George! I like to hear you say that; but," with a slow shake of the head, "I'm afraid it's true. Yes, I am a regular bad lot."

"Tell me what you have done that is so wrong," she said.

"Oh – I've – I've spent all my money."

"That's not so very wrong; you have hurt only yourself."

"Jove, that's a new way of looking at it," he muttered. "And" – aloud – "and I've run into debt, and I've – oh, I can't tell you any more; I don't want you to hate me!"

"Hate you? I could not do that."

He sprang to his feet, paced up and down, and then dropped at her side again.

"Well, that's all about myself," he said; "now tell me about yourself."

"No," she said; "not yet. Tell me why you are going to Arkdale?"

"I'm going to Arkdale to take a train to Hurst Leigh to see my uncle, cousin, or whatever he is – Squire Davenant."

"Is he an old man?"

"Yes, a very old man, and a bad one, too. All our family are a bad lot, excepting my cousin, Stephen Davenant."

"The one you do not like?"

"The same. He is quite an angel."

"An angel?"

"One of those men too good to live. He's the only steady one we've got, and we make the most of him. He is Squire Davenant's heir – at least he will come into his money. The old man is very rich, you know."

"I see," she said, musingly; then she looked down at him and added, suddenly: "You were to have been the heir?"

"Yes, that's right! How did you guess that? Yes, I was the old man's favorite, but we quarreled. He wanted it all his own way, and, oh – we couldn't get on. Then Cousin Stephen stepped in, and I am out in the cold now."

"Then why are you going there now?" she asked.

"Because the squire sent for me," he replied.

"And you have been all this time going?"

"You see, I thought I'd walk through the forest," he said, apologetically.

"You should be there now – you should not have waited on the road! Is your Cousin Stephen – is that his name? – there?"

"I don't know," he said, carelessly.

"Ah, you should be there," she said. "Squire Davenant would be friendly with you again."

"I'm afraid you haven't hit the right nail on the head there," he said. "I rather think he wants to give me a good rowing about a scrape I've got into."

"Tell me about that."

"Oh, it's about money – the usual thing. I got into a mess, and had to borrow some money of a Jew, and he got me to sign a paper, promising to pay after Squire Davenant's death; he called it a *post obit*– I didn't know what it was then, but I do now; for the squire got to hear of it, but how, hanged if

I can make out; and he wrote to me and to the Jew, saying that he shouldn't leave me a brass farthing. Of course the Jew was wild; but I gave him another sort of bill, and it's all right."

"Excepting that you will lose your fortune," said Una, with a little sigh. "What will you do?"

"That's a conundrum which I've long ago given up. By Jove! I'll come and be a woodman in the forest!"

"Will you?" she said. "Do you really mean it? – no, you were not in earnest!"

"I – why shouldn't I be in earnest?" he says, almost to himself. "Would you like me to? I mean shall I come here to – what do you call it – Warden?" and he threw himself down again.

"Yes," she said; "I should like you to. Yes, that would be very nice. We could sit and talk when your work was done, and I could show you all the prettiest spots, and the places where the starlings make their nests, and the fairy rings in the glades, and you could tell me all that you have seen and done. Yes," wistfully, "that would be very nice. It is so lonely sometimes!"

"Lonely, is it?" he said. "Lonely! By George, I should think it must be! I can't realize it! Books, it reads like a book. If I were to tell some of my friends that there was a young lady shut up in a forest, outside of which she had never been, they wouldn't believe me. By the way – where did you go to school?"

"School? I never went to school."

"Then how – how did you learn to read? and – it's awfully rude of me, you know, but you speak so nicely; such grammar, and all that."

"Do I?" she said, thoughtfully. "I didn't know that I did. My father taught me."

"It's hard to believe," he said, as if he were giving up a conundrum. "I beg your pardon. I mean that your father would have made a jolly good schoolmaster, and I must be an awful dunce, for I've been to Oxford, and I'll wager I don't know half what you do, and as to talking – I am not in it."

"Yes, my father is very clever," she said; "he is not like the other woodmen and burners."

"No, if he is, they must be a learned lot," assented Jack; "yes, I think I had better come and live here, and get him to teach me. I'm afraid he wouldn't undertake the job."

"Father does not like strangers," she said, blushing as she thought of the inhospitable scene of the preceding night. "He says that the world is a cruel, wicked place, and that everybody is unhappy there. But I think he must be wrong. You don't look unhappy."

"I am not unhappy now," said Jack.

"I am so glad," she said; "why are you not?"

"Because I am with you."

"Are you?" she said, gently. "Then it must be because I am with you that I feel so happy."

The Savage flushed and he looked down, striving to still the sudden throb of pleasure with which his heart beat.

"Confound it," he muttered, "I must go! I can't be such a cad as to stop any longer; she oughtn't to say this sort of thing, and yet I – I can't tell her so! No! I must go!" and he rose and took out his watch.

"I am afraid I must be on the tramp."

"Yes," she assented; "you have stayed too long. I hope you will find that the Squire Davenant has forgiven you. I think he cannot help it. And you will have your fortune and will go back into the world, and will quite forget that you lost your way in Warden Forest. But I shall not forget it; I shall often think of it."

"No," he said, "I shan't forget it. But in case I should, will you give me something – no, I won't ask it."

"Why not?" she said, wonderingly. "Were you going to say, will I give you something to help you to remember?"

"Yes, I will. What shall I give you?" and she looked around.

Jack looked at her. His bad angel whispered in his ear, "Ask her to give you a kiss," but Jack metaphorically kicked him out of hearing.

"Give me a flower," he said, and his voice was as gentle as its deep ringing bass could be.

Una nodded, and plucking a dog rose held it out to him.

"There," she said; "at least you will remember it as long as the rose lasts. But it soon dies," and she sighed.

Jack took it and looked at it hard. Then he put it to his lips.

"There is no smell to a dog rose," said Una.

"Ah no! I forgot. Just so. Well, good-by. We may shake hands, Una. That is your name, isn't it? How do you spell it?"

"U – n – a," she said, giving him her hand.

"It's a pretty name," he said, looking at her.

"Is it?" she said, dreamily. "Yes, I think it is, now. Say it again."

"Una, good-by. We shall meet again."

"Do you think so? Then you will have to come to Warden again."

"And I will. I will come soon. Oh, yes, we shall meet again. Good-by," and, yielding to the temptation, he bent and touched her hand – Heaven knows, reverently enough – with his lips.

A warm flush spread over the girl's face and neck, and she quivered from head to foot. It was the first kiss – except those of her father and mother – that she had ever received.

"Good-by," he repeated, and was slowly relinquishing her hand, the hand that clung to his, when a hand of firmer texture was laid on his arm and swung him round.

It was Gideon Rolfe, his face white with passion, his eyes ablaze, and a heavy stick upraised.

The Savage had just time to step back to avoid the blow and plant his feet firmly to receive a renewed attack; but with an effort the old man restrained himself, and struggling for speech, motioned the girl away with one hand and pointed with the other to Jack.

"You scoundrel!" he gasped, hoarsely. "Go, Una, go. You scoundrel! I warmed you at my hearth, you viper! and you turn to sting me. Go, Una – go at once. Do you disobey me?"

White and trembling, the girl shrank into the shade.

"You villain!" went on the old man, struggling with his passion.

"Stop!" exclaimed Jack, the veins in his forehead swelling ominously. "You must be mad! Don't strike me! – you are an old man!"

"Strike you! No, no; blows are of no avail with such as you! Curs take no heed of blows! What other way can one punish the scoundrel who repays hospitality by treachery? Was it not enough that you forced your way into my house, broke my bread, but you must waylay a credulous girl and lead her in the first step to ruin. Oh, spare your breath, viper! I know you and your race too well. Ruin and desolation walk hand in hand with you; but you have reckoned without your host here. My knowledge of you arms me with power to protect a weak, innocent girl from your wiles. Scoundrel!"

"You use strong words," he said, and his voice was low and hoarse. "You are an old man and – you are her father. You call me a scoundrel; I call you a fool, for if I were half the scoundrel you think me, you'd be to blame for any harm I might have done. I've done none. But that's no thanks to you, who keep such a girl as she is shut up as you do, and leave her to wander about unprotected. You know me, you say, and you know no good of me; that's as it may be, but I say when you call me a scoundrel, you lie!"

"Yes, I know you. I know the stock from whence you sprung, villains all! I thought that here, at least, I was safe from your kind; but Fate led you here – thank Fate that I let you go unhurt. Take an old man's advice, and, unlike your race, for once leave the prey which you thought so easy to destroy. Go!"

"I am going," he said, grimly. "I shall go, because if I stayed all night I should not convince you that I am not the scoundrel you suppose me. But, if you think that I am to be frightened by these

sort of threats, you are mistaken. I have said that I will come back, and I *will!"* and with a curt nod he strode off.

CHAPTER V

It was the evening of the day on which Jack Newcombe had parted from Gideon and Una, and the young moon fell peacefully on the irregular pile of the ancient mansion known familiarly for twenty miles of its neighborhood as The Hurst.

The present owner was one Ralph Davenant, or Squire Davenant, as Jack Newcombe had called him, and as he was called by the county generally.

He was an old man of eighty, who had lived one-half his life in the wildest and most dissipated fashion, and the other half in that most unprofitable occupation known as repenting thereof.

I say "known as," for if old Squire Davenant had really repented, this story would never have been written.

If half the stories which were told of him were true, Ralph Davenant, the present owner of Hurst, deserves a niche in the temple of fame – or infamy – which holds the figures of the worst men of his day. He had been a gambler, a spendthrift, a rogue of the worst kind for one half his life; a miser, a cynic, a misanthrope for the other.

And he now lay dying in his huge, draughty bed-chamber, hung with the portraits of his ancestors – all bad and filled with the ghosts of his youth and wasted old age.

As it was, he lay quite still – so still that the physician, brought down from London at a cost of – say, ten guineas an hour, was often uncertain whether he was alive or dead.

There was a third person in the room – a tall, thin young man, who stood motionless beside the bed, watching the old man, with half-closed eyes and tightly compressed lips. This was Stephen Davenant, the old man's nephew, and, as it was generally understood, his heir. Stephen Davenant was called a handsome man, and at first sight he seemed to merit that description. It was not until you had looked at him closely that you began to grow critical and to find fault. He was dark; his hair, which was quite black, was smooth, and clung to his head with a sleek, slimy closeness that only served to intensify the paleness, not to say pallor, of the face. Pallor was, indeed, the prevailing characteristic, his lips even being of a subdued and half-tinted red; they were not pleasant lips, although for every forty minutes out of the sixty they wore a smile which just showed a set of large and even teeth, which were, if anything, too faultless and too white. Jack said that when Stephen smiled it was like a private view of a cemetery.

In short, to quote the Savage again, Stephen Davenant was an admirable example, as artists would say, of "a study in black and white."

As he stood by the bed, motionless, silent, with the fixed regard of his light gray eyes on the sick man, he looked not unlike one of those sleek and emaciated birds which one sees standing on the bank of the Ganges, waiting for the floating by of stray dead bodies.

And yet he was not unhandsome. At times he looked remarkably well; when, for instance, he was delivering a lecture or an address at some institute or May meeting. His voice was low and soft, and not seldom insinuating, and some of his friends had called him, half in jest, half in earnest, "Fascination Davenant."

It will be gathered from this description that to call all the race of Davenants bad was unfair; every rule has its exception, and Stephen Davenant was the exception to this. He was "a good young man."

Fathers held him up as a pattern to their wayward sons, mothers patronized and lauded him, and their daughters regarded him as almost too good to live.

The minutes, so slow for the watchers, so rapid to the man for whom they were numbered, passed, and the old cracked clock in the half-ruined stables wheezed out the hour, when, as if the sound had roused him, old Ralph moved slightly, and opening his eyes, looked slowly from one upright figure to the other.

Dark eyes that had not even yet lost all their fire, and still shone out like a bird's from their wrinkled, cavernous hollows.

Stephen unlocked his wrist, bent down, and murmured, in his soft, silky voice:

"Uncle, do you know me?"

A smile, an unpleasant smile to see on such a face, glimmered on the old man's lips.

"Here still, Stephen?" he said, slowly and hollowly. "You'd make a good – mute."

A faint, pink tinge crept over Stephen's pale face, but he smiled and shook his head meekly.

"Who's that?" asked Ralph, half turning his eyes to the physician.

"Sir Humphrey, uncle – the doctor," replied Stephen, and the great doctor came a little nearer and felt the faint pulse.

"What's he stopping for?" gasped the old man. "What can he do, and – why don't he go?"

"We must not leave you, uncle, till you are better."

A faint flame shot up in the old man's eyes.

"Better, that's a lie, you know. You always were – " Then a paroxysm of faintness took him, but he struggled with and overcame it.

"Is – is – Jack here?" he asked.

"I regret to say," he replied, "that he is not. I cannot understand the delay. I hope, I fervently hope, that he has not willfully – "

"Did you tell him I was dying?" asked Ralph, watching him keenly.

"Can you doubt it?" murmured Stephen, meekly. "I particularly charged the messenger to say that my cousin was not to delay."

The old man looked up with a sardonic smile.

"I'll wait," he muttered, and he closed his eyes resolutely. The minutes passed, and presently there was a low knock at the door, and a servant crept up to Stephen.

"Mr. Newcombe is below, sir."

Stephen looked warningly at the bed, and stole on tiptoe from the room – not that there was any occasion to go on tiptoe, for his ordinary walk was as noiseless as a cat's – down the old treadworn stairs, into the neglected hall, and entered the library.

Bolt upright, and looking very like a Savage indeed, stood Jack Newcombe.

With noiseless step and mournful smile, Stephen entered, closed the door, and held out his hand.

"My dear Jack, how late you are!"

With an angry gesture Jack thrust his hands in his pockets, and glared wrathfully at the white, placid face.

"Late!" he echoed, passionately. "Why didn't you tell me that he was dying?"

"Hush!" murmured Stephen, with a shocked look – though if Jack had bellowed in his savagest tone, his voice would not have reached the room upstairs. "Pray, be quiet, my dear Jack. Tell you! Didn't my man give you my message? I particularly told him to describe the state of my uncle's health. Slummers is not apt to forget or neglect messages!"

"Messages!" said Jack, with wrathful incredulity; "he gave me none – left none, rather, for I was out. He simply said that the squire wanted to see me."

"Dear, dear me," murmured Stephen, regretfully. "I cannot understand it. Do you think the person who took the message delivered it properly? Slummers is so very careful and trustworthy."

"Oh," said Jack, contemptuously. "Do you suppose anyone would have forgotten to tell me if your man had told them that the squire was dying? I don't if you do, and I don't believe you do. You're no fool, Stephen, though you have made one of me," and he moved toward the door.

"Stay," said Stephen, laying his white hand gently on Jack's arm. "Will you wait a few minutes? Though by some unfortunate accident you were not told how ill my uncle is, I assure you that he is too ill now to be harassed – "

"Oh, I know what you mean without so many words," interrupted Jack, scornfully. "Make your mind easy, I am not going to split upon you. Bah!" he added, as Stephen shook his head with sorrowful repudiation. "Do you suppose that I don't know that your man was instructed to keep it from me? What were you afraid of – that I should cut you out at the last moment? You judge me by your own standard, and you make a vast mistake. It isn't on account of the money – you are welcome to that – and you deserve it, for you've worked hard enough for it; no, it's not on that account, it's – but you wouldn't understand if I told you. I am going up now," and he sprang up the stairs quickly.

Stephen followed him, and entered the room close behind him. The old man looked up, motioned with his hand to Jack, looked at the other two and quietly pointed to the door.

Stephen's eyes closed and his lips shut as he hesitated for a moment, then he turned and left with the physician.

"I think," said Sir Humphrey, blandly, and looking at his watch – one of a score left him by departed patients, "I think that I will go now, Mr. Davenant; I can do no good and my presence appears only to irritate your uncle."

The great doctor departed, just thirty guineas richer than when he came, and Stephen went into the library and closed the door, and as he did so it almost seemed as if he had taken off a mask and left it on the mat outside.

The set, calm expression of the face changed to one of fierce, uncontrollable anxiety and malice. With sullen step he paced up and down the room, gnawing – but daintily – at his nails, and grinding the white tombstones.

"Another half hour," he muttered, "and the fool would have been too late? Will he tell the old man? Curse him; how I hate him! I was a fool to send for him – an idiot! What is he saying to him? What are they doing? Thank Heaven, that old knave Hudsley isn't there! They can't do anything – can't, can't! No, I am safe."

Stephen Davenant need not have been so uneasy; Jack was not plotting against him, nor was the old man making a will in the Savage's favor.

Jack stood beside the bed, waiting for one of the attacks of faintness to pass, looking down regretfully at the haggard, death-marked face, recalling the past kindnesses he had received from the old man, and remorsefully remembering their many quarrels and eventful separation.

"Bad lot" as he was, no thought of lucre crossed the Savage's mind; he forgot even Stephen and the cowardly trick he had played him, and remembered only that he was looking his last on the old man, who, after his kind, had been good, and so far as his nature would allow it, generous to him.

At last old Ralph opened his eyes.

"Here at last," he said; and by an effort of the resolute will, he made himself heard distinctly, though every word cost him a breath.

"I'm sorry I'm so late," he said; and his voice was husky. "I didn't know – "

The old man looked at him shrewdly.

"So Stephen didn't send? It was just like him. A good stroke."

"Yes, he sent," said Jack; "but – "

The old man waved his hand to show that he understood.

"A sharp stroke. A clever fellow, Stephen. You always were a fool."

"I'm afraid so, sir," he said quietly.

"But Stephen is a knave, and a fool, too," murmured the old man. "Jack, I wish – I wish I could come back to the funeral."

"To see his face when the will's read," explained old Ralph, with a grim smile.

Jack colored, and, I am ashamed to say, grinned.

A sardonic smile flitted over the old man's face.

"Be sure you are there, Jack; don't let him keep you away."

"Not that you will be disappointed – much," said the old man.

"Don't think of me, sir," said Jack, with a dim sense of the discordance in such talk from such lips.

"I have thought of you as far – as – as I dared. Jack, you are an honest fool. Why – why did you give that *post obit?"*

"I don't know," said Jack, quietly. "Don't worry about that now."

"Stephen told me," said the old man, grimly. "He has told me every piece of wickedness you have done. He is a kind-hearted man, is – Ste – phen."

"We never were friends, sir," he said. "But don't talk now."

"I must," murmured the old man. "Now or never, and – give me your hand, Jack."

"I've had yours ever since I came in," said Jack, simply.

"Oh, I didn't know it. Good-by, boy – don't – don't end up like this. It – and – for Heaven's sake don't cry!" for Jack emitted a suspicious little choking sound, and his eyes were dim. "Good-by; don't be too disappointed. Justice, Jack, justice. Where is Stephen? – send him to me. I" – and the old sardonic smile came back – "I like to see him – he amuses me!"

The eyes closed; Jack waited a moment, then pressed the cold hand, and crept from the room.

Half way down the stairs he leaned his arm on the balustrade and dropped his face on it for a minute or two, then choking back his tears, went into the library – where Stephen was sitting reading a volume of sermons – and pointed up-stairs.

"My uncle wants me?" murmured Stephen. "I will go. Might I recommend this book to you, my dear Jack; it contains – "

Jack, I regret to say, chucked the volume into a corner of the room, and Stephen, with a mournfully reproachful sigh, shook his head and left the room.

CHAPTER VI

"Villains," says an old adage, "are made by accident." Now mark how accident helped to make a villain of the good Stephen Davenant.

He passed up the stairs and entered the bedroom. As he did so his foot struck against a chair and caused a little noise. The dying man heard it, however, and opening his eyes, said, almost inaudibly:

"Is that you, Hudsley?"

Stephen was about to reply, "No, it is I – Stephen," but stopped, hesitated, and as if struck by a sudden idea, drew back behind the bed-curtains.

Whatever that idea was, he was considerably moved by it; his hands shook, and his lips trembled during the interval of silence before the old man repeated the question:

"Is that you, Hudsley?"

Then Stephen, wiping his lips, answered in a dry voice utterly unlike his own, but very remarkably resembling that of the old solicitor, Hudsley:

"Yes, squire, it's Hudsley."

The dying man's hearing was faint, his senses wandering and dimmed; he caught the sense of the words, however, for with an effort he turned his head toward the curtains.

"Where are you?" he asked, almost inaudibly; "I can't see you; my sight has gone. You have been a long while coming. Hudsley, you thought you – knew – everything about the man who lies here; you were wrong. There's a surprise for you as well as the rest. Did you see Jack?"

Stephen had no need to reply: the old man rambled on without waiting, excepting to struggle for breath.

"He is down-stairs. Poor boy! it's a pity he is such a fool. There was always one like him in the Newcombe family. But the other – Stephen – the man who has been hanging about me all this time, eager to lick my boots so that he might step into them when I was gone; he is a fool and a knave."

Stephen's face went white and his lips twitched. It is probable that he remembered the adage: "Listeners hear no good of themselves."

"He is the first of his kind we have had in the family. Plenty of fools and scamps, Hudsley, but no hypocrites till this one. Well, he'll get his deserts. I'd give a thousand pounds to come back and hear the will read, and see his face. He makes so sure of it, too, the oily eel!"

Stephen writhed like an eel, indeed, and his lips blanched. Was the old man delirious, or had he, Stephen, really played the part of sycophant, toady and boot-licker all these years for nothing?

Great drops of sweat rolled down his face, his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and his knees shook so that he had to steady himself by holding the curtain.

"Yes, disappointed all. You don't understand. You think that you know everything. But no; I trusted you with a great deal, but not with all. How dark it is! Hudsley, you are an old man; don't finish up like – like this. Only one soul in the wide world is sorry that I'm going; and he's a fool. Poor Jack! I remember – "

Then followed, half inaudibly, a string of names belonging to the companions of his youth. Most of them were dead and forgotten by him until this hour, when he was about to join their shades.

"Ah, the old time! the old time. But – but – what was it I was saying? I – I – Hudsley – quick! for Heaven's sake! I – the key – the key – "

Stephen came round, in his eagerness risking recognition.

"The key?" he asked, so hoarsely that his voice might well be taken for an old man's. "What key?"

"Feel – under my pillow!" gasped Ralph Davenant.

Stephen thrust his trembling hand under the pillow, and, with a leap of the heart, felt a key.

"The safe!" murmured a faltering voice. "The bottom drawer. Bring them to me! Quick!"

Stephen glided snake-like across the room to a small safe that stood in a recess, opened the door, and with trembling hands drew out the drawer. His hands shook so, his heart beat to such an extent, that as a movement in the next room struck upon his ears, he could scarcely refrain from shrieking aloud; but it was only the nurse, whom the old man would only allow to enter the room at intervals; and setting his teeth hard, and fighting for calm, Stephen took out two documents.

One was a parchment of goodly proportions.

Both were folded and endorsed on the back – the parchment with the inscription, "Last will and testament of Ralph Davenant, Gent., Jan. 18 – ."

With eyes that almost refused to do their task, Stephen turned the other paper to the light, and read, "Will, July 18 – ." This inscription was written in an old man's hand – the parchment was engrossed as usual.

Two wills! The one – the parchment, however, was useless; the other – the sheet of foolscap – was the last.

"Well," rose the voice from the bed, hollow and broken, "have you got them?"

Stephen came up and stood behind the curtain, and held the wills up.

"Yes, yes," he said. "The first is – is in whose favor?"

The old man struggled for breath. White, breathless himself with the agony of anxiety and fear – for any moment someone might enter the room – Stephen stood staring beside him. He dared not undo the tapes and glance at the wills, in case of interruption – dared not conceal them, for Hudsley might appear on the scene. With the wills clasped in his hand, he stood and waited.

The faintness passed – old Ralph regained his voice.

"One is parchment – the other is paper. The parchment one you drew up; you know its contents – I want it destroyed, or, stay, keep it. It will add to the deceitful hound's disappointment. The other – ah, my God – it is too late – Hudsley, there is a cruel history in that paper. No hand but mine could pen it. But – but – I have done justice. Too late! – why do you say – too late? Why do you mock a dying man? Mind, Hudsley, I trust to you. It is a sound will, made in sound body – and – mind. Don't leave that hypocritical hound a chance of setting it aside. I trust to you. Stop, better burn the first will; burn it here now – now," and in his excitement he actually raised his head. Raised it to let it drop upon the pillow again with exhaustion.

Stephen stood and glared, torn this way and that by doubt and uncertainty.

"Justice," he whispered hoarsely. "The first will, my will leaves all to – "

"To that hound Stephen!" gasped the old man. "I did it in a weak moment and repented of it. Leaves all to him; but not now."

Stephen hesitated no longer. With the quick, gliding movement of a cat he reached the iron safe, replaced the parchment in the drawer and locked the outer door, and thrust the paper will into his pocket.

Scarcely had he done so, before he had time to get to his place, the door opened and Hudsley, the lawyer, entered.

He was an old man, as thin and bent as a withy branch, with a face seamed and wrinkled, like his familiar parchment, with the like spots; his dark, keen gray eyes, which looked out from under his shaggy eyebrows, like stars in a cloudy sky.

As he entered, Stephen came forward, his back to the light, his face in the shadow, and held out his hand.

Hudsley took it, held it for a moment, and dropped it with a little, irritable shudder – the slim, white hand was as cold as ice – and, turning to the bed, looked anxiously at the dying man.

"Great heaven!" he said, "is he dead?"

A savage hope shot up in Stephen's heart, but he looked and shook his head.

"No. You have been a long time coming, Mr. Hudsley."

"I have, sir, thanks to your man's stupidity," said the lawyer, in an angry whisper. "He came for me in a confounded dogcart!"

"The quickest vehicle to get ready," murmured Stephen. "I told him, to take the first that came to hand."

"And the result," said the lawyer impatiently. "The result is that we lost half an hour on the road! Does your man drink, Mr. Stephen?"

"Drink! Slummers drink!" murmured Stephen. "A most steady, respectable – I may say conscientious – man."

"He may be conscientious, but he's a very bad driver. I never saw such a clumsy fellow. He drove into a ditch half a mile after we had started."

"Dear, dear," murmured Stephen regretfully. "Poor Slummers. It is not his fault. He is a worthy fellow, but too sympathetic, and my uncle's illness quite upset him – "

"Hush!" interrupted Mr. Hudsley, holding up his finger and bending down.

"Squire, do you know me? I am Hudsley."

The dying man moved his hand faintly in assent.

"Yes. Have you done as I told you?"

"You have told me nothing yet."

"The safe! – the key! – the pillow!" said the Squire.

Hudsley caught his meaning and felt under the pillow, and Stephen, as if to assist, thrust his hand under, and withdrew it with the key in his fingers.

"Why – again?" came the voice, broken and impatient. "You have done it! you have burnt the first."

"What is he saying?" he asked.

"You have burned it; show me the other – the last; let me – touch it."

Hudsley opened the safe and took the first will from the drawer.

"Two, did he say?" he muttered: "there is only one here – the will;" and he came to the bed with it.

"There is only one will here, of course, squire," he said, bending down and speaking slowly and distinctly.

"Yes – you, you have – burned the other. Speak. I cannot see, but I can hear you."

"I have burned none," said Hudsley. "Have only just come – there is only one will here."

"Which?" gasped the dying man.

"The will of January – Mr. Stephen – "

Before they could finish, they saw, with horror, the dying man half raise himself, his face livid, his hands wildly clutching the air, his eyes, by accident, turned toward Stephen.

"You – you thief!" he gasped. "Give it to me! – give – give – oh, God! Too late? – too la – "

It was too late. Before the nurse and Jack could rush into the room, horrified by the shriek which rang from Stephen's white lips, old Ralph Davenant had fallen back dead!

CHAPTER VII

Half an hour afterward Stephen Davenant passed down the stairs on tiptoe, though the tramp of an armed host could not disturb old Ralph Davenant now – passed down with his hand pressed against his breast pocket, in which lay the stolen will. Had the sheet of blue foolscap been composed of red-hot iron instead of paper, Stephen could not have felt its presence more distinctly and uncomfortably; it seemed to burn right through his clothes and scorch his heart; he could almost fancy, in his overstrained state, that it could be seen through his coat.

He paused a moment outside the library door, one white hand fingering his pale lips, the other vainly striving to keep away from his breast pocket, and listened to the tramp, tramp of Jack as he walked up and down the room. Any other face would have been more endurable than Jack's, with its fiercely frank gaze and outspoken contempt.

At last he opened the door and entered, his handkerchief in his hand. Jack stopped and looked at him.

"I have been waiting for you," he said.

"My poor uncle!"

Jack looked at him with keen scrutiny, mingled with unconcealed scorn.

"I have been waiting for you, in case you wished to say anything before I went."

"What?" murmured Stephen, with admirably feigned surprise and regret. "You will not go, my dear Jack! not to-night."

"Yes, to-night," said Jack quietly. "I couldn't stop in the house – I shall go to the inn."

"But – "

"No, thanks!" said Jack, cutting him short.

"Oh, do not thank me," murmured Stephen, meekly. "I may have no right to offer you hospitality, the house may be yours."

"Well, I think you could give a pretty good guess on that point," said Jack, bluntly; "but let that pass. I am going to the 'Bush.' If you or Mr. Hudsley want me – where is Hudsley?" he broke off to inquire.

"Mr. Hudsley is up-stairs sealing up the safe and things," said Stephen humbly. "He wished me to assist him, but I had rather that he should do it alone – perhaps you would go through the house with him?"

Jack shook his head.

"As you please," murmured Stephen, with a resigned sigh. "Mr. Hudsley is quite sufficient; he knows where everything of importance is kept. You will have some refreshments after your journey, my dear Jack?"

"No, thanks," said Jack; "I want nothing – I couldn't eat anything. I'll go now."

"Are you going, Mr. Newcombe?" said Mr. Hudsley, entering and looking from one to the other keenly.

"I am going to the 'Bush;' I shall stay there in case I am wanted."

"The funeral had better be fixed for Saturday. You and Mr. Stephen will be the chief mourners." Then he turned to Stephen. "I have sealed up most of the things. Is there anything you can suggest?"

"You know all that is required; we leave everything to you, Mr Hudsley. I think I may speak for my cousin – may I not, Jack?"

Jack did not reply, but put on his gloves.

"I will go now," he said. "Good-night, Mr. Hudsley."

The old lawyer looked at him keenly as he took his hand.

"I shall find you at the 'Bush?'" he said.

"Yes," replied Jack, and was leaving the room when Stephen rose and followed him.

"Good-night, my dear Jack," he said. "Will you not shake hands on – on such an occasion?"

Jack strode to the door and opened it without reply, then turned and, as if with an effort, took the hand which Stephen had kept extended.

"Good-night," he said, dropping the cold fingers, and strode out.

Stephen looked after him a moment with his meek, long-suffering expression of face changed into a malignant smile of triumph, and his hand went up to his breast pocket.

"Good-night, beggar!" he murmured, and closed the door.

Mr. Hudsley was still standing by the library-table, toying absently with the keys, a thoughtful frown on his brow, which did not grow any lighter as Stephen entered, making great play with the pocket-handkerchief.

"I think I also may go now, Mr. Stephen," he said. "Nothing more can be done to-night. I will be here in the morning with my clerk."

"I suppose nothing more can be done. You have sealed up all papers and jewels? I am particularly anxious that nothing shall be left informal."

"I don't think there is anything unsealed that should have been."

"A very strange scene, the final one, Mr. Stephen."

"Awful, awful, Mr. Hudsley. My poor uncle seemed quite delirious at the last."

"Hem!" grunted the old lawyer, putting his hat to his lips and looking over it at the white, smooth face. "You think he was delirious – "

"Don't you, Mr. Hudsley? Do you think that he was conscious of what he was saying? You have been his legal adviser and confidant for years; you would know whether there was any meaning in his wild and incoherent statement about the will. As you are no doubt aware, my poor uncle never broached the subject of his intentions to me."

"I know of only one will – that of last year. That will I executed for him; it is the will locked up in the safe up-stairs. I have a copy at the office," he added, dryly.

"You – you don't think there is any other – any other later will?" he asked, softly.

"I didn't think so until an hour ago. I am not sure that I think so now. Do you?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "My uncle was not the man to draw up a will with his own hand, and his confidence, and I may say affection for you, were so great that he would not have gone to any other legal adviser to do it for him. No, I do not think there is any other will; of course, I do not know the contents of the will in the safe."

"Of course not," said Mr. Hudsley, in a tone so dry that it seemed to rasp his throat.

"And yet I cannot understand, my poor uncle's outbreak, except by attributing it to delirium."

"Hem!" said Mr. Hudsley. "Well, in case there should have been any meaning and significance in it, my clerk and I will make a careful search to-morrow."

"Yes," murmured Stephen, "and I devoutly trust that should a later will be in existence, you may find it."

"I hope we may," said Mr. Hudsley. "Good-night!"

Stephen accompanied him to the door as he had accompanied the doctor and Jack, and saw him into the brougham, and then turned back into the house with a look of release, which, however, gradually changed to one of lurking fear and indefinite dread.

"Conscience makes cowards of us all."

It makes a worse coward of Stephen Davenant than he was naturally.

As he stood in the deserted hall, and looked round, at its vast dimness, at the carved gallery and staircase, somber and dull for want of varnish, and listened to the faint, ghostly noises made by the awe-stricken servants moving to and fro overhead, a chill crept over him, and he wished that he had kept one of them, even Jack, to bear him company.

With fearful gaze he peered into the darkness, scarcely daring to cross the hall and enter the library. For all the stillness, he fancied he could hear that last shriek of the dying man ringing through

the house; for all the darkness, the slim, bent figure seemed to be moving to and fro, the dark piercing eyes turned upon him with furious accusation. Even when he had summoned up courage to enter the library, locking the door after him, the eyes seemed to follow him, and with a shudder that shook him from head to foot he poured out a glass of brandy and drank it down.

The Spirit of Evil certainly invented brandy for cowards.

Stephen set down the empty glass and looked round the room – another man.

He even smiled in a ghostly kind of fashion as he took the will from his pocket and opened it.

"Poor Jack!" he murmured, with a sardonic display of the white teeth. "This no doubt makes you master of Hurst Leigh; but Providence has decreed that the spendthrift shall be disappointed. Yes, I am the humble instrument chosen. I am – "

He stopped suddenly with a start, for he had been reading as he soliloquized, and he had come upon words that struck him to the very heart's core.

Was he dreaming, or had his senses taken leave of him?

With beating heart and white, parched lips he stared at the paper until the lines of crabbed handwriting danced before his astounded eyes.

If brevity is the soul of wit, old Ralph Davenant's will was wit itself. It consisted of five paragraphs.

The first was merely the usual preamble declaring the testator to be of sound mind.

The second ran thus:

"To John Newcombe I will and bequeath the sum of fifty thousand pounds, the said sum to be realized by the sale or transfer of bonds and stocks, at the discretion of James Hudsley."

Enough in this to move Stephen, but it paled into insignificance before what followed:

"To my nephew, Stephen Davenant, I will and bequeath the set of Black's sermons in twenty-nine volumes, standing on the second shelf in the library, having remarked the affection which the said Stephen Davenant bore the said volumes, and accepting his repeated assertions that his attendance upon me was wholly disinterested."

An ugly flash and an evil glitter swept over Stephen's white face and eyes, and his teeth ground together maliciously.

"To each and every one of my servants I bequeath the sum of one hundred pounds, such sum to be forfeited by each and every one who assumes mourning for my death, which each and every one has anxiously looked forward to.

"And lastly, I will and bequeath the remainder of my property of whatsoever kind, be it money, houses, lands, or property of any description, to my only daughter and child, Eunice Davenant, the same to be held in trust for her sole use and benefit by James Hudsley.

"And I hereby inform him, and the world at large, that the said Eunice Davenant is the only issue of my marriage with Caroline Hatfield; that the said marriage was celebrated in secret at the Church of Armfield, in Sussex, in June, 18 – . And that the said Eunice Davenant, my daughter, is in the keeping of one Gideon Rolfe, woodman, of Warden Forest, who has reared her as his own child, and who is unacquainted with the facts of my secret marriage, and I decree and appoint James Hudsley sole guardian, trustee, and ward of the aforesaid Eunice Davenant, and at her hands I crave forgiveness for my neglect of her mother and herself.

"(Signed)Ralph Davenant,
"Hurst Leigh.

"Witness – George Goodman,
"Coachman, Hurst Leigh.

"Martha Goodman,
"Cook, Hurst Leigh."

White, breathless, Stephen held the paper in his clinched hands and stared at the astounding contents.

Eunice Davenant the squire's daughter.

His overstrained brain refused to realize it.

Old Ralph Davenant married! Married! It was impossible.

Oh, yes, that was it. A smile, a ghastly smile shone on his face. *It was a joke*– a vile, malicious joke, worthy of the crabbed, misanthropical old man! A villainous joke, set down just to bring about litigation, and create trouble and confusion between the two young men, himself and Jack Newcombe. And yet – and the smile died away and left his face fearful and haggard – and yet that awful fury of the dying man when he knew that the will had been stolen.

No, it was no jest. The marriage had taken place; there *was* a daughter, and she was the heiress of all that immense, untold wealth, except the fifty thousand pounds left to Jack Newcombe, while he – he, Stephen Davenant, the next of kin, the man who had been working, lying, toadying for the money, was left with a set of musty sermons.

Rage filled his heart; stifling, choking with fury, the disappointed schemer struck the senseless paper with his clinched fist, and ground his teeth at it; then, suddenly, as if by a swift inspiration, he remembered that this accursed will, which would reduce him to beggary, and leave an unknown girl and his hated cousin wealthy, was in his hands; that he and he only knew of its existence. With a sudden revulsion of feeling he sprang to his feet, and held the paper at arm's length and laughed softly at it, as if it were endued with sense, and could appreciate its helplessness.

Then he drew the candle near, folded the paper into a third of its size, held it to the candle – and drew it back again, overcome by that fascination which almost invariably exercises itself on such occasions – that peculiar reluctance to destroy the thing whose existence can destroy the possessor.

The flame flickered and licked the frail paper; the smoke curled round its edge; and yet – and yet he could not destroy it.

Instead, he sat down, and with clinched teeth unfolded the will and read it – read it again and again, until every word was burned and seared into his brain.

"Eunice Davenant! Eunice Davenant! Curse her!" he groaned out.

But even as the words left his lips a sound rose, the unmistakable tap – tap of something – some finger striking the window-pane.

Biting his bloodless lips to prevent himself calling out in his ecstasy of fear, he thrust the will into his pocket, caught up the candle, swept the curtains aside, and started back.

The light fell full upon the face of a young girl.

CHAPTER VIII

The face at the window was that of a young girl of about two-and-twenty.

It would be hard to say whether Stephen Davenant was pleased or annoyed by this apparition. That he was surprised there could be no doubt, for he almost dropped the candle in his astonishment, and fumbled at the lock of the window for some moments before he could open it.

"Laura!" he exclaimed, "can it be you? Great Heavens! Impossible!"

With a little gasp of relief and suppressed excitement, the girl stepped into the room, and leaned upon his arm, panting with a commingling of weariness and fear.

"My dear Laura," he said, still holding the candle, "how did you come here? Why – "

"Oh, Stephen, is it really you? I was afraid that I had made some mistake – that I had come all this way – "

"You do not mean to say you have come all the way from London alone – alone!"

"Yes, I have come all the way from London. Do not be angry with me, Stephen. I – I could not wait any longer. It seemed so long! Why did you leave me without a word? I did not know whether you were alive or dead. Three weeks – think, three weeks! How could you do it?"

"Hush! hush! Do not speak so loud," he whispered. "Did anyone see you come in?"

"No one. I have been waiting in the shrubs for – oh, hours! I saw the visitors go away – an old gentleman and a young one – and I saw your shadow behind the blind," and she pointed to the window. "I have been outside waiting, and dreading to knock in case you should not be alone."

"You – you saw my shadow?" he said, with an uneasy smile. "Did you see – I mean, what was I doing?"

"I did not see distinctly; I was listening for voices. Oh, Stephen, I am so weary!"

He drew a chair for her, and, motioning her to sit, mixed a glass of brandy-and-water, and stood over her holding her wrist and looking down at her with an uneasy smile.

"Now," he said, taking the glass from her, "tell me all about it – how you came, and why? Speak in a whisper."

"You don't need to ask me why, Stephen," she said, leaning forward and laying her hand upon his arm, her dark eyes fixed on his half-hidden ones. "Why did you leave me so long without a word?"

"I will tell you directly," he answered. "Tell me how you came – alone! Great Heaven!"

"Alone, yes; why not? I was not afraid. I came by the train."

"But – but – " he said, with a little flush and a shifting glance, "how did you know where I was?"

"You would never guess! You do not deserve that I should tell you. Well, I followed Slummers!"

"Followed Slummers!" he echoed, with a forced smile.

"Yes, I met him in the street; you are going to ask me why I did not ask him where you were," she broke off with a smile and a shake of her head.

"Because I knew he would not tell me. Stephen, I do not like that man, and he does not like me. Why do you trust him so?"

"You followed Slummers – well?"

"To the station. I was behind him when he took his ticket, and I took one for the same place. I was quite close behind him, but he did not see me. I got into the train at the last moment, and I followed him from the station here."

"My dear Laura," he murmured, soothingly; "how rash, how thoughtless!"

"Was it?" she said. "Perhaps it was. I did not stop to think."

"But now – now what are you to do?"

"Don't be angry with me, Stephen, now I *am* here. You must tell me what I am to do." Then her eyes wandered round the house. "What a large house! Is it yours, Stephen?"

"Eh?" he said, starting slightly. "I – I – don't know – I mean it was my uncle's. I was going to write to-night and tell you where I was, and why I did not write before."

"Why didn't you?" she said, with gentle reproach.

"Because," he replied, "I could not – it was impossible. I could not leave the house, and could not trust the letter to a servant. My uncle has been very ill: he – he – lies dead up-stairs."

"Up-stairs! Oh, Stephen!"

"You see," he exclaimed reproachfully, "that I have a good excuse, that I have not desert – left you without a word for no cause."

"Forgive me, Stephen, dear!" she murmured, penitently. "Do not be angry with me. Say you are glad to see me now I have come."

"Of course I am glad to see you, but I am not glad you have come, my dear Laura. What am I to do with you? I am not alone here, you know. The house is full of servants; any moment someone may come in. Think of the awkward position in which your precipitancy has placed me – has placed both of us!"

"I never thought of that – I did not know. Why did you not tell me you were with your uncle? Oh, Stephen, why have you hidden things from me?"

"Hidden things?" he echoed, with ill-concealed impatience. "I did not think that it was worth telling. I did not know that I was coming – I was fetched suddenly. Now that I come to think of it, I told Slummers to call and tell you."

"And he forgot it – on purpose. I hate Slummers!"

"Poor Slummers!" murmured Stephen. "Never mind him, however. We must think now of what is to be done with you. You – you cannot stay here."

"Can I not? No, I suppose not. I can go back," she added, with a touch of bitterness.

"My darling," he said, coaxingly, "I am afraid you must go back. There is an up-train – the last – in half an hour."

The girl leaned back and clasped her hands in her lap.

"I am very sorry," he said, grasping her arm; "but what can I do? You cannot stay here. That's impossible. There is only one inn in the place, and your appearance there would arouse curiosity, and – oh, *that*, too, is quite impossible! My poor Laura, why did you come?"

"Yes," she said, slowly, "it was foolish to come. You are not glad to see me, Stephen."

He bent over her and kissed her, but she put him from her with a touch of her hand, and rose wearily.

"I will go," she said. "Yes, I was wrong to come. Tell me the way," and she drew her jacket close.

"Don't look so grieved, dear," he murmured. "What am I to do? If there was any place – but there is not. See, I will come with you to the station. We shall have to walk, I am afraid; I dare not order a carriage. My poor child, if you had only foreseen these difficulties."

"Do not say any more," she interrupted coldly. "I am quite convinced of my folly and am ready to go."

"Sit down and wait while I get my hat. We must get away unobserved. Suspicious eyes are watching my every movement to-night. I can't tell you all, but I will soon. Sit down, my darling; I will not be gone a moment. If anyone comes to the door, step through the window and conceal yourself."

Unlocking the door noiselessly he went out, turning the key after him.

Barely a minute elapsed before he was in the room again.

Warm though the night was he put on an overcoat and turned up the collar so that it hid the lower part of his face.

Locking the door after him, he came up to the table, poured out another glass of brandy-and-water, and got some biscuits.

"Come," he said, "you must eat some of these. Put some in your pocket. And you must drink this, my poor darling, or you will be exhausted."

She put back the glass and plate from her with a gesture of denial.

"I could not eat," she said. "I do not want anything, and I shall not be exhausted. Let us go; this house makes me shudder," and she moved to the window and passed out.

"Laura, my dear Laura," murmured Stephen, in his most dulcet tones, "why are you angry with me?"

"I am not angry with you," she said, and the voice, cold and constrained, did not seem the same as that in which she had greeted him a quarter of an hour ago. "I am angry with myself; I am filled with self-scorn."

"My dear Laura," he began, soothingly, but she interrupted him with a gesture.

"You are quite right; I was wrong to come. You have not said so in so many words, but your face, your eyes, your very smile have told me so plainly."

"What have I said?"

"Nothing," she answered, without hesitation, and with the same air of cold conviction. "If you had said angry words, had been harsh and annoyed openly, and yet been glad to see me, I could have forgiven myself, but you were not glad to see me. If I had been in your place – but I am a woman. Don't say any more. Is the station near?"

"My dear Laura," murmured Stephen for the third time, and now more softly than ever, "more must be said. I am anxious, naturally anxious, to learn whether this – this sudden journey can be concealed."

It was quite true, he was anxious, very anxious – on his own account.

CHAPTER IX

"Come," he said; "it is all right, then. Do not take the matter so seriously, my darling Laura. The worst part of it is that you should have made such a journey alone, and have to go back alone, and at night! That is what grieves me. If I could but go with you – and yet that would scarcely be wise – but it is impossible under the circumstances. Come, give me your arm, my dear Laura."

A little shiver ran through her frame, and she caught her breath with a stifled sob.

"Come, come, my darling," he murmured; "don't look back, look forward. In an hour or two you will be home."

"Do you think I am afraid?" she asked, and her voice trembled, but not with fear. "No, I am looking back. Oh, Stephen, do you remember when we met first?"

"Yes, yes," said Stephen, soothingly, and with an anxious, sidelong look about – to be seen promenading the high road with a young woman on his arm on the night of his uncle's death would be the ruin of his carefully built-up reputation. "Yes, yes," he murmured. "Shall I ever forget? How fortunate you lost your way, Laura, and that you should have come up to me to ask it, and that I should have been going in that direction. And yet the thoughtless speak of chance!"

And he cast up his eyes with unctuous solemnity, though there was no one in the dark road to be impressed by it.

"Chance," said the girl, sadly – "an evil or a good chance for me – which? Stephen, I sometimes wish that we had never met – that I had not crossed your path, and so have left the old life, with its dull, quiet and sober grayness; but the die was cast that afternoon. I went back to the quiet home, to the old man who had been my father, mother and all to me, and life was changed."

"Your grandfather has no suspicion?"

"No, he trusts me entirely. If he asks a question when I go to meet you, he is satisfied when I tell him that I am going to a neighbor. Stephen, if I had had a mother, do you think I should have deceived her also?"

"Deceived? Deceived is too harsh a word, my dear Laura. We have been obliged, for various reasons, to use some reserve – let us say candidly, to conceal our engagement. You have not mentioned my name to anyone?" he broke off.

"To no one," she answered.

"Such concealment was necessary. My uncle was a man of rough and hasty temper, ill-judging and merciless."

"But," she said, with a sudden eagerness, and a slight shudder, "he – he is dead now, Stephen. There is no need for further concealment."

"Softly, softly, dear Laura. We must be patient – must keep our little secret a little while longer. I can trust my darling to confide in me – yes, yes, I know that – "

"Stephen, to-night for the first time – why, I know not – I have doubted – no, not doubted, for I have fought hard against the suspicion that I was wrong to trust you."

"My dearest!" he murmured reproachfully.

"You were wrong to leave me for so long without a word – you put my love to too severe a test. I – I cannot say whether it has stood it or not. To-night I am full of doubt. Stephen – look at me!"

He turned his face and looked down. He had not far to look, for she was tall, and in the moment of excitement had drawn herself to her full height. The moon, sailing from amongst the clouds, shone on her upturned face; her lips were set, and the dark eyes gleamed from the white face.

"Look at me, Stephen. If – I say if – there is the faintest idea of treachery lurking in your mind – "

"My dearest – "

"Cast it out! Here, to-night, I warn you to cast it out! Such love as mine is like a two-edged sword, it cuts both ways, for love – or hate! Stephen, I have loved, I have trusted you – for mine, for your own sake, be true to me!"

He was more impressed than alarmed. This side of her character had been presented to him to-night for the first time. Hitherto the beautiful girl had been all smiles and humble devotion. Was she bewitched, or had he been mistaken in her. Perhaps it was the moon, but suddenly his face looked paler than ever, and the white eyelids drooped until they hid the shifting eyes, as he put his arm around her.

"My dearest! What can you mean? Deceive you! Treachery! Can you deem me —*me*– capable of such things. My dearest, you are overtired! And your jacket has become unbuttoned. Listen, that is the railway bell. Laura, you will not leave me with such words on your lips?"

"Forgive me, Stephen."

"I have done so already, dearest, and now we must part! It is very hard – but – I cannot even go with you to the platform. Someone might see us. It is for your sake, darling."

"Yes, yes, I know," she said, with a sigh. "Good-bye – you will write or come to me – when?"

"Soon, in a day or two," he said. "Do not be impatient. There is much to be done; my poor uncle's funeral, you know. Good-bye. See! I will stay here and watch the train off. Good-bye, dear, dear Laura!"

She put her arm round him and returned his kiss, and glided away, but at the turn of the road leading to the station she turned and, holding up her hand, sent a word back to him.

It was:

"Remember!"

Stephen waited until the train puffed out of the station, and not until it had flashed some distance did the set smile leave his face.

Then, with a rather puzzled and uneasy expression, he turned and walked swiftly back to the house.

His brain was in a whirl, the sudden appearance of the young girl coming on the top of the other causes of excitement bewildered him, and he felt that he had need of all his accustomed coolness. The sudden peril and danger of this accursed will demanded all his attention, and yet the thought of the girl would force itself upon him. He had met her, as she had said, in the streets, and had commenced an acquaintance which had resulted in an engagement. Alone and unprotected, save for an old grandfather, and innocent of the world, Laura Treherne had been, as it were, fascinated by the smooth, soft-spoken Stephen, from whose ready tongue vows of love and devotion rolled as easily as the scales from a serpent in spring-time. And he, for his part, was smitten by the dark eyes and quick, impulsive way of the warm-hearted girl.

But there had come upon him of late a suspicion that in binding himself to marry her he had committed a false step; to-night the suspicion grew into something like certainty.

To tell the truth, she had almost frightened him. Hitherto the dark eyes had ever turned on his with softened gaze of love and admiration; to-night, for the first time, the hot, passionate nature had revealed itself.

The deep-toned "Remember!" which came floating down the lane as she disappeared rang unpleasantly in his ears. Had he been a true-hearted man the girl's spirit would have made her more precious in his eyes; but, coward-like, he felt that hers was a stronger nature than his, and he began to fear.

"Yes," he muttered, as he unlocked the library window, and sank into a chair. "It was a weak stroke, a weak stroke! But I can't think of what is to be done now, not now!"

No, for to-night all his attention must be concentrated on the will.

Wiping the perspiration from his brow, he lit another candle. This time nothing should prevent him from destroying the accursed thing which stood between him and wealth; he would burn it at

once – at once. With feverish eagerness he thrust his hand in his coat, then staggered and fell back white as death.

The pocket was empty. The will was not there.

"I – I am a fool!" he muttered, with a smile. "I put it in the other coat," and he snatched up the overcoat, but a glance, a touch showed him that it was not there either.

Wildly, madly he searched each pocket in vain, went on his knees and felt, as if he could not trust his sight alone, every inch of the carpet; turned up the hearth-rug, almost tore up the carpet itself, shook the curtains, and still hunted and searched long after the conviction had forced itself upon his mind that in no part of the room could the thing be hidden.

Then he paused, pressing his hand to his brow and biting his livid lips. Let him think – think – think! Where could it be? He had not dropped it on the stairs or in any other part of the house, for he remembered, he could swear, that he had felt the thing as he stood in the study buttoning up his overcoat. If not in the house, where then?

Throwing aside all caution in his excitement, he unfastened the window, and, candle in hand, examined the grand terrace, traced every step which he had taken across the lawn – and all to no purpose.

"It is lying in the road," he muttered, the sweat dropping from his face. "Heaven! lying glaring there, for any country clown to pick up and ruin me. I must – I will find it! Brandy – I must have some brandy – this – this is maddening me!"

And indeed he seemed mad, for though he knew he had not passed it, he went back, still peering on the ground, the candle held above his head. Suddenly he stumbled up against some object, and, looking up, saw the tall figure of a man standing right in his path. With a wolfish cry of mingled fear and rage, he dropped the candle and sprang on to him.

"You – you thief!" he cried, hoarsely; "give it to me – give it me!"

The man made an effort to unlock the mad grasp of the hands round his throat, then scientifically and coolly knocked his assailant down, and, holding him down writhing, struck a match.

Gasping and foaming, Stephen looked up and saw that it was Jack Newcombe – Jack Newcombe regarding him with cool, contemptuous surprise and suspicion.

"Well," he said contemptuously, "so it's you! Are you out of your mind?" and he flung the match away and allowed Stephen to rise.

Trembling and struggling for composure, Stephen brushed the dust from his black coat and stood rubbing his chest, for Jack's blow had been straight from the shoulder.

"What have you got to say for yourself?" said Jack, sternly. "I asked you if you had gone mad. What are you doing here with a candle, and behaving like a lunatic?"

Stephen made a mighty effort for composure, and a ghastly smile struggled to his face.

"My dear Jack, how you startled me!" he gasped. "I was never so frightened in my – my life!"

"So it appeared," said Jack, with strong disgust in his voice. "Pick up the candle – there it is."

And he pointed with his foot. But Stephen was by no means anxious for a light.

"Never mind the candle," he said. "You are quite right – I must have seemed out of my mind. I – I am very much upset, my dear Jack."

"Are you hurt?" inquired Jack, but with no great show of concern.

"No, no!" gasped Stephen; "don't distress yourself, my dear Jack – don't, I beg of you. It was my fault, entirely. The – the fact is that I – "

He paused, for Jack had got the candle, lit it, and held it up so that the light fell upon Stephen's face.

"Now," he said, his tone plainly intimating that he would prefer to see Stephen's face while he made his explanation.

"The fact is," Stephen began again, "I have had the misfortune to lose a pocketbook – no, not a pocketbook, that is scarcely correct, but a paper which I fancied I had put in my pocketbook, and

which must have dropped out. It – it was a draft of a little legal document which my lawyer had sent me – of no value, utterly valueless – oh, quite – "

"So I should judge from the calm way in which you accused the first man you met of stealing it," said Jack, with quiet scorn.

Stephen bit his lip, and a glance of hate and suspicion shot from under his eyelids.

"Pray forgive me, my dear Jack," he said, pressing his hand to his brow, and sighing. "If you had sat up for so many nights, and were so worn and overwrought, you would have some sympathy with my overstrained nerves. I am much shaken to-night, my dear Jack – very much shaken."

And indeed he was, for the Savage's fist was by no means a soft one.

Jack looked at him in silence for a moment, then held the candle toward him.

"You had better go to the house and get some of the servants to help you look for the paper," he said. "Good-night."

"Oh, it is of no consequence," said Stephen, eagerly. "Don't go – stop a moment, my dear Jack. I – I will walk with you as far as the inn."

"No, thanks," said Jack, curtly; then, as a suspicious look gleamed in Stephen's eyes, he added: "Oh, I see! you are afraid I should pick it up in the road. You had better come."

Stephen smiled, and laid his hand on Jack's arm.

"You – you are not playing a joke with me, my dear Jack? You haven't got the – document in your pocket all the time?"

"If I said that I hadn't you wouldn't believe me, you know," he replied. "There, take your hand off my coat!"

"Stop! stop!" exclaimed Stephen, with a ghostly attempt at a laugh. "Don't go, my dear Jack; stop at the house to-night. I should feel very much obliged, indeed, if you would. I am so upset to-night that I – I want company. Let me beg of you to stop."

And in his dread lest Jack should escape out of sight, he held on to his arm.

Jack shook him with so emphatic a movement of disgust that Stephen was in imminent danger of making a further acquaintance with the lawn.

"Go indoors," he said sternly, "and leave me alone. I'd rather not sleep under the same roof with you. As for your lost paper, whatever it may be, you had better look for it in the morning, unless you want to get into further trouble," and he turned on his heel and disappeared.

Stephen waited until he had got at a safe distance, and, blowing out the candle, followed down the road with stealthy footsteps, keeping a close watch on the rapidly-striding figure, and examining the road at the same time. But all to no purpose; Jack reached and entered the inn without stopping, and neither going nor returning could Stephen see anything of the missing will.

Two hours afterward he crept back and staggered into the library more dead than alive, one question rankling in his disordered brain.

Had Jack Newcombe found the will, and, if not, where was it?

After a time the paroxysm of fear and despair passed, and left him calmer. His acute brain, overwhelmed but not crushed out, began to recover itself, and he turned the situation round and round until he had come to a plan of action.

It was not a very definite one, it was rather vague, but it was the most reasonable one he could think of.

There in Warden Forest, living as the daughter of a woodman, who was himself ignorant of her legitimacy, was the girl. I am sorry to say that he cursed her as he thought of her. Where was the will? Whoever had got it would no doubt come to him first to make terms, and, failing to make them, would go to the real heiress.

Stephen, quick as lightning, resolved to take her away.

But where?

He did not much care for the present, so that it was somewhere under his eyes, or in the charge – the custody, really – of a trustworthy friend.

The only really trustworthy friend whom Stephen knew was his mother.

"Yes, that is it," he muttered. "Mother shall take this girl as – as – a companion. Poor mother, some great ignorant, clodhopping wench who will frighten her into a nervous fit. Poor mother!" And he smiled with a feeble, malicious pleasure.

There are some men who take a delight in causing pain even to those who are devoted to them.

"Dear mother," he wrote, "I have to send you the sad news of my uncle's death. Need I say that I am utterly overwhelmed in grief. I have indeed lost a friend!" ("The malicious, mean old wolf," he muttered, in parenthesis.) "How good he was to me! But, mother, even in the midst of our deepest sorrows, we must not forget the calls of charity. I have a little duty to perform, in which I require your aid. I fear it will necessitate your making a journey to Wermesley station on this line. If you will come down by the 10:20 on Wednesday, I will meet you at Wermesley station. Do not mention your journey, my dear mother; we must not be forgetful that we are enjoined to do good by stealth.

"In great affliction,
"Your loving son,
"Stephen Davenant."

It was a beautiful letter, and clearly proved that Stephen was not only a bad man, but an extremely clever and dangerous one – for he could retain command over himself even in such moments as these.

CHAPTER X

Let us hasten from the gloomy atmosphere of Hurst Leigh, and, leaving the presence of the thwarted old man lying upstairs, and the no less thwarted young man writhing in torturing dread in the darkened library, return to Warden Forest.

With fleet feet Una fled from the lake, the voices of the woodman and Jack Newcombe ringing in her ears, a thousand tumultuous emotions surging wildly in her heart.

Until the preceding night Gideon Rolfe had seemed the calmest and most placable of fathers; nothing had occurred to ruffle his almost studied impassability. New and strange experiences seemed to crowd upon her so suddenly that she scarcely accepted them as real. Had she been dreaming, and would she wake presently to find the handsome young stranger, with his deep musical voice, and his dark, eloquent eyes, the phantom of a vision?

As she came in sight of the cottage she turned aside and, plunging into the depths of the wood, sank down upon a bank of moss and strove to recall every word, every look, every slight incident, which had passed since the arrival of the stranger; and, as she did so, she seemed vaguely conscious that a change, indefinite yet undeniable, had fallen upon her life. The very trees, the atmosphere itself, seemed changed, and in place of that perfect, unbroken calm which had hitherto enwrapped her life, a spirit of unrest, of vague longing, took possession of her.

A meteor had crossed the calm, serene sky of her existence, vanishing as quickly as it had come, and creating a strange, aching void.

Still it was not at all painful, this novel feeling of wistfulness and unrest; a faint echo of some mysterious delight rang in the inner chambers of her young soul, the newly awakened heart stirred within her like an imprisoned bird, and turned to the new light which had dawned upon her. That it was the celestial light of love she was completely ignorant. She only knew and felt, with all the power of mind and soul, that a spirit had fallen upon her life, that she had, half-blinded, left the road of gray, unbroken calm, never to return – never to return.

Step by step she recalled all that had passed, and sat revolving the strange scene with ever-increasing wonder.

What did it mean? Why should her father be angry with the youth? Why should he accuse and insult him, and drive her away as if from the presence of some wild animal who was seeking to devour her?

Wild animal! A smile, sad and wistful, flitted over her beautiful face as she called up the handsome face and graceful form of the youth. Was it possible that one so base as her father declared him to be could look as this youth had looked, speak as he had spoken? With a faint, tremulous, yet unconscious blush, she remembered how graceful he looked lying at her feet, his lips half parted in a smile, his brow frank and open as a child's.

And yet he himself had said, half sadly, that he was wild and wicked. What could it mean?

Innocent as a nun, ignorant of all that belonged to the real living world, she sat vainly striving to solve this, the first enigma of her inner life.

Once, as she sat thinking and pondering, her eyes cast down, her brows knit, her fingers strayed to her right arm with a gentle, almost caressing touch. It was the arm upon which Jack's hand had rested: even now she seemed to feel the pressure of the strong fingers just as she heard the ring of his deep, musical voice, and could feel the gaze of his dark, flashing eyes; they had looked fierce and savage when she had first seen them at the open door of the cottage last night, but this morning they had worn a different expression – a tender, half-pitying, and wholly gentle expression, which softened them. It was thus she liked to remember them – thus she would remember them if she never saw them again.

And as this thought flashed across her mind a wistful sadness fell upon her, and a vague pain came into her heart. Should she never see him again? Never! She looked round mournfully, and lo! the whole world seemed changed; the sun was still shining, the trees were still crowned in all their glory of summer leafage, but it all looked gray and dark to her; all the beauty and glory which she had learned to love had gone – vanished at the mere thought that she should never see him again.

Slowly she rose, and with downcast eyes moved toward the cottage. She passed in at the open door and looked round the room – that, too, seemed altered, something was missing; half-consciously she wandered round, touching with the same half-caressing gesture the chair on which Jack Newcombe had sat, opened the book at the page which she was reading while he was eating his supper; a spell seemed to have fallen upon her, and it was with a start like one awakening from a dream that she turned as a shadow fell across the room and Gideon Rolfe entered.

She turned and looked at him questioningly, curiously, but without fear. The cry of alarm when he had broken in upon them by the lake had been on Jack's account, not her own; never since she could remember had Gideon Rolfe spoken harshly to her, looked angrily; without a particle of fear, rather with a vague wonder, she looked and waited for him to speak.

The old man's face wore a strange expression; all traces of the fierce passion which had convulsed it a short time ago had passed away, and in its place was a stern gravity which was almost sad in its grim intensity.

Setting his ax aside, he paced the room for a minute in silence, his brows knit, his hands clasped behind his back.

Una glided to the window and looked out into the wood, her head leaning on her arm.

"Una," he said, suddenly, his voice troubled and grave, but not unkind.

She started, and looked around at him; her spirit had fled back to the lake again, and she had almost forgotten that he was in the room.

"Una, you must not wander in the forest alone again."

"No! Why not?"

He hesitated a moment, as if he did not know how to answer her; then he said, with a frown:

"Because I do not wish it – because the man you saw here last night, the man you were with by the lake, may come again" – a faint light of gladness shone in her eyes, and he saw it, and frowned sternly as he went on – "and I do not wish you to meet him."

She was silent for a moment, her eyes downcast, her hands tightly clasped in front of her; then she looked up.

"Father, tell me why you spoke so angrily to him – why do you not want him to come to Warden again?"

"I spoke as he deserved," he answered; "and I would rather that Warden should be filled with wild beasts than that he should cross your path again."

Her face paled slightly, and her eyes opened with wonder and pain.

"Is he so very bad and wicked?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

Gideon Rolfe strode to and fro for a moment before he answered. How should he answer her? – how warn and caution her without destroying the innocence which, like the sensitive plant, withers at a touch?

"Is it not sufficient that I wish it, Una?" he said. "Why are you not satisfied? Wicked! Yes, he's wicked; all men are wicked, and he's the most wicked and base!"

"You know him, father?" she asked. "You would not say so if you did not. I am sorry he is so bad."

"Look at me, Una," he said.

She turned, her eyes downcast and hidden, her lips trembling for a moment.

"Yes, father."

"Una," he said, "what is the meaning of this? Why are you changed – why do you shrink from me?"

She looked up with a curious mixture of innocent pride and dignity.

"I don't shrink from you, father," she said in a low voice.

Gideon's hand dropped from her shoulder, and the frown gave place to a sad expression. "Has the time I looked forward to with fear and dread come at last?" he murmured, inaudibly, and he paced to and fro again, as if endeavoring to arrive at some decision.

Una watched him with dreamy, questioning eyes, in which shone a tender mournfulness. Why were all men wicked? Why was this one man, with the handsome face and the musical voice, more wicked than the rest? What was it that her father knew that should make him hate the youth so? These were the questions that haunted her as she waited silent and motionless.

At last, with a wave of the hand, as if he were putting some decision on one side, Gideon Rolfe turned to her and motioned her to the window-seat. "Una," he said, "last night you were wondering why your lot should be different from that of other girls; you were wondering why I have kept you here in Warden, and out of the world. It is so, is it not?"

She did not answer in words, but her eyes said "yes," plainly.

Gideon Rolfe sighed, and passed his hand over his brow; it was a hand hardened by toil, but it was not the hand of a peasant, any more than was his tone or his words those of one.

"Una, I have foreseen this question; I have been expecting it, and I had resolved that when it came I would answer it. But," and his lips twitched, "I cannot do it – I cannot," and his brow contracted as if he were suffering some great, mental anguish. "For my sake, do not press me. In time to come, sooner or later, you must know the secret of your life, you must learn why and wherefore your whole life has been spent in seclusion; you have guessed that there is some mystery, some story – there is. It must remain a mystery still. For your own sake I dare not draw aside the veil which conceals; for your own sake my lips are for the present sealed. Child, can you tell me that, secluded and lonely as your life has been, it has been an unhappy one?"

"Father!" she murmured, and her eyes filled slowly.

"God forgive me if it has been!" he said, sadly. "I have striven to make it a happy one."

Silently she rose and laid her hand upon his arm and put up her lips to kiss him, but with a gentle gesture he put her away from him.

"Una, listen to me. All my life I have had but one aim, one purpose, your happiness and welfare. For your sake I left the world and an honored name – " he stopped suddenly, warned by the gentle wonder of her gaze, and with a faint color in his face hurried on – "for your sake, and yours only. Do you think that it is by choice that I have kept you hidden from the world? No, but of necessity. Una, between the world and you yawns a wide gulf. On this side are peace, and innocence, and happiness; on the other," and his voice grew grave and solemn, "lie misery and – shame." White and wondering, she gazed at him, and the innocent wonder in the beautiful face recalled him to himself. "Enough! You can trust me, Una; it is no idle, meaningless warning. Remember what I have said, when your thoughts turn to the world beyond the forest, when you grow weary and impatient with the quiet life which, though it may seem sad and weary, is the only one you can ever know without passing that gulf of which I have spoken."

"And now I want you to give me a promise, Una."

"A promise, father?" she echoed, in a low voice.

"Yes; I want you to promise me that if this – this young man should come, as he has threatened to do – that if he should come to you, and speak to you, you will not listen, will not speak to him."

An impatient frown knitted Gideon Rolfe's brow.

"Is this so much to ask you?" he said, in a low voice. "Is it so grave a thing to demand of you that you should avoid a man whom you have seen but twice in your life, one whom you know to be wicked and worthless?"

"Girl," he exclaimed, in low, harsh accents, "has the curse fallen upon you – already? Has he bewitched you? Speak? Why do you not speak? Has all the careful guarding of years been set at naught and rendered of no avail by the mere sight of one of his race, by a few idle words spoken by one of his hateful kin?"

He grasped her shoulder; instantly, with a revulsion of feeling, he withdrew his hand, and bent his head with a gesture almost of humility.

"Una, forgive me. You see how this unmans me – can you not understand how great must be the danger from which I wish to save you? Promise me what I ask you, for your own sake – ay, and for his."

"For his?" she murmured.

"Yes, for his. Let him but attempt to cross your path again, and I will not hold my hand. I held it once – would to Heaven I had not! I say, for his sake, promise that you will hold no speech with him!"

"Father, what has he done to make you hate him so?" she asked.

"I cannot, I will not tell you more than this: His race has ruined my life and yours – ruined it beyond all reparation here and hereafter. No more. I wait for your promise."

"I promise," she said.

"Good," he said. "I can trust you, child."

"Yes, you can trust me," she said, in a low voice; then with slow, listless steps she crossed the room and stole up-stairs.

CHAPTER XI

The Savage, wholly unconscious of, and totally indifferent to, the fact that his every footstep was watched by Stephen, entered the "Bush" Inn and went straight to his room, the little knot of regular customers, who were drinking and smoking in the parlor, either rising respectfully as he entered or maintaining an equally respectful silence until he was out of hearing.

"Mr. Jack's a fine fellow," said the landlord, looking at the fire solemnly. "Did you notice his face as he went through? I'm afraid it's all over with the old squire. Well, well, rest his soul, I say. I'm not one to bear grudges against the dead."

There was, if not a hearty, a unanimous assent to this dutiful sentiment, and the landlord, encouraged, ventured a little further, looking first over his shoulder to see if the door was shut, and then glancing at a little wrinkled faced man who sat in the corner by the fireplace, and looked, in his rusty black suit, like a lawyer's clerk, as indeed he was.

"All over now, Mr. Skettle," said the landlord, with a little cough. "I wonder – ahem – who'll be the next squire?"

The old clerk peered out from under his hairless brows, and shook his head with a dry smile; it was a very fair imitation of his master's, Mr. Hudsley's, manner, and never failed to impress the company at the "Bush."

"Aha!" he breathed. "Hem – yes. Time will prove – time will prove, Jobson."

Jobson, the landlord, looked round and winked with impressive admiration, as much as to say, "Deep fellow, Skettle; knows all about it, mind you, but not a word!"

"Well," said the parish clerk, with a shake of the head, "if wishing would make the mare to go, I know who'd be the Squire o' Hurst," and he pointed with his pipe to the ceiling, above which the Savage was thoughtfully pacing to and fro.

"We've had enough o' Davenants," began the miller; but Jobson stopped him with a warning gesture.

"No names, South – no names; this air a public house, and I'm a man as minds my own business."

"So was the last squire," retorted the miller, who was not to be put down – "leastways, he didn't meddle or help his neighbors. Not one shilling have I took from the Hurst since I was that high. Is there a man in this room as can say he'll be a penny the worse for Squire Ralph's death?

"And from what I see it seems to me that if things go on as they appear to be going, we shan't be much better for the new squire, if the name's to be the same."

"A nice spoken gentleman, Mr. Stephen," muttered the tailor, from behind the table.

The miller smiled and shook his head.

"There's some grain as grinds so soft that you can't keep it on the ground from the wind; but it don't make good bread, neighbor. No! Now the youngster up above," and he jerked his head toward the ceiling, "he comes of a different branch – same tree, mind yer, but a healthier branch. It will be good news for Hurst Leigh if it's found that Master Jack is to be our head."

"Nothing soft about Mr. Jack. If all we hear be true, it's a pretty wild branch of the tree he comes from."

"They say he's wild. No doubt; he always was. I can remember him a boy home for the holidays. He used to come down to the mill and poach my trout – a bit of a boy no higher than that" – and he put his hand against the table – "as fine a boy as ever I see. One day I caught him, and told him I'd either give him a thrashing or tell his uncle; for, do yer see, we allus called the old squire his uncle.

"'All right,' said he, 'wait till I've landed this fish and we'll settle it between us like gentlemen.' Another time I found him in the orchard. 'Well, Master Jack,' says I, 'bean't you got enough apples at the Hurst, but you must come and plague me?' He thought a moment, then he looks up with that

audacious flash in his eyes, and says, quiet enough: 'Stolen fruit is the sweetest, South. If you feel put upon, take it out of the Hurst Orchard. I give you leave.' What was to be done with a boy like that? Fear! He didn't know what fear was. Do any o' you remember that roan mare as the old parson had? Well, Master Jack hears us talking o' the spiteful beast one day, and nothing 'ud do but he must go off and ask the parson to let him ride 'un. Of course the old fellow said no. Two nights after that the young varmint breaks open the stables, takes out the mare, saddles her, and rides her out to the common. I was late at the mill that night, and I hears her come clattering down the yard like a fire-engine, with Master Jack on her back, his eyes flashing and his hair a-flying, and him a-laughing as if it was the rarest bit o' fun in the world. I'd just time to cut across the meadow to the five-barred fence, and here he come past me, making straight for the fence, waving his hand and shouting someut about Dick Turpin. Ah, and he took the fence, too, and when that vicious beast threw him, and we came up to him, lying all o' a heap, with his arm broke, and the blood streaming from his face – what's he do but laugh at us, and swear as we'd startled her! And as for fighting! There warn't a week but what he'd come to the mill, all cut and mauled, for the missis to wash him and put him to rights. He'd never go home to the Hurst those times. Even then the old squire and him didn't agree. The old man called him a Savage, and I hear as that's what they call him up in London, and yet there warn't a house in Leigh as he warn't welcome in. Many and many a time he's slept up in the mill loft after one of his harum-scarum tricks, and many's the time I've faced the old squire when he's come after him with a horsewhip."

"They say that he run through all the money, as was his by rights, up in London in fast living," said the parish clerk, gravely.

"May be," said the miller, curtly. "If fast living means open-handed living, it's like enough; he never could keep a shilling when he was a boy, the first tramp as passed had it, safe as a gun. What's bred in the bone must come out in the flesh. Here's to the new squire – if it be Master Jack," and the sturdy old man raised his glass and emptied its contents at one vigorous but steady pull.

Meanwhile the subject of the discussion paced to and fro, pulling at his brier, and indulging in a study of the brownest description.

Never perhaps in his life had Jack been so upset, so serious and so sobered.

In the first place the sudden – or rather sudden to Jack – death of the old man with whom he had lived and quarreled as a boy, affected him more deeply than even he was aware. There in the silent room in the inn, he recalled all the old man's good qualities, all the little kindnesses he had done him, Jack, and more than all, the few last solemn and quite unexpectedly affectionate words which had dropped from his dying lips.

Jack, puffing at his pipe and rubbing his short hair with a puzzled frown, went over the scene again and again, and with no mercenary thoughts of the old man's declaration that he had remembered Jack in his will, but with reference to the mysterious allusions in the disposal of the large part of the property; then Jack's mind would fly off to the fearful scene at the actual death.

The wild cry, the white and horrified face of Stephen, the puzzled and sternly questioning one of the old lawyer. What did it mean?

And still more mysterious, what was the meaning of Stephen's conduct on the lawn? What was he hunting for with such intense eagerness as to make him fly at Jack like a madman?

Jack – as no doubt the reader will have surmised – was not clever.

He could not piece this and that together, and from disjointed incidents form an intelligent whole, as a child does with a box of puzzles.

The whole thing was a mystery to him, and grew more confusing and bewildering the more he thought of it.

It takes a villain thoroughly to appreciate a villain, a thief to understand and catch a thief; and Jack, being neither one nor the other, utterly failed to understand Stephen.

That he disliked him, with a feeling more like contempt than hatred, was a matter of course, but if any one had told Jack straight out that Stephen had abstracted the will, Jack would in all probability have refused to credit it. Will stealing and all such meanness was so thoroughly out of his line that he would not have understood how Stephen, led on step by step, could have possibly been guilty of it.

Then again, something else came forcing itself on these thoughts concerning the strange events at the Hurst. For the life of him he could not forget the Forest of Warden and all that had happened to him within its leafy shades.

At one moment it seemed as if years must have elapsed since he lost his way and forced an entrance at the woodman's hut, at another he was half inclined to believe that he had dined rather heavily at the club and dreamed it all. Like Una, he could not realize that they had met, touched hands and exchanged speech.

Jack could not get the beautiful face out of his mental vision; it mingled with the wan face of the dying man, with Stephen's pale, distorted countenance; it seemed to beam and shine upon him from the dark corners of the room with the same frank, pure, innocent smile with which it had shone down upon him as he lay at her feet in the woods.

And then the girl's surroundings! The extraordinary father, with his laborer's dress and his refined speech and bearing. What mystery enveloped the little group of persons buried in the depths of a wood, living apart from the world?

Jack rumpled his hair and drew a long breath eloquent of confusion and bewilderment.

It was certainly extraordinary! Three days ago he had left London, prosaic London, and was now plunged to the neck in a sea of romance and secrecy.

On one thing he was, however, resolved. He would keep his threat or promise. He would go to Warden Forest and see that beautiful face again, though he had to brave the anger of twenty mysterious woodmen. He thought at first that he would start on the morrow, but some feeling – perhaps some reverence and respect for the dead man – made him change his mind.

"No," he said to himself, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and prepared for bed; "I'll stay here over the funeral, and then – "

But, though he felt tired and worn out, it was hours before he could sleep, and when he did, his spirit fled back to Warden Forest, and the face that had haunted him waking hovered about him in dreams.

Was it love; love at first sight? Jack would have been first to laugh at the idea; but it is worthy of note that all the loves which had occurred in his wild, reckless life had never, in their warmest epochs, moved him as the remembrance of Una had done; not one had had the power to disturb his sleep or to bring him dreams.

Jack kept to his resolution. Five days passed, and he stuck to the "Bush" manfully. They were, perhaps, the dreariest days he ever spent in his life, and he never thought of them afterward without a shudder.

Every day he was tempted to take flight and go to London until the day of the funeral; but his promise to Hudsley kept him at his post. He would not even leave the "Bush."

On the first day, a note, written on the deepest of mourning paper, had come from Stephen, begging him to come to the Hurst; but he had written a firm and what was for him a polite refusal. Of Stephen himself he saw nothing. Mr. Hudsley had also sent, and asked him to stay at his house; and this, too, Jack had declined.

The fact was he wanted to be left alone, to think over the strange adventures in the forest, to dwell with unceasing wistfulness on the beautiful face and sweet, musical voice.

So he clung to the inn; taking a morning dip in the river; strolling about, with his brier pipe in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, exchanging a word with this man and the other, and bestowing his odd change on any children he happened to meet. Sometimes he would drop in at one of the cottages, where he was so welcome when a boy, and smoke and chat; but usually he kept to his room.

But wherever he went he was the observed of all observers. Every night the little club that met in the “Bush” parlor talked about him, and wondered why he didn’t go to the Hurst, and whether he would be the new squire.

The day of the funeral arrived at last – a cold, wet day, that foreshadowed the approaching autumn; and Jack put on his black suit – made by the village tailor who had described Stephen as a nice-spoken gentleman – and went up to the Hurst.

It was the first time he had been near it since the night he had the scuffle with Stephen on the lawn; and, to Jack’s eyes, it looked gloomier than ever.

As he entered the hall, a shrunken figure in shabby black came to meet him; it was old Skettle, Hudsley’s clerk.

The old man peered at him curiously, and made him a respectful bow in response to Jack’s blunt greeting, and opened the library door.

Mr. Hudsley was standing at the table, and looked up with his wrinkled face and keen eyes – not a trace of expression beyond keenness in them. Jack shook hands with him and looked around.

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