

HENRY WOOD

THE STORY OF CHARLES
STRANGE. VOL. 2 (OF 3)

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Mrs. Henry Wood

The Story of Charles Strange: A Novel. Vol. 2 (of 3)

CHAPTER I. SUSPICION

The church-clock of that small country place, Upper Marshdale, was chiming half-past nine on a dark night, as the local inspector turned out of the police-station and made his way with a fleet step across a piece of waste land and some solitary fields beyond it. His name was Poole, and he was hastening to Marshdale House, as Lord Level's place was called. A mysterious occurrence had taken place there the night before: Lord Level, previously an invalid, had been stabbed in his bed.

The officer rang a loud peal at the outer gate, and a policeman, who had been already sent on, came from the house to answer the summons. He waited when they were both within the gate, knowing that he should be questioned. His superior walked half-way up the avenue, and placed his back against a tree.

"What have you learnt, Jekyl? Any clue to the assassin?"

The policeman dropped his voice to a whisper, as though afraid the very trees might hear. "Speak up," sharply interrupted the inspector. "The air carries no tales."

"The case seems as clear, sir, as any we ever came across; a clear case against Lady Level."

It takes a great deal to astonish a police inspector, but this announcement certainly astonished Mr. Inspector Poole. "Against Lady Level?" he repeated.

"She's the guilty one, sir, I fear. But who'd think it, to see her? Only about twenty or so, and with beauty enough to knock you over, and blue eyes that look you down in their pride. She's dressed out like those high-born ladies do dress, in light silk that glistens as she walks, her neck and arms uncovered. There's a gentleman with her now, some friend of the family, and he won't let us go on with our investigation. He came and stopped it, and said we were acting against Lord Level's wishes."

"But why do you suspect Lady Level?" inquired the inspector.

"Listen, sir. It appears certain that no one got in; the doors and windows were left safe, and were found so; hadn't been disturbed at all; there has been no robbery, or anything of that sort, and no suspicion attaches to any of the servants so far as I see. Then there are the facts themselves. The servants were aroused in the middle of the night by Lord Level's bell ringing violently, and my lady screaming. When they got to his room, there he lay, fainted dead off, stabbed in two places, and she pretty near fainting too, and dropped down in a chair in her silk dressing-gown—"

"I am acquainted with the facts so far, Jekyl."

"Well, sir. Not a sign or symptom was there of anybody else being about, or of anybody's having been about. Her ladyship's version is, that she was woke up by Lord Level calling to her, and she found him stabbed and bleeding. That is all she will confess to."

"And he?"

"He says nothing, I hear, except that he will not have the police called in. He did not even want to have a doctor. But his lordship is off his head with fever, and may not know what he is saying."

"How does Lady Level account for the knife being found in her room?"

"There it is," cried the man. "Whenever these people, let them be high or low, do an evil deed, they are certain to commit some act of folly which allows suspicion to creep in. They over-do it, or they under-do it. If anyone else had done it and carried the weapon to her ladyship's room, she must

have seen who it was, and would surely have denounced him. And why did *she* put it there of all places? There's a fatality on them, I say, sir, and they can't escape it."

"But her motive for attacking him?"

"They were on bad terms, it seems. The servants heard them quarrelling violently earlier in the evening."

"Did the servants tell you this, to confirm their suspicions against her?"

"They don't suspect her, sir," replied Jekyl. "I and Cliff have drawn our own deductions by what they have said, and by personal observation."

The inspector mused. He was a kindly-disposed man, possessed his share of common sense, and did not feel so sure about the matter as his subordinate. "It appears scarcely credible that a young woman like Lady Level, hardly six months married, should attempt her husband's life, Jekyl. Where are these servants?"

"In the kitchen, sir. This way. There's no establishment to speak of. When my lord was detained here through damage to his knee, my lady followed him down—against his will, it's whispered—and brought only her maid and a man-servant."

"I think you have been listening to a good deal of gossip," remarked

Inspector Poole, as he moved on to the house.

Meanwhile Lady Level, in deep agitation, stood at the window which she had had thrown up for air, while she made the confession to Mr. Ravensworth that she had been a witness to the attack on her husband. This she had denied before; and it might never have been wrung from her, but that she overheard the two policemen, already in the house, whispering their suspicions against her.

She was shocked, indignant, terrified. She leaned for support on the window-frame, panting for breath in the cold night air.

"Arnold, am I to bear this?"

He stood with folded arms. He felt for her deeply: were she connected with him by near ties of blood, he could not have been more anxious to protect her; but a strong doubt that she *might* be guilty was working within him. He supposed she must have received some great provocation from Lord Level.

"How cruel they are to entertain such a suspicion! If they—if they— Oh, Arnold, they never will arrest me!—they never will publicly accuse me!" she uttered, as a new possibility occurred to her.

"Blanche, listen," he rejoined, talking to her as he had talked when she was a child. "All that can be done for you, I will do; but I cannot work in this uncertainty. Tell me the truth; be it good or be it ill, I will stand by you; but, if I am to be of service to you, I must know it. Was it you who struck Lord Level?"

"No. Have I not just told you so?"

"What you told me I do not understand. You say you saw it done—"

"Then I did not see it done," she petulantly interrupted; and no more questions would she answer.

"Let me take you back to the fire," said Mr. Ravensworth, as he shut down the window. "You are trembling with cold."

"Not with cold," was her reply.

Stirring the fire into a blaze, he drew the easy-chair near it for her. He then stood by, saying nothing.

"Suppose they should openly accuse me?" she began, after a silence.

"Would they arrest me?"

"Blanche," he retorted, in sharp, ringing, imperative accents, "are you guilty? Tell me, one way or the other, that I may know what to be at."

Lady Level rose and confronted him, her blue eyes wearing their most haughty expression. "You have known me for many years, known me well; how then can you repeat that question? *I* guilty of attacking Lord Level!"

"I would rather believe myself—I could as soon believe my own wife guilty of such a thing; but why have you equivocated with me? You have not told me the truth, as to what passed that night."

"My husband charged me not to tell anyone."

"Five minutes ago you told me yourself that you saw it done; now you say you did not see it. What am I to think?"

"In saying I saw it done, I spoke hastily; what I ought to have said was, that I saw who did it. And then, to-day, Lord Level insisted that I had been dreaming," she abstractedly continued. "Arnold, do you believe that we can see visions or dream dreams that afterwards wear the semblance of realities?"

"I wish you would not speak in riddles. The time is going on; those men of the law may come in and accuse you, and what defence am I to make for you? You know that you may trust me. What you say shall never pass my lips."

Lady Level deliberated. "I will trust you," she said at length: "there seems to be no help for it. I went to rest last night angry with Lord Level, for we had spoken irritating words to each other. I lay awake, I dare say for an hour, indulging bitter thoughts, and then I dropped asleep. Suddenly something woke me; I cannot tell you what it was: whether it was any noise, or whether it was the opening of the door, which I had closed, between my room and Lord Level's. All I know is, that door was wide open, and someone stood in the doorway with a lighted candle. It was a strange-looking object, and seemed to be dressed in flannel—either a long flannel shirt or a flannel gown. In the confusion of the moment I believed it must be Lord Level, and I was struck with amazement, for Lord Level is not able to get out of bed without assistance, from the injury to his knee, and I thought how long his hair was, and how dark it had grown—that was, you know, when I was between sleeping and waking. Then I saw that it had large, flashing black eyes, so it could not be Lord Level. It crossed the room—"

"Blanche," he interrupted, "you speak just as if you were describing a vision. It—"

"That is what Lord Level now says it was. Let me go on. It crossed the room as far as the dressing-table. I started up in bed then, and the wild eyes turned upon me, and at the same moment Lord Level called out from his own bed, apparently in agitation or pain. The figure dropped something, turned round, and darted back again through the open door to the other chamber. I saw the candle fall from its hand to the floor, and the place was in darkness, except for the little light that came from Lord Level's night-lamp. Terror overwhelmed me, and I cried out, and then my husband called to me by name. I ran to his room, flinging on my warm silk dressing-gown as I went, and there I found him hurt in some way, for he was bleeding from the arm and from the side. Arnold, as I live, as I breathe, that is the whole truth," she concluded with emotion.

"Did you again see the figure? Was it in Lord Level's room?"

"It was not there. I saw no trace of it. I remember I picked up the candlestick, for it was right in my path, and I screamed when I saw the blood upon my husband. He caught me to him by the other arm, as I have told you, telling me not to be frightened, that he would protect me; and I saw how white he looked, and that his brow was damp. Presently I asked him who and what it was; and the question seemed to excite him. 'Say nothing of what you have seen,' he cried; 'I charge you, *nothing*.' I don't quite know what I replied; it was to the effect that the household must be aroused, and the figure searched for. 'Blanche, you are my wife,' he said solemnly; 'my interests are yours; I charge you, by your duty and obedience to me, that you say nothing. Bury this in silence, as you value your life and mine.' Then he fainted and his hold relaxed, and I screamed out and the servants came. Had my life depended upon it I could not have helped screaming. What the figure had dropped in my room proved to be the knife."

"This is a very strange account!" exclaimed Mr. Ravensworth.

"It is so strange that I lose myself at times, wondering whether I was dreaming or awake. But it was true; it was true; though I could not proclaim it in defiance of my husband."

"Do you think the figure, as you call it, could have been one of the servants in disguise?"

"I am certain it was not. Not one of them has that dark Italian face."

"Italian face!" echoed Mr. Ravensworth. "Why do you call it an Italian face?"

Lady Level bent her head. "The thought somehow struck me," she answered, after a pause. "Not at the time, but since. I fancied it not unlike the Italian faces that one sees in pictures."

"Was it a man or a woman?"

"I do not know. At the time I took it to be a man, quite young. But since, recalling the appearance—well, it seems to me that it is impossible to decide which it was."

"And you saw no signs of this mysterious figure afterwards?"

"None whatever. There were no traces, I tell you, of its having been there, except the injury to Lord Level, the knife, and the fallen candlestick. The candlestick may have been left in Lord Level's room the previous night, for it is precisely like those used in the household, so that the figure may have lighted it from the night-lamp."

Mr. Ravensworth could not make much of all this. It puzzled him. "The curious thing is," he said aloud, "where could the figure have come from?"

"The curious thing is, that Lord Level wants to persuade me now that this was only a dream of the imagination."

"That his wounds are?"

"Not his wounds, of course—or the knife, but a great deal of what I told him. He ridicules the bare idea of its being a 'strange figure,' 'strangely dressed.' He says he caught a full view of the man who attacked him; that he should know him again; that he was dressed in a sort of soft light fustian, and was no more wild-looking than I am, except such wildness as arose from his state of inebriation, and he suspects he was a poacher who must have got in through one of the windows."

Mr. Ravensworth pondered over the tale: and he could not help deeming it a most improbable one. But that traces of some mysterious presence had been left behind, he would have regarded it as her husband appeared partially to regard it—a midnight freak of Lady Level's imagination. "Yet the wounds are realities," said Mr. Ravensworth, speaking aloud, in answer to his own thoughts.

"Arnold, it is all a reality," she said impressively. "There are moments, I say, when I am almost tempted to question it, but in my sober reason I know it to have been true; and while I ask myself, 'Was it a dream?' I hold a perfect, positive conviction that it was only too terrible a reality."

"You have spoken once or twice of its wild appearance. Did it look like a madman?"

"I never saw a madman, that I know of. This creature looked wild enough to be mad. There was one thing I thought curious in connection with finding the knife," proceeded Lady Level. "Timms, who picked it up, while Sanders had gone down for some hot water, brought it into Lord Level's room, calling out that she had found the weapon. 'Why, that's Mr. Drewitt's knife!' exclaimed the housemaid, Deborah, as soon as she saw it; and the steward, who had only just reached the room, asked her how she could make the assertion. 'It is yours, sir,' said Deborah; 'it's your new knife; I have seen it on your table, and should know it anywhere.' 'Deborah, if you repeat that again, I'll have you punished,' sharply called out the housekeeper, without, you understand, turning from Lord Level, to whom she was attending, to ascertain whether it was or was not the knife. Now, Arnold," added Lady Level, "ill and terrified as I felt at the moment, a conviction came across me that it was Mr. Drewitt's knife, but that he and Mrs. Edwards were purposely denying it."

"It is impossible to suspect them of attacking, or conniving at the attack on Lord Level."

"They attack Lord Level! They would rather attack the whole world combined, than that a hair of his head should suffer. They are fondly, devotedly attached to him. And Deborah, it appears, has been convinced out of her assertion. Hark! who is that?"

Mr. Ravensworth opened the door to reconnoitre. The inspector was prowling about the house and passages, exploring the outlets and inlets, followed by his two men, who had done the same before him.

"I thought you had forbidden the men to search," cried Lady Level.

"Why are they disobeying you?"

"Their chief is here now, and of course his orders go before mine. Besides, after what you have told me, I consider there ought to be a thorough search," added Mr. Ravensworth.

"In opposition to Lord Level?"

"I think that Lord Level has not taken a sufficiently serious view of the case. The only solution I can come to is, that some escaped madman got into the house before it was closed for the night, and concealed himself in it. If so, he may be in it now."

"Now! In it now!" she exclaimed, turning pale.

"Upon my word, I think it may be so. The doors and windows were all found safely fastened, you see. Therefore he could not escape during the night. And since the doors were opened this morning, the household, I take it, has been so constantly on the alert, that it might be an extremely difficult matter for him to get away unseen. If he, this madman, did enter yesterday evening, he must have found some place of concealment and hidden himself in it for hours, since it was not until one o'clock that he made the attack on Lord Level."

"Oh, Arnold, that is all too improbable," she rejoined doubtingly. "A madman could not plan and do all that."

"Madmen are more cunning than sane ones, sometimes."

"But I—I think it was a woman," said Lady Level, lowering her voice and her eyes.

Mr. Ravensworth looked at her. And for the first time, a feeling flashed into his mind that Lady Level had some suspicion which she would not speak of.

"Blanche," he said sharply, "do you know who it was? Tell me, if you do."

"I do not," she answered emphatically. "I may imagine this and imagine that, but I do not know anything."

"You were speaking, then, from imagination?"

"Y—es. In a case of mystery, such as this, imagination runs riot, and you can't prevent its doing so."

Again there was something about Lady Level that struck Mr. Ravensworth as being not honestly true. Before more could be said, steps were heard approaching the room; and Lady Level, afraid to meet the police, made her escape from it.

Running swiftly upstairs, she was passing Lord Level's door to enter her own, when she heard his voice, speaking collectedly, and peeped in. He saw her, and held out his hand. He appeared now quite rational, though his fine gray eyes were glistening and his fair face was flushed. Mrs. Edwards was standing by the bedside, and it was to her he had been talking.

Blanche advanced timidly. "Are you feeling better?" she softly asked.

"Oh, much better; nearly well: but for my knee I should be up and about," he answered, as he drew her towards him. "Mrs. Edwards, will you close the door? I wish to speak with my wife."

Mrs. Edwards, with a warning glance at her lady, which seemed to say, "He is not fit for it"—at least Blanche so interpreted it—went out and shut the door. Lord Level drew her closer to his side. He was lying propped up by a mound of pillows, almost sitting up in bed, and kept her standing there.

"Blanche," he began in very quiet tones, "I hear the police are in the house."

"Yes," she was obliged to answer, quite taken aback and feeling very much vexed that he had been told, as it was likely to excite him.

"Who sent for them? You?"

"Oh no."

"Then it was your friend; that fellow Ravensworth. I thought as much."

"But indeed it was not," she eagerly answered, shrinking from her husband's scornful tones. "When the two policemen came in—and we do not know who it was sent them—Mr. Ravensworth went to them by my desire to stop the search. I told him that you objected to it."

"Objected to it! I forbade it," haughtily rejoined Lord Level. "And if—if—"

"Oh, pray, Archibald, do not excite yourself; do not, do not!" she interrupted, frightened and anxious. "You know you will become worse again if you do."

"Will you go and end it in my name? End it, and send them away from the house."

"Yes, if you tell me to do so; if you insist upon it," she answered.

"But I am afraid."

"Why are you afraid?"

Lady Level bent her head until it was on a level with his. "For this, Archibald," she whispered: "that they might question me—and I should be obliged to answer them."

Lord Level gently drew her cool cheek nearer, that it might rest against his fevered one, and remained silent, apparently pondering the question.

"After I told you all that I saw that night, you bade me be silent," she resumed. "Well, I fear the police might draw it from me if they questioned me."

"But you must not allow them to draw it from you."

"Oh, but perhaps I could not help it," she sighed. "You know what the police are—how they question and cross-question people."

"Blanche, I reminded you last night that you were my wife, and you owed me implicit obedience in all great things."

"Yes, and I am trying to obey you; I am indeed, Archibald," she protested, almost torn by conflicting emotions; for, in spite of her doubts and suspicions, and (as she put it to herself) her "wrongs," she loved her husband yet.

"Well, my dear, you must be brave for my sake; ay, and for your own. Listen, Blanche: you will tell the police *nothing*; and they *must not search the house*. I don't care to see them myself to forbid it; I don't want to see them. For one thing, I am hardly strong enough to support the excitement it would cause me. But—"

"Will you tell me something, Archibald?" she whispered. "Is the—the—person—that attacked you in the house now?"

Lord Level looked surprised. "In this house? Why, how could it be?"

Certainly not."

"Was it—was it a woman?" she breathed, her voice low and tremulous.

He turned angry. "How can you be so silly, Blanche? A woman! Oh yes," changing to sarcasm, "of course it was a woman. It was you, perhaps."

"That is what they are saying, Archibald."

"*What* are they saying?" he returned, in dangerous excitement—if Blanche had only noticed the signs. For all this was agitating him.

"Why, that," she answered, bursting into tears. "The police are saying so. They are saying that it was I who stabbed you."

Lord Level cried out as a man in agony. And, with that, delirium came on again.

CHAPTER II. NOT LIFTED

My Lady Level sat at the open window of her husband's sitting-room, in the dark, her hot face lifted to the cool night air. Only a moment ago Lord Level had been calling out in his delirium, and Mrs. Edwards was putting cool appliances to his head, and damp, hot bricks to his feet. And Blanche knew that it was she who, by her indiscreet remarks and questioning, had brought on the crisis. She had not meant to harm or excite him; but she had done it; and she was very contrite.

It was now between ten and eleven o'clock. She did not intend to go to bed that night; and she had already slipped off her evening dress, and put on a morning one of soft gray cashmere. With his lordship in a fresh attack of fever, and the police about, the household did not think of going to rest.

Blanche Level sat in a miserable reverie, her lovely face pressed upon her slender hand, the tears standing in her blue eyes. She was suspecting her husband of all kinds of unorthodox things—this has been said before. Not the least disloyal of them being that an individual named Nina, who wore long gold earrings to enhance her charms, was concealed in that east wing, which might almost be called a separate house, and which owned a separate entrance.

And a conviction lay upon Lady Level—caught up since, not at the time—that it was this Nina who had attacked Lord Level. She could not drive away the impression.

Naturally she was bitterly resentful. Not at the attack, but at all the rest of it. She had said nothing yet to her husband, and she did not know whether she ever should say it; for even to speak upon such a topic reflected on herself a shame that stung her. *Of course* he forbade the search lest this visitor should be discovered, reasoned she; that is, he told her to forbid it: but ought she to obey him? Lady Level, cowering there in the darkness, would have served as a perfect exemplification of a small portion of Collins's "Ode to the Passions."

'Thy numbers, Jealousy, to naught were fixed,
Sad proof of thy distressful state;
Of differing themes the veering song was mixed,
And now it courted love, now raving, called on hate.'

Thus was it here. One moment she felt that she could—and should—put Lord Level away from her for his falsity, his treachery; the next she was conscious that life without him would be one long and bitter penance, for she had learned to love him with her whole heart and soul.

And until that miserable sojourn at Pisa, she had deemed that he returned her love, truly and passionately. Fie on the deceitful wiles of man!

A stir in the passage without. Was there any change in Lord Level, for better or for worse? Despite her resentment, she was anxious, and she opened the door. Mrs. Edwards had come out from the opposite chamber, a basin in hand.

"My lady, he is calmer," whispered the housekeeper, answering the unspoken question which she read in her eyes. "If he could only be kept so, if he had nothing to disturb him, he would soon be well again. It is a most unlucky thing that these police should have come here, where they are not wanted. That of itself must bring excitement to his lordship."

"It is unlucky that these tales should have been carried to him," haughtily reproved the young lady. "I cannot think who does it, or why."

"Nay, my lady, but when his lordship questions of this and that, he must be answered."

Closing the door of the sick-chamber very quietly, Mrs. Edwards passed down the stairs. At the same moment, covert steps were heard ascending them. Lady Level caught a glimpse of Mr. Inspector Poole's head, and stole back out of sight.

Meanwhile Mr. Ravensworth had been trying to gain a little explanation from that official. "Do you know," he said to him, "that you are here against Lord Level's wishes, and in direct opposition to his orders?"

"No, I do not," replied the inspector. "I did not understand it in that light. I certainly was told that his lordship had said he would not have the case officially inquired into, but I understood that he was lightheaded when he spoke, not at all conscious of what he was saying."

"From whom, then, did you receive your instructions, Mr. Poole?"

"From Dr. Macferraty," was the ready answer. "He called in at the station this evening."

"Ah!" cried Arnold Ravensworth.

"It would be a grave mistake, he said, if so monstrous a thing—they were the doctors own words—should be left uninvestigated, because his lordship was off his head," added the inspector. "May I ask, sir, if you entertain any suspicion—in any quarter?"

"Not any," decisively replied Mr. Ravensworth. "The whole thing is to me most mysterious."

The speakers looked at one another. Mr. Poole was deliberating whether he should give a hint of what Jekyl had said about Lady Level. But he was saved the trouble.

"I understand, through overhearing a word or two, that your men have been wondering whether the culprit could have been Lady Level," spoke Mr. Ravensworth in low tones. "The very idea is monstrous: you have but now used the right word. *Believe me*, she is innocent as a child. But she is most terribly frightened."

"Well, I thought it very unlikely," admitted the inspector.

"But it seems," slowly continued Mr. Ravensworth, weighing well his words, "that she caught sight at the time, or thought she caught sight, of a figure curiously attired in white flannel, who dropped, or flung, the knife down in her chamber. Lord Level says it was not white flannel, but light fustian, such as a countryman might wear. According to that, he must also have seen the individual. The difficulty, however, is, to know whether his lordship is speaking in his senses or out of them."

"Someone must have got in, then, after all; in spite of the doors being found as they were left."

"I think so. I cannot see any other loophole for suspicion to fall back upon. Concealed himself in the house probably beforehand. And, for all we know, may be concealed in it still. I gathered an impression while Lady Level was talking to me that it might really be some escaped madman. All the same, Lord Level persists in forbidding the matter to be investigated."

Keen and practical, the officer revolved what he heard. The story was a curious one altogether, and as yet he did not see his way in it.

"I think, sir," he said with deliberation, "that I shall take the affair into my hands, and act, in the uncertain state of his lordship's mind, upon my own responsibility. First of all, we will just go through the house."

Mr. Ravensworth went with him: they two together. After a thorough search, nothing wrong could they find or discover. The servants and the two policemen remained below; Mrs. Edwards was in close attendance upon his lordship; and the steward, who appeared most exceedingly to resent the presence of these police in the house, had shut himself into his rooms.

In the course of time, the inspector and Mr. Ravensworth approached these rooms. Passing Lord Level's chamber with soft footsteps, they traversed the passages beyond it, until they found themselves stopped by a door, which was fastened.

Mr. Poole shook it. "It must lead to some of the remote rooms," he observed, "and they are uninhabited. Just the spot for an assassin to conceal himself in—or to try to do so."

"I think these may be the steward's apartments," spoke Arnold Ravensworth doubtingly. "I remember Lady Level said they were only divided from his lordship's chamber by a passage or two."

Whose ever rooms they were, no one came to the door in answer to the summons, and the inspector knocked again.

This time it brought forth Mr. Drewitt. They heard him draw a chain, and then he opened the door a few inches, as far as the chain permitted him.

"Will you let us in, Mr. Drewitt? I must search these rooms."

"Search for what?" asked the old man. "It's you, is it, Poole! I cannot have my rooms searched. This morning, after the alarm, I went over them, to be quite sure, and that's sufficient."

"Allow me to search for myself," returned the officer.

"No, sir," answered the steward, with dignity. "No one shall come in to search these rooms in opposition to the wish of my lord. His orders to me were that the affair should be allowed to drop, and I for one will not disobey him, or give help to those who would. His lordship believed that whoever it might be that attacked him came in and went out again. The country might be hunted over, he said, but not his house."

"I must enter here," was all the answer reiterated by the officer.

"It shall be over my body, then," returned the steward, with emotion. "My lord forbade a search, and you have no right whatever to proceed with it."

"My good man, I am a police inspector."

"You may be inspector-general for all I care," retorted the old gentleman, "but you don't come in here. Get my lord's authority first, and then you will be welcome. As to reminding me who you are, Mr. Poole, you must know that to be superfluous. And I beg *your* pardon, sir," he added, addressing Mr. Ravensworth, "but I would inquire what authority you hold from my lord, that you, a stranger, should set at naught his expressed wishes?"

The door was shut and bolted in their faces, and the inspector leaned against the wall in thought. "Did you notice his agitation?" he whispered to Mr. Ravensworth. "There's more in this than meets the eye."

It certainly wore that appearance. However, for the present they were foiled, and the steward remained master of the position. To attempt to enter those rooms by force would create noise and commotion in the house that might be disastrous to the health of Lord Level.

"There's *something* in those rooms that has to be concealed," spoke the astute inspector. "If it be the man who attacked Lord Level—"

"But the steward, devoted as he is to his master, would not harbour *him*," impulsively interrupted Arnold Ravensworth.

"True. Unless—unless, mind you, there exists some cause, which we cannot even guess at, for his lordship's shielding him," said the inspector. "I must say I should like to get into the rooms."

"There is no other way of doing it; no other entrance."

"I don't know that, sir. Unless I am mistaken, these rooms communicate direct with the East Wing. By getting into that, we might find an unsuspected entrance."

He made his way downstairs in silence, musing as he went. At the foot of the staircase he encountered Deborah.

"Which are the passages in this lower part of the house that lead to the East Wing?" he inquired.

"Not any of them, sir," answered Deborah promptly. "At least, not any that are ever opened. At the end of the stone passage there's a heavy door, barred and bolted, that leads to other passages, I believe, and to other heavy bolted doors, and they lead into the East Wing. That's what I have heard say. The only entrance in use is the one through Mr. Drewitt's rooms."

Opposition seemed only to strengthen the will of Mr. Inspector Poole. "Into the rooms I mean to make my way," he said to Mr. Ravensworth, as he retraced his steps up the staircase. "Could you not," he hastily added, "get Lady Level to bring her authority to bear upon old Drewitt?"

It was the appearance of Lady Level that probably induced the thought. She, looking pale, haggard and uneasy, was peeping down at them, and did not escape in time.

Arnold Ravensworth somewhat hesitatingly acceded. They wished to speak to Mr. Drewitt—he put it to her in that way—but he had bolted himself into his rooms; would she use her authority and bid him admit them?

She complied at once, unsuspectingly. Of all parts of the house, that occupied by the steward must be most free from concealment. And she went with them to the barred-up door.

The steward did not presume to dispute Lady Level's mandate, which she gave somewhat imperiously. She entered with them. They found themselves in the old gentleman's sitting-room, and he placed chairs for them. "We have not come to sit down," said Mr. Poole; and he passed into the other rooms in rapid succession: the two bed-chambers and the unoccupied room that had nothing in it but a few trunks. A very cursory inspection convinced him that no person was being harboured there.

"Why could you not have admitted us just now, Mr. Drewitt?" he asked.

"Because you brought not the authority of either my lord or my lady," answered the faithful old retainer.

The inspector strode to the end of the passage and stood before the oaken door already spoken of, examining its heavy fastenings. The others had followed him.

"This must be the door communicating between the house and the East Wing," he remarked. "Will you open it, Mr. Drewitt?"

"No, sir, I will not."

"But we must have it opened," interposed Arnold Ravensworth. "The fact is, we have some reason to fear the midnight assassin may yet be hiding himself on the premises. He does not appear to be in the house, so he may be in the East Wing—and we mean to search it."

"Are you an enemy of my lord's?" returned the old man, greatly agitated.

"Certainly not. I would rather be his friend. I have been the friend, if I may so express it, of Lady Level since she was a child, and I must see that she is protected, her husband being for the time laid aside."

"My lady," called out the old man, visibly trembling, "I appeal to you, as my lord's second self, to forbid these gentlemen from attempting to enter the East Wing."

"Be firm, Blanche," whispered Mr. Ravensworth, as she came forward.

"We must search the East Wing, and it is for your sake."

She turned to the steward. "I am sure that they are acting for the best. Open the door."

For one moment the old man hesitated, and then wrung his hands. "That I should be forced to disobey the wife of my lord! My lady, I crave your pardon, but I will not open these rooms unless I have the express authority of his lordship to do so."

"But I wish it done, Mr. Drewitt," she said, blushing hotly.

Police inspectors have generally the means of carrying out their own will. Mr. Poole, after critically regarding the fastenings, produced one or two small instruments from his pockets and a bunch of keys. As he was putting one of the keys into the lock for the purpose of trying whether it would fit it, a curious revulsion came over Lady Level. Possibly the piteous, beseeching countenance of the steward induced it. "He *is* my husband, after all," she whispered to her own heart.

"Stop!" she said aloud, pushing the key downwards. "I may not have the right to sanction this in opposition to the wish of Lord Level. He has forbidden any search to be made, and I must do the same."

There was a moment's silence. The inspector gazed at her.

"When his lordship shall be sufficiently recovered to see you, sir, you can take instructions from him if he sees well to give them," she added to the officer civilly. "Until then, I must act for him, and I forbid—"

"Highly-tighty, and what's the matter here?" broke in a hearty voice behind them, at which they all turned in surprise. Making his way along the passage was a portly, but rather short man of sixty

years, with an intellectual brow and benevolent countenance, a red face and a bald head. The change in Mr. Drewitt's look was remarkable; its piteousness had changed to radiance.

The new-comer shook hands with him. Then he turned and affably shook hands with the inspector, speaking gaily. "You look as if you had the business of all the world on your shoulders, Poole."

"Have you seen my lord, Mr. Hill?" asked the steward.

"I got back home to-night and came on here at once, hearing of the hubbub you are in, and I have seen my lord for a few minutes. And this is my lady—and a very charming lady I am sure she is," he added, bowing to Lady Level with an irresistible smile. "Will she shake hands with the old man who has been doctor-in-ordinary to her lord's family for ages and ages?"

Blanche put her hand into his. She, as she was wont sometimes to tell him in days to come, fell in love with him at once.

"What a blessing that you are back again!" murmured the good old steward.

"Ay," assented Mr. Hill, perhaps purposely misinterpreting the remark: "we will have Lord Level up and about in no time now.—Mr. Poole, I want a private word with you."

The doctor drew him into the steward's sitting-room, and closed the door. The conference did not last more than a minute or two, but it was very effectual. For when Mr. Inspector Poole came forth, he announced his decision of withdrawing all search at present. To be resumed if necessary, he added, when his lordship should have recovered sufficiently to give his own orders.

The only one who did not appear to be altogether satisfied with this summary check was Arnold Ravensworth. He did not understand it. Upon some remark being made as to Lady Level's safety from any attack by the midnight villain, Mr. Hill at once told her *he* would guarantee that. And though he spoke with a laugh, as if making light of the matter, there was an assurance in his eye and tone that she might implicitly trust to.

"Then—as it seems I cannot be of any further use to you to-night, and as I may just catch the midnight up-train, I will wish you good-bye, Lady Level," said Mr. Ravensworth. "I am easy about you, now Mr. Hill is here. But be sure to write for me if you think I can be of service to you or to Lord Level."

"I will, I will," she answered. "Thank you, Arnold, for coming."

* * * * *

Marshdale House returned to its usual monotony, and a day or two went on. Nothing more was seen or heard of the unknown individual who had so disturbed its peace; the very mention of it was avoided. Nevertheless, Blanche, turning matters over in her mind, could only look at it and at that detestable East Wing with an increased sense of mystery. "But for knowing that someone was there who might not be disclosed to the honest light of day, why should he have forbidden the search?" ran the argument that she was for ever holding with herself; and she steeled her heart yet more against her husband.

On this, the second afternoon after the commotion, she was sitting reading a newspaper in the garden, where the sun was shining hotly, when Mr. Hill, who had been up with Lord Level, appeared.

"Well," said the doctor cheerily, halting before her, "he is a great deal better, and the knee's ever so much stronger. I shall have him up to-morrow. And in a couple of days after that he may venture to travel to town, as he is so anxious to get there."

"Your treatment seems to agree with him better than Dr. Macferraty's did," she answered.

"Ay: I know his constitution, you see. Good-day, Lady Level. I shall be in again to-night."

Soon after the doctor went out, there was heard a shrill whistle at the gate, together with a kicking about of gravel by a pair of rough boots. Lady Level looked up, and saw the boy from the station bringing in a parcel.

"Well, Sam," said she, as the lad approached. "What have you come for?"

"They sent me on with this here parcel—and precious heavy he is for his size," replied Sam Doughty, as without ceremony he tumbled the parcel on to the bench by Lady Level's side. It was addressed to her, and she knew that it contained some books which Mr. Ravensworth had promised to send down. "Come down by the mid-day train," curtly added the boy for her information.

"Do you get paid for delivering parcels, Sam?"

"*Me* get paid!" returned the youth, with intense aggravation; "no such luck. Unless," added he, a happy thought striking him, "anybody likes to give me something for myself—knowing how weighty they be, and what a lug it is for one's arms."

"This parcel is not at all heavy," said Lady Level.

"I'm sure he is, then, for his size. You should lift, though, what I have to drag along sometimes. Why, yesterday that ever was, I brought a parcel as big as a house to the next door; one that come from Lunnon by the mid-day train just as this'n did; and Mother Snow she never gave me nothing but a jam tart, no bigger nor the round o' your hand. She were taking a tray on 'em out o' the oven."

"Jam tarts for *her* delectation!" was the thought that flashed through Lady Level's mind. "Who was the parcel for, Sam?" she asked aloud.

"'Twere directed to Mrs. Snow."

"Oh. Not to that lady who is staying there?"

"What lady be that?" questioned Sam.

"The one you told me about. The lady with the long gold earrings."

Sam's stolid countenance assumed a look of doubt, as if he did not altogether understand. His eyes grew wider.

"*That* un! Her bain't there now, her bain't. Her didn't stop. Her went right away again the next day after she come."

"*Did* she?" exclaimed Lady Level, taken by surprise. "Are you sure?"

"Be I sure as that's a newspaper in your hand?" retorted Sam. "In course I be sure. The fly were ordered down here for her the next morning, and she come on to the station in it, Mr. Snow a sitting outside."

"She went back to London, then!"

"She went just t'other way," contradicted the boy. "Right on by the down-train. Dover her ticket were took for."

Lady Level fell into a passing reverie. All the conjectures she had been indulging in lately—whither had they flown? At that moment Mrs. Edwards, having seen the boy from the house, came out to ask what he wanted. Sam put on his best behaviour instantly. The respect he failed to show to the young lady was in full force before Mrs. Edwards.

"I come to bring this here parcel, please, ma'am, for Lady Level," said he, touching his old cap.

"Oh, very well," said Mrs. Edwards. "I'll carry it indoors, my lady," she added, taking it up. "You need not wait, Sam."

Lady Level slipped a sixpence into his ready hand, and he went off contented. Mrs. Edwards carried away the parcel.

Presently Lady Level followed, her mind busy as she went upstairs. She was taking some contrition to herself. What if—if it was all, or a great deal of it, only her imagination—that her husband was not the disloyal man she had deemed him?

His chamber door was closed; she passed it and went into her own. Then she opened the door separating the rooms and peeped in. He was lying upon the bed, partly dressed, and wrapped in a warm dressing-gown; his face was turned to the pillow, and he was apparently asleep.

She stole up and stood looking at him. Not a trace of fever lingered in his face now; his fine features looked wan and delicate. Her love for him was making itself heard just then. Cautiously she stooped to imprint a soft, silent kiss upon his cheek; and then another.

She would have lifted her face then, and found she could not do so. His arm was round her in a trice, holding it there; his beautiful gray eyes had opened and were fixed on hers.

"So you care for me a little bit yet, Blanche," he fondly whispered.

"Better this than calling me hard names."

She burst into tears. "I should care for you always, Archibald, if—if—I were sure you cared for me."

"You may be very sure of *that*," he emphatically answered. "Let there be peace between us, at any rate, my dear wife. The clouds will pass away in time."

On the Monday morning following, Lord and Lady Level departed for London. The peace, patched up between them, being honestly genuine and hopeful on his lordship's part, but doubtful on that of my lady.

Still nothing had been said or done to lift the mystery which hung about Marshdale.

CHAPTER III. ONE NIGHT IN ESSEX STREET

We go on now to the following year: and I, Charles Strange, take up the narrative again.

* * * * *

It has been said that the two rooms on the ground-floor of our house in Essex Street were chiefly given over to the clerks. I had a desk in the front office; the same desk that I had occupied as a boy; and I frequently sat at it now. Mr. Lennard's desk stood opposite to mine. On the first floor the large front room was furnished as a sitting-room. It was called Mr. Brightman's room, and there he received his clients. The back room was called my room; but Mr. Brightman had a desk in it, and I had another. His desk stood in the middle of the room before the hearthrug; mine was under the window.

One fine Saturday afternoon in February, when it was getting near five o'clock, I was writing busily at my desk in this latter room, when Mr. Brightman came in.

"Rather dark for you, is it not, Charles?" he remarked, as he stirred the fire and sat down in his arm-chair beside it.

"Yes, sir; but I have almost finished."

"What are you going to do with yourself to-morrow?" he presently asked, when I was putting up my parchments.

"Nothing in particular, sir." I could not help sometimes retaining my old way of addressing him, as from clerk to master. "Last Sunday I was with my uncle Stillingfar."

"Then you may as well come down to Clapham and dine with me. Mrs. Brightman is away for a day or two, and I shall be alone. Come in time for service."

I promised, and drew a chair to the fire, ready to talk with Mr. Brightman. He liked a little chat with me at times when the day's work was over. It turned now on Lord Level, from whom I had heard that morning. We were not his usual solicitors, but were doing a little matter of business for him. He and Blanche had been abroad since the previous November (when they had come up together from Marshdale), and had now been in Paris for about a month.

"Do they still get on pretty well?" asked Mr. Brightman: for he knew that there had been differences between them.

"Pretty well," I answered, rather hesitatingly.

And, in truth, it was only pretty well, so far as I was able to form a judgment. During this sojourn of theirs in Paris I had spent a few days there with a client, and saw Blanche two or three times. That she was living in a state of haughty resentment against her husband was indisputable. Why or wherefore, I knew not. She dropped a mysterious word to me now and then, of which I could make nothing.

While Mr. Brightman was saying this, a clerk came in, handed a letter to him and retired.

"What a nuisance!" cried he, as he read it by fire-light. I looked up at the exclamation.

"Sir Edmund Clavering's coming to town this evening, and wants me to be here to see him!" he explained. "I can't go home to dinner now."

"Which train is he coming by?" I asked.

"One that is due at Euston Square at six o'clock," replied Mr. Brightman, referring to the letter. "I wanted to be home early this evening."

"You are not obliged to wait, sir," I said. I wished to my heart later—oh, how I wished it!—that he had not waited!

"I suppose I must, Charles. He is a good client, and easily takes offence. Recollect that breeze we had with him three or four months ago."

The clocks struck five as he spoke, and we heard the clerks leaving as usual. I have already stated that no difference was made in the working hours on Saturdays in those days. Afterwards, Mr. Lennard came up to ask whether there was anything more to be done.

"Not now," replied Mr. Brightman. "But I tell you what, Lennard," he added, as a thought seemed to occur to him, "you may as well look in again to-night, about half-past seven or eight, if it won't inconvenience you. Sir Edmund Clavering is coming up; I conclude it is for something special; and I may have instructions to give for Monday morning."

"Very well," replied Lennard. "I will come."

He went out as he spoke; a spare, gentlemanly man, with a fair complexion and thin, careworn face. Edgar Lennard was a man of few words, but attentive and always at his post, a most efficient superintendent of the office and of the clerks in general.

He left and Mr. Brightman rose, saying he would go and get some dinner at the Rainbow. I suggested that he should share my modest steak, adding that Leah could as easily send up enough for two as for one: but he preferred to go out. I rang the bell as I heard him close the frontdoor. Watts answered it, and lighted the gas.

"Tell your wife to prepare my dinner at once," I said to him; "or as soon as possible: Mr. Brightman is coming back to-night. You are going out, are you not?"

"Yes, sir, about that business. Mr. Lennard said I had better go as soon as I had had my tea."

"All right. It will take you two or three hours to get there and back again. See to the fire in the next room; it is to be kept up. And, Watts, tell Leah not to trouble about vegetables to-day: I can't wait for them."

In about twenty minutes Leah and the steak appeared. I could not help looking at her as she placed the tray on the table and settled the dishes. Thin, haggard, untidy, Leah presented a strange contrast to the trim, well-dressed upper servant I had known at White Littleham Rectory. It was Watts who generally waited upon me. When Leah knew beforehand that she would have to wait, she put herself straight. Today she had not known. My proper sitting-room upstairs was not much used in winter. This one was warm and comfortable, with the large fire kept in it all day, so I generally remained in it. I was not troubled with clients after office hours.

"I wonder you go such a figure, Leah!" I could not help saying so.

"It is cleaning-day, Mr. Charles. And I did not know I should have to come up here. Watts has just gone out."

"It is a strange thing to me that you cannot get a woman in to help you. I have said so before."

"Ah, sir, nobody knows where the shoe pinches but he who wears it."

With this remark, unintelligible as apropos to the question, and a deep sigh, Leah withdrew. I had finished dinner, and the tray was taken away before Mr. Brightman returned.

"Now I hope Sir Edmund will be punctual," he cried, as we sat together, talking over a glass of sherry. "It is half-past six: time he was here."

"And there he is!" I exclaimed, as a ring and a knock that shook the house resounded in our ears. After five o'clock the front door was always closed.

Watts being out, we heard Leah answer the door in her charming costume. But clients pay little attention to the attire of laundresses in chambers.

"Good heavens! Can Sir Edmund have taken too much!" uttered Mr. Brightman, halting as he was about to enter the other room to receive him. Loud sounds in a man's voice arose from the passage; singing, laughing, joking with Leah. "Open the door, Charles."

I had already opened it, and saw, not Sir Edmund Clavering, but the young country client, George Coney, the son of a substantial and respectable yeoman in Gloucestershire. He appeared to be in exalted spirits, and had a little exceeded, but was very far from being intoxicated.

"What, is Mr. Brightman here? I only expected to see you," cried he, shaking hands with both. "Look here!" holding out a small canvas bag, and rattling it. "What does that sound like?"

"It sounds like gold," said Mr. Brightman.

"Right, Mr. Brightman; thirty golden sovereigns: and I am as delighted with them as if they were thirty hundred," said he, opening the bag and displaying its contents. "Last week I got swindled out of a horse down at home. Thirty pounds I sold him for, and he and the purchaser disappeared and forgot to pay. My father went on at me, like our old mill clacking; not so much for the loss of the thirty pounds, as at my being done: and all the farmers round about clacked at me, like so many more mills. Pleasant, that, for a fellow, was it not?"

"Very," said Mr. Brightman, while I laughed.

"I did not care to stand it," went on George Coney. "I obtained a bit of a clue, and the day before yesterday I came up to London—and I have met with luck. This afternoon I dropped across the very chap, where I had waited for him since the morning. He was going into a public-house, and another with him, and I pinned them in the room, with a policeman outside, and he pretty soon shelled out the thirty pounds, rather than be taken. That's luck, I hope." He opened the bag as he spoke, and displayed the gold.

"Remarkable luck, to get the money," observed Mr. Brightman.

"I expect they had been in luck themselves," continued young Coney, "for they had more gold with them, and several notes. They were for paying me in notes, but 'No, thank ye,' said I, 'I know good gold when I see it, and I'll take it in that.'"

"I am glad you have been so fortunate," said Mr. Brightman. "When do you return home?"

"I did mean to go to-night, and I called to leave with you this small deed that my father said I might as well bring up with me, as I was coming"—producing a thin folded parchment from his capacious pocketbook. "But I began thinking, as I came along, that I might as well have a bit of a spree now I am here, and go down by Monday night's train," added the young man, tying up the bag again, and slipping it into his pocket. "I shall go to a theatre to-night."

"Not with that bag of gold about you?" said Mr. Brightman.

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because you would have no trace of it left to-morrow morning."

George Coney laughed good-humouredly. "I can take care of myself, sir."

"Perhaps so; but you can't take care of the gold. Come, hand it over to me. Your father will thank me for being determined, and you also, Mr. George, when you have cooled down from the seductions of London."

"I may want to spend some of it," returned George Coney. "Let's see how much I have," cried he, turning the loose money out of his pockets. "Four pounds, seven shillings, and a few halfpence," he concluded, counting it up.

"A great deal too much to squander or lose in one night," remarked Mr. Brightman. "Here," added he, unlocking a deep drawer in his desk, "put your bag in here, and come for it on Monday."

George Coney drew the bag from his pocket, but not without a few remonstrative shakes of the head, and put it in the drawer. Mr. Brightman locked it, and restored the bunch of keys to his pocket.

"You are worse than my father is," cried George Coney, half in jest, half vexed at having yielded. "I wouldn't be as close and stingy for anything."

"In telling this story twenty years hence, Mr. George, you will say, What a simpleton I should have made of myself, if that cautious old lawyer Brightman had not been close and stingy!"

George Coney winked at me and laughed. "Perhaps he's right, after all."

"I know I am," said Mr. Brightman. "Will you take a glass of sherry?"

"Well; no, I think I had better not. I have had almost enough already, and I want to carry clear eyes with me to the play. What time does it begin?"

"About seven, I think; but I am not a theatre-goer myself. Strange can tell you."

"Then I shall be off," said he, shaking hands with us, as only a hearty country yeoman knows how to.

He had scarcely gone when Sir Edmund Clavering's knock was heard. Mr. Brightman went with him into the front room, and I sat reading the *Times*. Leah, by the way, had made herself presentable, and looked tidy enough in a clean white cap and apron.

Sir Edmund did not stay long: he left about seven. I heard Mr. Brightman go back after showing him out, and rake the fire out of the grate—he was always timidly cautious about fire—and then he returned to my room.

"No wonder Sir Edmund wanted to see me," cried he. "There's the deuce of a piece of work down at his place. His cousin wants to dispute the will and to turn him out. They have been serving notices on the tenants not to pay the rent."

"What a curious woman she must be!"

Mr. Brightman smiled slightly, but made no answer.

"He did not stay long, sir."

"No, he is going out to dinner."

As Mr. Brightman spoke, he turned up the gas, drew his chair to the desk and sat down, his back then being towards the fire. "I must look over these letters and copies of notices which Sir Edmund brought with him, and has left with me," he remarked. "I don't care to go home directly."

The next minute he was absorbed in the papers. I put down the *Times*, and rose. "You do not want me, I suppose, Mr. Brightman," I said. "I promised Arthur Lake to go to his chambers for an hour."

"I don't want you, Charles. Mind you are not late in coming down to me to-morrow morning."

So I wished him good-night and departed. Arthur Lake, a full-fledged barrister now of the Middle Temple, rented a couple of rooms in one of the courts. His papers were in one room, his bed in the other. He was a steady fellow, as he always had been, working hard and likely to get on. We passed many of our evenings together over a quiet chat and a cigar, I going round to him, or he coming in to me. He had grown up a little, dandified sort of man, good-humouredly insolent as ever when the fit took him: but sterling at heart.

Lake was sitting at the fire waiting for me, and began to grumble at my being late. I mentioned what had hindered me.

"And I have forgotten my cigar-case!" I exclaimed as I sat down. "I had filled it, all ready, and left it on the table."

"Never mind," said Lake. "I laid in a parcel to-day."

But I did mind, for Lake's "parcels" were never good. He would buy his cigars so dreadfully strong. Nothing pleased him but those full-flavoured Lopez, whilst I liked mild Cabanas: so, generally speaking, I kept to my own. However, I took one, and we sat, talking and smoking. I smoked it out, abominable though it was, and took another; but I couldn't stand a second.

"Lake, I cannot smoke your cigars," I said, flinging it into the fire. "You know I never can. I must run and fetch my own. There goes eight o'clock."

"What's the matter with them?" asked Lake: his usual question.

"Everything; they are bad all over. I shall be back in a trice."

I went the quickest way, through the passages, which brought me into Essex Street, and had my latch-key ready to open the door with as I approached the house. There were three of these latchkeys. I had one; Lennard another, for it sometimes happened that he had to come in before or after business hours; and Leah had possession of the third. But I had no use for mine now, for the door was open. A policeman, standing by the area railings, recognised me, and wished me good-evening.

'Whose carelessness is this?' thought I, advancing to the top of the kitchen stairs and calling to Leah.

It appeared useless to call: no Leah made her appearance. I shut the front door and went upstairs, wondering whether Mr. Brightman had left.

Left! I started back as I entered; for there lay Mr. Brightman on the floor by his desk, as if he had pushed back his chair and fallen from it.

"What is the matter?" I exclaimed, throwing my hat anywhere, and hastening to raise him. But his head and shoulders were a dead weight in my arms, and there was an awful look upon his face, as the gaslight fell upon it. A look, in short, of death, and not of an easy death.

My pulses beat quicker, man though I was, and my heart beat with them. Was I alone in that large house with the dead? I let him fall again and rang the bell violently. I rushed to the door and shouted over the banisters for Leah; and just as I was leaping down for the policeman I had seen outside, or any other help that might be at hand, I heard a latch-key inserted into the lock, and Lennard came in with Dr. Dickenson. I knew him well, for he had attended Miss Methold in the days gone by.

As he hastened to Mr. Brightman, Lennard turned to me, speaking in a whisper:

"Mr. Strange, how did it happen? Was he ill?"

"I know nothing about it, Lennard. I came in a minute ago, and found him lying here. What do you know? Had you been here before?"

"I came, as Mr. Brightman had directed," he replied. "It was a little before eight; and when I got upstairs he was lying there as you see. I tried to rouse him, but could not, and I went off for the doctor."

"Did you leave the front door open?"

"I believe I did, in my flurry and haste. I thought of it as I ran up the street, but would not lose time in going back to shut it."

"He is gone, Mr. Strange," said Dr. Dickenson, advancing towards me, for I and Lennard had stood near the door. "It is a case of sudden death."

I sat down, bewildered. I could not believe it. How awfully sudden!

"Is it apoplexy?" I asked, lifting my head.

"No, I should say not."

"Then what is it?"

"I cannot tell; it may be the heart."

"Are you sure he is dead? Beyond all hope?"

"He is indeed."

A disagreeable doubt rushed over my mind, and I spoke on the impulse of the moment. "Has he come by his death fairly?"

The surgeon paused before he answered. "I see no reason, as yet, to infer otherwise. There are no signs of violence about him."

I cannot describe my feelings as we stood looking down at him. Never had I felt so before. What was I to do next?—how act? A hazy idea was making itself heard that some weighty responsibility lay upon me.

Just then a cab dashed up to the door; we heard it all too plainly in the hushed silence; and someone knocked and rang. Lennard went down to open it, and I told him to send in the policeman and fetch another doctor. Looking over the banisters I saw George Coney come in.

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