

Farjeon Benjamin Leopold

A Secret Inheritance. Volume 1 of 3



Benjamin Farjeon

A Secret Inheritance. Volume 1 of 3

«Public Domain»

Farjeon B.

A Secret Inheritance. Volume 1 of 3 / B. Farjeon — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

BOOK THE FIRST.	5
CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	15
CHAPTER IV	20
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	22

Farjeon B. L. Benjamin Leopold
A Secret Inheritance (Volume 1 of 3)

BOOK THE FIRST.
THE RECORD OF GABRIEL CAREW

VOL. I.

CHAPTER I

My earliest distinct remembrances are of a mean and common home in London, in which I lived with my parents and a servant named Fortress. She was a young woman, her age being twenty-four or five, but her manners were as sedate as those of a matron who had a distaste for frivolity and tittle-tattle. She performed her duties quietly and in silence, and seldom spoke unless she were first addressed. She did not take the trouble to render herself agreeable to me, or to win my affection. This was entirely to my liking, as I was of a retired habit of mind and disposition. It was not unusual for weeks to pass without our exchanging a word.

We were surrounded by squalid thoroughfares, the residents in which were persons occupying the lowest stations of life, human bees whose hives were not over stocked with honey, being indeed, I have no doubt, frequently bare of it. This was not the result of indolence, for they toiled early and late. I saw, and observed. Sometimes I wondered, sometimes I despised, and I always shrank from close contact with these sordid conditions of existence. If I had possessed a store of pocket-money it is not unlikely that a portion of it would have been expended in charity, but I will not affirm that I should have been impelled to liberality by motives of benevolence. We were, however, very poor, and my father seldom gave me a penny. I did not complain; I had no wants which money could gratify. I did not consort with other children; I did not play or associate with them; when they made advances towards me I declined to receive them, and I held myself entirely aloof from their pleasures and occupations. In this respect I instinctively followed the fashion of our home and the example of my parents. They had no friends or intimate acquaintances. During the years we lived thus poorly and meanly, not a man, woman, or child ever entered our doors to partake of our hospitality, or to impart what would possibly have been a healthy variety to our days.

Our dwelling consisted of two rooms at the top of a small house. They were attics; in one my mother and Mrs. Fortress slept; in the other my father and I. The bed he and I occupied was shut up during the day, and made an impotent pretence of being a chest of drawers. This room was our living room, and we took our meals in it.

In speaking of our servant as Mrs. Fortress I do not intend to convey that she was a married woman. My impression was that she was single, and I should have scouted the idea of her having a sweetheart; but my parents always spoke of and to her as Mrs. Fortress.

From the window of our living-room I could see, at an angle, a bit of the River Thames. The prospect was gloomy and miserable. There was no touch of gaiety in the sluggish panorama of the life on the water. The men on the barges, working with machine-like movement against the tide, were begrimed and joyless; the people on the penny steamers seemed bent on anything but pleasure; the boys who played about the stranded boats when the tide was low were elfish and mischievous. The land life was in keeping. The backs of other poor houses were scarcely a handshake off. On a sill here and there were a few drooping flowers, typical of the residents in the poverty-stricken neighbourhood. Sometimes as I gazed upon these signs an odd impression stole upon me that we had not always lived in this mean condition. I saw dimly the outlines of a beautiful house, with gardens round it, of horses my parents used to ride, of carriages in which we drove, of many servants to wait upon us. But it was more like a dream than reality, and I made no reference to it in my parents' hearing, and did not ask them whether my fancies had any substantial foundation.

When I say that a cloud rested upon us, I mean the figure of speech to bear no partial application. It was dark and palpable; it entered into our lives; it shadowed all our days. On more than one occasion I noticed my parents gazing apprehensively at me, and then piteously at each other; and upon their discovering that I was observing them they would force a smile to their lips, and assume a gaiety in which, young as I was, I detected a false ring. My mother did not always take her meals with us; my father and I frequently sat at the table alone.

"Your mother is not well enough to join us," he would sometimes say to me. If he saw me gazing on the vacant chair.

There were occasions when he and I would go into the country, and I do not remember that my mother ever accompanied us. There would be no preliminary preparation for these trips, nor was it customary for my father to say to me on the morning or the evening before these departures, "We are going into the country to-morrow, Gabriel." We always seemed to be suddenly called away, and our return was also sudden and, to me, unexpected. These holidays would, in the ordinary course of things, have been joyfully hailed by most poor lads. Not so by me. They were most melancholy affairs, and I was glad to get back from them. My father appeared to be suffering from greater anxiety in the country than in London. The excuse for these sudden departures was that my mother was ill, and needed quiet. We stopped at poor inns, and had no money to spend in junketings.

"I would like to take you to such or such a place," my father would say, "but I cannot afford it."

"It does not matter, father," I would answer. "I should be happy if I only had my books about me."

It was the being separated from my little library that made the country so irksome to me. I was passionately fond of reading, and my store of literature consisted of books which had belonged to my father, and had been well thumbed by him. They were mine; he had given them to me on my birthday. Of their nature it is sufficient to say here that they were mostly classics, and that among them were very few of a light character.

One morning a ray of light shone through the dark spaces of our lives.

We were sitting at breakfast in our lodgings in London when Mrs. Fortress brought in a letter for my father. It was an unusual event, and my father turned it over leisurely in his hand, and examined the writing on the envelope before he opened it. But his manner changed when he read the letter; he was greatly agitated, and my mother asked anxiously:

"Have you bad news?"

"No," he replied, "good."

He was silent for a few moments, and his next words were:

"Mildred, can you bear a shock?"

"Yes," said my mother, "as the news is good."

"We are rich once more," my father said, and then exclaimed, as he gazed around upon the mean walls of our apartment, "Thank God!"

A relative of ours had died in a distant land, and had left his fortune to my father. My father had had no expectations from him, and had, indeed, almost forgotten his existence. The greater was our surprise at this sudden change in our circumstances.

Although there were formalities to be gone through before my father came into possession of the large legacy, and although seven or eight weeks elapsed before we removed from our poor lodgings, the change from poverty to riches was almost immediately apparent. My father presented me with a purse containing money. I do not remember how much, but there were sovereigns in it.

I was not proud; I was not elated. The prospect of living in a better place, with better surroundings, was agreeable to me, but it did not excite me. With my purse in my pocket I went to a shop in which second-hand books were sold, and among them some I desired to possess. I bought what I wished, and carried them away with me. On my way home I noticed a little girl sitting on a doorstep, and there was a wan look in her pale face which attracted me. By her side was a crutch. As I stood looking at her for a moment, the string with which my books were tied became undone, the paper in which they were wrapped burst, and the books fell to the ground. I stooped to pick them up, but the books, being loose and of different sizes, were cumbersome to hold, and I called to the girl that I would give her a shilling if she helped me.

"A shilling!" she exclaimed, and rose upon her feet, but immediately sank to the ground, with a cry of pain.

"What is the matter with you?" I asked. "I haven't hurt you, have I?"

She pointed to her crutch. Thinking that she wished me to hand it to her, I lifted it from the ground, and found that it was broken.

"You are lame," I said.

"Yes," she said, looking at me admiringly from her crouching position; the twitch in her leg had caused her but momentary suffering, "I can't stand without my crutch, and it's broke."

"But you tried to stand when I called to you."

"Oh, yes; you said you'd give me a shilling, and I didn't think of my leg."

Much virtue in a shilling, thought I, to cause one to forget such an affliction.

"I wouldn't mind buying you a crutch," I said, "if I knew where they were sold."

"There's a shop in the next street," said the girl, "where the master's got the feller one to this. It's a rag and bone shop, and he'll sell it cheap."

"I'll show you the shop, young sir, if you like," said a voice at my elbow.

The tone and the manner of speech were refined, and it surprised me, therefore, when I turned, to behold a figure strangely at variance with this refinement. The man was in rags, and the drunkard's stamp was on his features, but in his kind eyes shone a sadly humorous light. Moreover, he spoke as a gentleman would have spoken.

I accepted his offer to show me the rag and bone shop, and we walked side by side, conversing. To be exact, I should say that he talked and I listened, for he used twenty words to one of mine. This kind of social intercourse was rare in my experiences, and it proved interesting, by reason of my chance companion being an exception to the people who lived in the neighbourhood. Few as were the words I uttered, they, and the books I carried under my arm, served to unlock his tongue, and he regaled me with snatches of personal history. He was familiar with the books I had purchased, and expressed approval of my selection. He had, indeed, been born a gentleman, and had received a liberal education.

"Which has served to convince me," he observed, "that if it is in the nature of a man to swim with the current into which he has drifted or been driven, swim with it he must, wheresoever it may lead him."

"There is the power of resistance," I said.

"There is nothing of the sort," was his comment, "unless it is agreeable to the man to exercise it. We are but straws. It is fortunate that life is short, and that happiness does not consist in wearing a jewelled crown. Young sir, how came you to live in these parts?"

"I do not know," I replied. "My parents live here."

"But you are not poor."

By this time I had bought the odd crutch, and my companion had seen the gold in my purse when I paid for it.

"We have been," I said, "but are so no longer."

"Shade of Pluto!" he cried. "If I could but say as much! So, being suddenly made rich, you open your heart to pity's call?" I shook my head in doubt, and he touched the crutch. "Don't you think this a fine thing to do?"

"I am not sure," I said.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "Praise me not for my virtues; blame me not for my vices. That morality, in respect to the average man, is a knife that cuts both ways. To sinners like myself it is more comforting than otherwise."

He puzzled me, and I told him so, but he made a pretence of disbelieving me, and said,

"There are depths in you, young sir. You may live to discover that you are in the wrong century."

That I did not clearly understand him did not render his conversation less interesting. I gave the girl the crutch and a shilling, and left her and the man together.

I record this incident because it is the only one I remember during the time we lived in that poor neighbourhood in which strangers played a part. So far as my outer life was concerned, it was utterly devoid of colour.

CHAPTER II

There was but little difference in this respect when we removed to Rosemullion, an old-fashioned, straggling mansion on the outskirts of Rochester, surrounded by stone walls, and secluded from public view by thick clusters of trees. We made no friends, we kept no company. Within half a hundred yards of the great house was a cottage of six rooms, very pretty, embosomed in shrubs and flowers. After a time this cottage became my real home. I was allowed to do pretty much as I liked, within certain unexpressed limitations through which, it appears, I did not break. Before I inhabited this cottage, I spoke, of course, to my father on the subject.

"You have taken a fancy to it, Gabriel?" he said.

"A great fancy," I said; "I wish it were mine."

"You may consider it yours," he said.

I thanked him, and immediately removed my books and papers into it. In a very short time it was ready for occupation, and I took possession of it. I wrote and studied in it, mused in it, slept in it, and lived therein a life of much seclusion. It suited my humour; I was fond of privacy, and I could enjoy it there to my heart's content.

Heaven knows there was no inducement in the great house to render it attractive to me. It was invariably quiet and sad. Whatever else our coming into possession of wealth did for us, it did not improve my mother's health. She became more than ever a confirmed invalid, and frequently kept her chamber for weeks together, during which times I was not permitted to see her. Mrs. Fortress remained with us in attendance on my mother, and exercised absolute control not only over her, but over the whole establishment. My father did not trouble himself in domestic matters; he left everything to Mrs. Fortress. Our only regular visitor was a doctor, who occasionally, after seeing my mother, would come and chat with me a while. He was a practitioner of fair ability, but apart from his profession, had little in him to attract me to him. I had the knack of gauging men, though I mixed but little with them; I had also the gift of drawing them out, as it were, and of extracting any special knowledge in which they were proficient. Using the doctor in this way, quite unsuspectingly, I am sure, to himself, I gained something from conversing with him; but had his visits to me not been few and far between, I should have found a means of avoiding them. I had already developed a certain masterfulness of spirit, and judged and decided matters for myself. There was, however, one exception, the intercourse between my mother and myself. In this I did not guide, but was guided. When the periods of seclusion of which I have spoken were over, Mrs. Fortress would come to me and say, "Your mother will see you now," and would conduct me to her presence. Only the slightest references to her illness were permitted. There were in our small family unwritten laws which were never transgressed. I have no remembrance of the manner in which they were made known to me, but known they were, and obeyed as though they had been writ in letters of steel, and no thought of rebelling against them entered my mind. The utmost I was allowed to say was,

"You have been ill, mother?"

"Yes, Gabriel," she would reply, "I have been ill."

"You are better now, mother?"

"Yes, I am better now."

That was all.

Mrs. Fortress would stand in silence by the bedside. She ruled chiefly by looks. What peculiar duties were attached to her service I know not, but there cannot be a doubt that she performed them faithfully. I neither liked nor disliked her, but she compelled me to respect her. In her outward bearing she was more like a machine than a human being. Sometimes in thinking of her I recalled words which had been applied to me by the man who had accompanied me to purchase the crutch for the lame girl. "There are depths in you, young sir." There must be depths in every human creature-a

hidden life pulsing beneath the one revealed to the world. What depths were hidden in Mrs. Fortress's nature? Had she relatives in some faraway corner, of whom she thought with affection? Had she an ambition, an aspiration? Was she working to some coveted end? Had she an idea which was not bounded by the walls of my mother's sick room? Did she love anything in all the wide world? Did she fear anything? Was she capable of an act of devotion and self-sacrifice? Impossible to discover in one so stolid and impassive.

I saw her one day during a great storm standing in the porch of the principal entrance, watching with calm eyes the lightning playing among the trees. She gazed straight and clear before her; there was not a sign of blenching. Loud peals of thunder broke over the district; she made no movement. I could not but admire her, for I myself loved to watch a great storm, and took delight in witnessing a conflict of the elements.

"You enjoy it," I said, going to her side.

She gazed at me, and did not speak. She was evidently surprised at being addressed on any but a domestic subject. I felt an inward sense of satisfaction, which I did not allow to appear in my face. To have surprised a being so cold and impassive was, in its way, an achievement.

"I have heard," I continued, "that most persons are afraid of a storm such as this."

"They are cowards," she said. "What is there to be afraid of?"

"That is what I think. You must be brave."

"Nothing frightens me. There are worse storms."

"Oh, yes," I acquiesced. "There was one last year. It struck down hundreds of trees."

"I don't mean storms of that kind."

I thought a moment. "If not in nature, then," I said, "in human life?" She did not reply; she had already said more than she intended. What came next from me, in the form of a question, was entirely unpremeditated; it escaped from me unaware. "Do you believe in a future world?"

"It does not trouble me," she said; and she walked into the house, and cast not a look behind.

This portion of my life, when I was growing from childhood to manhood, is quite clear to me. The change in my parents' circumstances afforded me advantages for study which I might not otherwise have enjoyed. I was not sent to a private or public school; my education was conducted at home by private tutors, with whom no opportunities offered of becoming intimate. Indeed, it appeared to me that they were too frequently and unnecessarily changed, but I cannot say whether this was from design on my father's part, or because my tutors found their duties distasteful. I think they had no reason to complain of me on the score of attention; I was too fond of learning to close the windows of the mind which they assisted me to open. Perhaps the peculiar rules of our household weighed upon them. We appeared to be cut off from our species, to lead a life apart from theirs. Ordinary amusements and pleasures found no place in Rosemullion. Newspapers and the current literature of the day were not admitted into our home. Although we were in the midst of busy millions, although a feverish, restless life was throbbing all around us, we took no share in it, and seemed to have no interests in common with our fellow-creatures. There was a war which shook the world. Great dynasties were at stake, parliaments were hastily summoned, thousands of men were marching to an untimely death, millions of money were expended, the avenues of cities were thronged with excited crowds, the history of the world was stained with blood, battlefields were charged with sobs and cries of agony, red-hot demagogues fumed and foamed, drums beat, trumpets sounded, gay music, to cast a false sweetness on death, was played through day and night, heroes were made, poets wrote stanzas and immortalised themselves, the whole world was in convulsion. It touched us not. Our sympathies, desires, and aspirations were centred in our own little world. The stone walls which surrounded the estate upon which our house and cottage were built were eight feet in height. Our servants performed their duties almost noiselessly; our gardener was deaf and dumb. These conditions of existence could not have been accidental; they must have been carefully planned and considered. For what reason?

We were rich enough to pay for colour and variety, and yet they were not allowed to enter our lives. We were thrown entirely upon ourselves and our own narrow resources.

I cannot truthfully say that I was unhappy during those years. We can scarcely miss that to which we are not accustomed, and I have learned since that the world is too full of wants for happiness. My passion for books grew more profound and engrossing; I grew passionately endeared to solitude. There were some fine woods near our house, and I was in the habit of wandering in them by day and night. If in the daylight I heard the sound of voices, or was made aware of the proximity of human creatures, I wandered in the opposite direction. It was known that I frequented the woods by day, but my nocturnal ramblings were secretly indulged in. Even my father was not aware that the nights which should have been devoted to repose were spent in the open. When all in the house were sleeping, I would steal out and wander for hours in darkness, which had no terrors for me. Shadows took comprehensive shapes-comprehensive to me, but perhaps not to all men-and that some were weird and monstrous, like nothing that moved and lived upon the sunlit earth, suited my mood and nature. I did not ask myself whether they were or were not creatures of my imagination. I accepted them without question, and I humoured and made sport of them; spoke to them, taunted them; dared them to action; asked them their mission; and walked among them fearlessly. I loved the supernatural in book and fancy, and on rare occasions, when I was in a state of spiritual exaltation, a vague belief would steal upon me that I should one day possess the power of piercing the veil which shuts off the unseen from mortal eyes. In winter the snow-robed trees, standing like white sentinels in a white eternal night, possessed for me an irresistible fascination. I saw wondrous scenes and pictures. The woods were filled with myriad eyes, gleaming with love, with hate, with joy, with despair; grotesque creatures inhabited every cranny; white spirits lurked among the silvered branches; the frosty stars looked down upon me as upon one of their kindred, and I looked up at them, and cried in spiritual ecstasy, "Only to you and to me are these things visible!"

Thus I lived, as it were, the inner life, and became familiar with hidden beauties and hidden horrors.

Was I, then, so wrapped up in my own narrow self that I shut my eyes and ears to the pulsing of other human life? Not entirely. There were occasions when I associated with my fellows.

Thus, on a stormy night in September, when the rain came down in torrents, I heard the sounds of loud entreaty proceeding from outside the stone walls of the estate. Had it not been that my sense of hearing was very acute, and that those who were appealing were screaming at the top of their voices, it would have been impossible for me to hear them. The wind assisted them and me; it blew in the direction of the chamber in which I sat reading by the light of a lamp.

"Some people in distress," I thought, and proceeded with my reading.

The sounds of entreaty continued, grew louder, and more deeply imploring.

"They will scream themselves hoarse presently," I thought. "Well, I am comfortable enough."

"Well said, Gabriel, well said!"

Who spoke? Nothing human, for I was the only person awake in house and cottage. Although I was convinced of this I looked around, not in fear but curiosity. Nothing living was in view.

"Is it well?" I asked aloud. "The sounds proceed most likely from poor persons who are benighted, and who have not a roof to cover them."

"That is their affair," said the voice.

"The storm is terrible," I continued. "They may perish in it."

The answer came. "They meet their fate. Leave them to their doom. In the morning their sufferings will be over."

"And I shall live," I said, "guilty and self-condemned. There is no such thing as fate. Human will can save or destroy. They are human, and I will go to them."

The rain and the wind almost blinded me as I walked from my cottage to the gates. All the while the voices continued to beseech despairingly and bitterly, calling upon man, calling upon God.

I heard one say, "Hush! There's somebody coming."

The next moment I opened the gates.

"Ah, master," cried a woman, "for the love of God tell us the way to Purvis's huts! Jump down, Jim; you've pretty nigh broke my blade-bone in."

A tall man jumped from the woman's shoulders to the ground. It was from that elevated position he had seen the light in my room.

"I don't know Purvis or his huts," I said. "What are you?"

"Hoppers, master. We're bound for Purvis's gardens, and we thought we should get to the sleeping huts before night set in; but we missed our way, and have been tramping through the rain for I don't know how many hours. I'm soaked through and through, and am ready to drop."

"Why did you not stop at an inn?" I asked.

"None of that!" growled the man, in a threatening tone.

"Be quiet, Jim!" said the woman. "Why didn't we stop at an inn, master? Because in them places they don't give you nothing for nothing, and that's about as much as we've got to offer. We're dead broke, master."

"We're never nothing else," growled the man.

"Can you help us, master?" asked the woman.

"Ask him if he will," growled the man, "don't ask him if he can."

"Leave it to me, Jim. You're always a-putting your foot into it. Will you, master, will you?"

"Who is that crying?"

"One of the children, master."

"One of them! How many have you?"

"Five, master."

"Curse 'em!" growled the man.

"Shut up, Jim! The gentleman'll help us for the sake of the young 'uns, won't you, sir? They're sopping wet, master, and a-dying of hunger."

"If I allow you to occupy my room," I said, "and give you food and a fire, will you go away quietly when the sun rises?"

"There, Jim; didn't I tell you? We're in luck. Go away quiet when the sun rises, master? Yes, master, yes. Hope I may never see daylight again if we don't!"

"Come in," I said. "Follow me, and make as little noise as possible."

They followed me quietly to my room. Their eyes dilated when they saw the fire, upon which I threw a fresh supply of coals.

"God bless you, sir!" said the woman, drawing the children to the fire, before which the man was already crouching.

True enough, there were seven of them. Man, woman, and five children, the youngest a baby, the eldest not more than seven years of age. A gruesome lot. Starving, cunning, in rags; but there was a soft light in the woman's eyes; she was grateful for the warmth and the prospect of food. The man's eyes were watching me greedily.

"Where is it, master?"

"Where is what?"

"The grub you promised us."

"You shall have it presently."

I noticed that the children's clothes were drying on them, and I suggested to the woman that she should take them off.

"I've nothing to wrap 'em in, master," she said.

I went into my bedroom, and brought back sheets and blankets, which I gave to the woman. She took them in silence, and carried out my suggestion. I then made two or three journeys to the

larder, and brought up the food I found there, bread, butter, meat, and the remains of a pie. When I came up for the last time I saw the man standing, looking round the room.

"He ain't took nothing, master," said the woman, "and sha'n't."

I nodded, and the man resumed his recumbent position before the fire. I handed them the food, and they devoured it wolfishly. They ate more like animals than human beings.

"Can't you treat us to a mug of beer, master?" asked the man.

"I have no beer," I replied. "I think I can find some tea, if you would like to have it."

"It's the best thing you could give us, master," said the woman, "and we shall be thankful for it."

"It's better than nothing," said the man, and was pleased to confess, after he had disposed of a couple of cups-which he emptied down his throat rather than drank-that I might have offered him something worse. When they had eaten their fill they lay down to rest, and in less than three minutes the whole party were fast asleep. "Truly," I thought, as I gazed upon them, "nature has its compensations!" They went away, as they had promised, at sunrise, and when I gave the woman a few silver coins, she said gratefully,

"Thank you, master. We're right for four good days, Jim."

I watched them from the gates. They had with them the remains of the food, and were eating it as they walked, and talking in gay tones. I experienced a sensation of pleasure. The world was not devoid of sweetness.

CHAPTER III

Thus my life went on until I grew to manhood, and then two grave events befell, following close upon each other's heels. First, my father died. He was absent from home at the time, and we had had no forewarning of the loss. I do not know whether his errand when he left us, to be away, he said, for four or five weeks, was one of pleasure or business. Quite suddenly, before the time had elapsed, I was summoned to my mother's room by Mrs. Fortress.

"Your mother has the most serious news to impart to you," said Mrs. Fortress, "and I think it well to warn you not to excite her."

I had not seen my mother for several days, and I inquired of Mrs. Fortress as to the state of her health.

"She is still unwell," said Mrs. Fortress, "and very weak. I am afraid of the consequences of the shock she has received this morning."

"No one has visited us," I observed. "She can have been told nothing."

"The news came by post," said Mrs. Fortress.

"In a letter from my father?" I asked.

"Your father did not write," said Mrs. Fortress.

There was a significance in her tone, usually so cold and impassive, which attracted my attention.

"But the news concerns my father."

"Yes, it concerns your father."

"He is ill."

"He has been seriously ill. You will learn all from your mother."

Before I entered my mother's chamber I divined the truth.

"You sent for me, mother," I said.

"Yes, Gabriel," she replied. "Sit here, by my side."

I obeyed her, and there was a long silence in the room.

"Kiss me, Gabriel."

I kissed her, somewhat in wonder. It is the plain truth that we had grown to be almost strangers to each other.

"Has Mrs. Fortress told you?" she asked.

"She has told me nothing definite," I replied, "except that you have news of my father, and that he is ill."

"His illness is at an end," said my mother. "Can you not guess, Gabriel?"

"Yes, mother," I said, "I think I know."

"It is very sudden, Gabriel. When he went away he was in good health."

She gave me the letter she had received, and I read it without remark. It was from one who was a stranger to us, and was addressed from Wales. The writer said that my father was his friend-which surprised me, as I had never heard my father or mother mention his name-and had died in his house, where my father was staying on a visit.

"He had been ailing for two or three days past," the letter said, "and had complained of his head, but I did not think that anything serious was the matter with him, or I should have written to you at once. It did not appear that he was alarmed; indeed, he said that it was only a slight attack, and that it would soon pass away. Against his wish we called in a doctor, who agreed with him and us that there was no danger. Thus there was nothing to prepare us for the sad event the news of which it is our painful duty to communicate to you. He kept his room yesterday, and in the evening said that he felt better. At ten o'clock my wife and I wished him goodnight, and thought he would retire at once to rest, but from after indications we learnt that he had not undressed, but had sat in his arm-chair the

whole of the night. There was a bell at his elbow, from which I heard a faint ring at five o'clock this morning. It woke me from my sleep, and it also aroused my wife. 'That is Mr. Carew's bell,' my wife said; 'you had better go to him.' I rose immediately, and went to his room. I found our poor friend sitting in the arm-chair, and I at once recognised his grave condition. I roused the servants, and sent for the doctor; then I returned to your husband, and told him what I had done. I cannot say whether he understood me, for he was quite speechless, but I followed the direction of his eyes, and saw a sheet of paper upon which he had written a few words. They were not very legible, but I understand from them that it was his desire that he should be buried from Rosemullion. We shall respect his wish, and you will therefore be prepared for what is to follow. Although he was speechless, and life was surely ebbing away, he was calm and composed. My wife and I sat with him until the doctor arrived. Nothing could be done for him, and at twenty minutes to seven this morning your poor husband passed away in peace. It would doubtless have been a satisfaction to him could he have spoken to us, and have imparted to us his last wishes, but he had not the power. Two or three times he seemed to make an effort, and we inclined our ears to hear what he had to say. No sound, however, proceeded from his lips; he had not the strength to utter a word. The effort over, he seemed to be resigned."

The letter contained the expression of a sincere sympathy for our bereavement.

"He died peacefully," said my mother. "All deaths are not so."

"Madam!" cried Mrs. Fortress, in a warning tone.

Did it spring from my fancy that my mother's remark was uttered in fear, and was intended to bear a personal reference, and that Mrs. Fortress's "Madam!" sounded like a threat? If it were or were not so, my mother quickly recovered herself.

"It is good to know that your father did not suffer," she said.

"Death is not a pleasant subject to talk about," observed Mrs. Fortress.

"What has passed between my mother and myself is quite natural," I retorted; it appeared to me that her remark was unnecessary.

"I beg your pardon," she said, but although her words conveyed an apology, her voice did not.

Shortly afterwards my mother pleaded that she was tired, and I left the room.

Upon the news of my father's death becoming known I had two visitors, the doctor who attended on my mother, and a lawyer. I may mention here that these were the only persons who, with myself, followed my father to the grave. The doctor's visit was one of condolence, and he indulged in the usual platitudes which, but for the occasion, I should not have listened to with patience. He bade me good day with a sigh, and called into his face an expression of dolour which I knew was assumed for my benefit.

The lawyer's visit was upon business. He came to acquaint me with the particulars of my father's Will.

"I have the rough draft in my office," he said; "the Will itself we shall doubtless find among your father's private papers. It was his habit, when he intended to be absent from home for any length of time, to leave the key of his safe in my keeping, I have brought it with me."

We went together to my father's special room, the room in which he wrote and transacted his private business, and which was always kept locked. No person, unbidden, was allowed to enter it but himself. Although I had now been living at Rosemullion for many years I had been but once in this apartment, and then I took no particular notice of it. The key of the room had been found in his portmanteau, which he had taken with him to Wales, and had been delivered up to me with his other effects.

It was plainly furnished. There were two chairs, a couch, and a writing-table-nothing more; not a picture, not an ornament, not a single evidence of luxury. The walls were hung with old tapestry on which battle scenes were worked.

"Rosemullion is not a modern building," said the lawyer, "but perhaps you are already familiar with its history, being a student."

I said, In reply, that I was not aware that Rosemullion was of ancient origin, nor that it had a history.

"Did your father never speak to you on the subject?" asked the lawyer.

"Never," I replied.

"Perhaps it was not of much interest to him," remarked the lawyer. "The house belonged to a great family once, who owned vast tracts of land hereabout. They ruled here for many generations, I believe, until, as is the case with numberless others who carried it with a high hand in times gone by, they lost their place in the world. If the truth were known we should learn-to judge from my experiences, and supposing them to be worth anything-that there was but one cause why they were wiped out. Spendthrift father, spendthrift heir, followed by another, and perhaps by another; land parted with piecemeal, mortgaged and sold, till heirlooms and stone-walls are called upon, and the wreck is complete. It is an old story, and is being played out now by many inheritors of ancient names."

"The chairs and couch in the room," I said, "are modern. Not so the writing-table."

It was made of stout oak, and bore signs of long service. Its massive legs were wonderfully carved, and were fixed deep in the oaken flooring. The lawyer's remarks had given the place an interest in my eyes, and I gazed around with lively curiosity.

"If these walls could speak," I said, "they would be able to tell strange stories."

"Many of which," said the lawyer, with a dry cough, "are better unrevealed. It is quite as well that dumb memorials cannot rise in witness against us."

"So that we are no better off than our forefathers."

"And no worse," said the lawyer, sententiously. "We are much of a muchness, ancients and moderns. I had no idea till to-day how solid these walls really were."

They were, indeed, of massive thickness, fit depositories of mighty secrets. I lifted the tapestry to examine them, and observed a steel plate fixed in the portion I had bared. I was searching in vain for a keyhole when the lawyer said,

"The safe your father used is not on that side; it is here to the right. On three sides of the wall you will see these steel plates fixed, and my idea is that the receptacles were used as a hiding-place for jewels and other treasure. In the building of this room special ingenuity was displayed. No one unacquainted with the secret could open the metal doors, the design is so cunning. There were locksmiths before Brahmah. I would defy any but an expert to discover the means, and it would puzzle him for a time."

"They are really doors?"

"Yes; you shall see for yourself."

"How did you discover the secret?" I asked.

"Your father let me into it," he replied.

"How did *he* discover it? Before he bought this little estate I doubt if he had ever heard the name of Rosemullion, or knew of its existence."

"That is very probable, but I cannot enlighten you upon the point. In his conversations with me he never referred to it. It is not unlikely that the agents through whom he purchased the place may have known; or he may have found a clue to it after he came into possession. That, however, is mere speculation, and is not material to us. What is material *is* the Will. Observe. Here before us is a sheet of steel, covered with numberless small knobs with shining round surfaces. There must be some peculiarity about the metal that it does not rust; or perhaps its lustre is due to the dryness of the air. When I say that the knobs are numberless I am inexact. They may be easily counted; they are in regular lines, and are alternately placed. From ceiling to floor there are twenty lines, and each line contains twenty knobs-four hundred in all. If you pressed every one of these four hundred knobs one after another with your thumb, you would find only one that would yield beneath the pressure. That knob is in the bottom line, at the extreme left hand corner. Kneel, and press with your thumb, and you will find that I am right."

I followed his instructions. I knelt, and pressed the knob; it yielded, and upon my removing my thumb, it returned to its former position.

"Still," I said, as I rose from my kneeling posture, "I see no hole in which a key can be inserted."

"Wait," said the lawyer. "By pressing on that knob you have unlocked a second at the extreme end of the right corner in the same line. Press it as you did the other."

I knelt and obeyed; it yielded as the other had done, and returned to its former position. But there was no apparent change in the steel door.

"You have unlocked a third knob," said the lawyer. "You will now have to stand upon one of the chairs; place it here, on the right, and press again on the knob at the extreme right hand. It yields. One more, and the charm is nearly complete. Remove the chair to the left, and repeat the operation on the topmost knob at the extreme left hand. Now descend. Supposing this to be the door of a room, where would the keyhole be situated? Yes, you point to the exact spot. Press there, then, gently. What do we see? The keyhole revealed. The rest is easy."

He inserted the key and turned the lock. Massive as was the door, there was no difficulty now in opening it. With very little exertion on our part it swung upon its hinges. I could not but admire the ingenuity of the device, and I wondered at the same time how my father could have found it out, supposing the secret not to have been imparted to him.

There was a space disclosed of some two feet in depth, divided by stout oaken shelves. On one of the shelves was a cash-box. There was nothing else within the space. The lawyer took out the cash-box, and brought it to the table. It was unlocked, and the lawyer drew from it my father's Will. I was disappointed that it contained no other papers. I cannot say what I expected to discover, but I had a vague hope that I might light upon some explanation of the mystery which had reigned in our home from my earliest remembrance. However, I made no remark on the subject to the lawyer.

The Will was read in my mother's presence, the only other person in attendance, besides my mother, the lawyer, and myself, being Mrs. Fortress. It was very simple; the entire property was bequeathed to my mother; during her lifetime I was to reside at Rosemullion, and there was otherwise no provision made for me; but at her death, with the exception of a legacy to Mrs. Fortress, "for faithful and confidential service," I became sole heir. The only stipulation was that Rosemullion should not be sold.

"I hope, Gabriel," said my mother, "that you are not dissatisfied."

I replied that I was contented with the disposition my father had made of his property.

"You can have what money you want," she said.

"I shall want very little," I said.

"You will remain here, Gabriel?"

These words which, in her expression of them, were both a question and an entreaty, opened up a new train of thought. I set it aside a while, and said to my mother,

"Is it your wish?"

"Yes, Gabriel, while I live."

"I will obey you, mother."

"Gabriel," she said, "bend your head." Mrs. Fortress came forward as if with the intention of interposing, but I motioned her away, and she retired in silence, but kept her eyes fixed upon us. "You bear no ill-will towards me?" my mother whispered. "You do not hate me?"

"No, mother," I replied, in a tone as low as her own. "What cause have I for ill-will or hatred? It would be monstrous."

"Yes," she muttered, "it would be monstrous, monstrous!"

And she turned from me, and lay with her face to the wall. Her form was shaken with sobs.

Mrs. Fortress beckoned to me and I followed her to the door.

"I will speak to you outside," she said.

We stood in the passage, the door of my mother's bedroom being closed upon us. The lawyer, who had also left the room, stood a few paces from us.

"It comes within my sphere of duty," said Mrs. Fortress, "to warn you that these scenes are dangerous to your mother. Listen."

I heard my mother crying and speaking loudly to herself, but I could not distinguish what she said.

"Remain here a moment," said Mrs. Fortress; "I have something more to say to you."

She left me, and entered the bedroom, and in a short time my mother was quiet. Mrs. Fortress returned.

"She is more composed."

"You have a great power over her, Mrs. Fortress."

"No one else understands her." She held in her hand a letter, which she offered to me. "It was entrusted to me by your father, and I was to give it to you in the event of his dying away from Rosemullion, and before your mother. Perhaps you will read it here."

I did so. It was addressed to me, and was very brief, its contents being simply to the effect that Mrs. Fortress was to hold, during my mother's lifetime, the position she had always held in the household, and that I was, under no consideration, to interfere with her in the exercise of her duties. She was, also, as heretofore, to have the direction of the house.

"Are you acquainted with the contents of this letter?" I asked.

"Yes; your father, before he sealed it gave it to me to read. He gave me at the same time another document, addressed to myself."

"Investing you, I suppose, with the necessary authority." She slightly inclined her head. "I shall not interfere with you in any way," I said.

"I am obliged to you," she said, and then she re-entered my mother's apartment.

The lawyer and I walked to my father's private room. I wished to assure myself that there was nothing else in the safe in which my father had deposited his Will, and which we had left open. There was nothing, not a book, not a scrap of paper, nor article of any kind. Then in the presence of the lawyer, I searched the writing-desk, and found only a few unimportant memoranda and letters. My unsatisfactory search at an end, I remarked to the lawyer that I supposed nothing remained to be done.

"Except to lock the safe," he said.

"How is that accomplished?"

"You have merely to reverse the process by which you opened it. I have seldom seen a more admirable and simple piece of mechanism."

I followed his instructions, and let the tapestry fall over the steel plate. Then the lawyer, saying that he would attend to the necessary formalities with respect to the Will, bade me good-day.

CHAPTER IV

When I told my mother that I was contented with the disposition my father had made of the property I spoke the truth, but I did not intend to imply that I was contented with the position in which I found myself after my father's death. Not with respect to money-that was the last of my thoughts; indeed, my mother placed at my disposal more than sufficient funds; but that I, who had by this time grown to manhood, should be still confined in leading strings, hurt and galled me. I chafed inwardly at the restraint, and it will be readily understood that my feelings on this matter did not bring my mother and me closer to each other. I did not, however, give expression to them; I schooled myself into a certain philosophical resignation, and took refuge in my books and studies.

Wide as had always been the breach-I can find no other word to express the attitude we held towards each other-between Mrs. Fortress and myself, it grew wider as time progressed. We seldom addressed a word to each other. To do her justice she seemed to desire a more familiar intercourse as little as I did. Her demeanour was consistently respectful, and she did not exercise her authority obtrusively or offensively. Everything went on in the house as usual. My wants were attended to with regularity, and I may even say that they were anticipated. To all outward appearance I had nothing whatever to complain of, but the independence of spirit which develops with our manhood, the consciousness that we are strong enough to depend upon ourselves and to walk alone, the growing pride which imparts a true or false confidence in our maturing powers-all these were in silent rebellion within me, and rendered me at times restless and dissatisfied. What it might have led to is hard to say, but the difficulty was solved without action on my part. Within twelve months of my father's death I was a free man, free to go whither I would, to choose my own mode of life, to visit new lands if I cared. The chains which had bound me fell loose, and I was my own master.

It was in the dead of a hot summer night, and I was sitting alone by the window in my favourite room. The sultry air scarcely stirred the curtains, and I saw in the sky the signs of a coming storm. I hoped it would burst soon; I knew that I should welcome with gratitude the rain and the cooler air. Such sweet, fresh moments, when an oppressively hot day has drawn to its close, may be accepted-with a certain extravagance of metaphor, I admit-as Nature's purification of sin.

All was still and quiet; only shadows lived and moved about. Midnight struck. That hour to me was always fraught with mysterious significance.

From where I sat I could see the house in which my mother lay. It had happened on that day, as I strolled through the woods, that I had been witness of the love which a mother had for her child. The child was young, the mother was middle-aged, and not pretty, but when she looked at her child, and held out her arms to receive it, as it ran laughing towards her with its fair hair tumbled about its head, her plain face became glorified. Its spiritual beauty smote me with pain; the child's glad voice made me tremble. Some dim sense of what had never been mine forced itself into my soul.

I had the power-which I had no doubt unconsciously cultivated-of raising pictures in the air, and I called up now this picture of the mother and her child. "Are all children like that," I thought, "and are all mothers-except me and mine?" If so, I had been robbed.

The door of the great house slowly opened, and the form of a woman stepped forth. It walked in my direction, and stopped beneath my window.

"Are you up there, Master Gabriel?"

It was Mrs. Fortress who spoke.

"Yes, I am here."

"Your mother wishes to see you."

I went down immediately, and joined Mrs. Fortress.

"Did she send you for me?"

"Yes, or I should not be here."

"She is very ill?"

"She is not well."

The grudging words angered me, and I motioned the woman to precede me to the house. She led me to my mother's bedside.

I had never been allowed so free an intercourse with my mother as upon this occasion. Mrs. Fortress did not leave the room, but she retired behind the curtains of the bed, and did not interrupt our conversation.

"You are ill, mother?"

"I am dying, Gabriel."

I was prepared for it, and I had expected to see in her some sign of the shadow of death. When the dread visitant stands by the side of a mortal, there should be some indication of its presence. Here there was none. My mother's face retained the wild beauty which had ever distinguished it. All that I noted was that her eyes occasionally wandered around, with a look in them which expressed a kind of fear and pity for herself.

"You speak of dying, mother," I said. "I hope you will live for many years yet."

"Why do you hope it?" she asked. "Has my life given you joy-has it sweetened the currents of yours?"

There was a strange wistfulness in her voice, a note of wailing against an inexorable fate. Her words brought before me again the picture of the mother and her child I had seen that day in the woods. Joy! Sweetness! No, my mother had given me but little of these. It was so dim as to be scarcely a memory that when I was a little babe she would press me tenderly to her bosom, would sing to me, would coo over me, as must surely be the fashion of loving mothers with their offspring. It is with no idea of casting reproach upon her that I say she bequeathed to me no legacy of motherly tenderness.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.