Dowling Richard

Miracle Gold: A Novel (Vol. 1 of 3)

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
TOO LATE

"The 8.45 for London, miss? Just gone. Gone two or three minutes. It's the last train up to town this evening, miss. First in the morning at 6.15, miss."

"Gone!" cried the girl in despair. She reached out her hand and caught one of the wooden pillars supporting the roof of the little station at Millway, near the south-east coast of England.

"Yes, miss, gone," said the porter. He was inclined to be very civil and communicative, for the last train for London had left, the enquirer seemed in great distress, and she was young and beautiful. "Any luggage, miss? If you have you can leave it in the cloak-room till the first train to-morrow. The first train leaves here at a quarter past six."

She did not speak. She looked up and down the platform, with dazed, bewildered eyes. Her lips were drawn back and slightly parted. She still kept her hand on the wooden pillar. She

seemed more afraid of becoming weak than in a state of present weakness.

The porter, who was young and good-looking, and a very great admirer of female charms, thought the girl was growing faint. He said: "If you like, miss, you can sit down in the waiting-room and rest there."

She turned her eyes upon him without appearing to see him, and shook her head in mechanical refusal of his suggestion. She had no fear of fainting. For a moment her mental powers were prostrated, but her physical force was in no danger of giving way. With a start and a shiver, she recovered enough presence of mind to realize her position on the platform, and the appearance she must be making in the eyes of the polite and well-disposed railway porter.

"Thank you, I have no luggage-with me." She looked around apprehensively, as though dreading pursuit.

"Would you like me to call a fly for you, miss?"

"No. Oh, no!" she cried, starting back from him in alarm. Then seeing the man retire a pace with a look of surprise and disappointment, she added hastily, "I do not want a cab, thank you. It is most unfortunate that I missed the train. Is it raining still?"

"Yes, miss; heavy."

From where she stood she could have seen the rain falling on the metals and ballast of the line; she was absolutely looking through the rain as she asked the question, but she was in that

half-awakened condition when one asks questions and hears answers without interest in the one or attention to the other. She knew heavy summer rain was falling and had been falling for more than an hour; she knew that she had walked two miles through the rain with only a light summer cloak and small umbrella to protect her from it, and she knew that she could not use a cab or fly for two reasons; first, she could not spare the money; second, she durst not drive back, if back she must go, for she must return unperceived. When she thought of getting back, and the reason for concealment, an expression of disgust came over her face, and she shuddered as one shudders at a loathsome sight unexpectedly encountered.

The porter lingered in the hope of being of use. He had no mercenary motive. He wanted merely to remain as long as possible near this beautiful girl. He would have done any service he could for her merely that he might come and go near where she stood, within the magic radius of her eyes. Even railway porters, when they are in quiet stations, are no more than other men in the presence of the beauty of woman.

It was almost dark now. Nine o'clock had struck. The straight warm rain was falling through the dusky, windless air. It was an evening towards the end of June-the last Wednesday of that month. There was not a sound but the dull muffling beat of the rain upon the roof. Not a soul visible but the girl and porter.

She took her hand away from the wooden pillar, and gathered her cloak round her, in preparation for going.

"Can I do anything for you, miss? Have you far to walk?" asked the man. Offering service was the nearest thing he could do to rendering service.

She did not answer his question; she asked instead: "Do you think the rain will stop soon?"

He glanced at the thin line of dull, dark, leaden sky, visible from where he stood at a low angle between the roofs of the platform. "No, miss, I don't think it will. It looks as if 'twould rain all night." If she had been a plain girl of the dumpy order, or his own degree, he would have tried to make himself agreeable by prophesying pleasant things. But the high privilege of answering so exquisitely beautiful a young lady demanded a sacrifice of some kind, and he laid aside his desire to be considered an agreeable fellow, and said what he believed to be the truth.

She sighed, moved her shoulders under the cloak to settle it, and saying "Thank you," in a listless, half-awake way, moved with down dropped eyes and drooping head, slowly out of the station, raised her umbrella and, turning sharply to the left, walked through the little town of Millway and under the huge beeches of a broad, deserted road leading southward.

The trees above her head were heavy with leaves, the road was very dim, almost dark, this night of midsummer. The perpendicular rain fell unseen through the mute warm evening. A thick perfume of multitudinous roses made the soft air heavy with richness. No sound reached the young girl but the faint clatter of the rain upon the viewless leaves overhead, the pit and

splash of the huge drops from the leaves close to her feet, and the wide, even, incessant dull drumming of the shower upon the trees, looming dimly abroad in the vapourous azure dusk of the dark.

After walking a while the girl sighed and paused. Although her pace had not been quick, she felt her breath come short. The mild, moist, scent-laden air seemed too rich for freshening life and cooling the blood. She was tired, and would have liked to sit down and rest, but neither time nor place allowed of pause. She must get on-she must get back as quickly as possible, or she might be too late, too late to regain Eltham House and steal unperceived to her room there. To that hateful Eltham House, under which to-night rested that odious Oscar Leigh. Oscar Leigh, the grinning, bold, audacious man.

Edith Grace turned her attention for a moment away from her thoughts to her physical situation and condition. She listened intently. She heard the patter of the rain near and the murmur of it abroad upon grass and trees. But there was some other sound. A sound nearer still than the patter at her feet, and more loud and distinct, and emphatic and tumultuous, than the roll of the shower far away.

For a while she listened, catching her breath in fear, not knowing what this sound could be. Then she started. It was much nearer than she thought. It was the heavy, fierce, irregular beating of her own heart.

At first she was alarmed by the discovery. She had never felt

her heart beat in this way before, except after running when a child. Upon reflection she recollected that nervous excitement sometimes brought on such unpleasant symptoms, and that the best way to overcome the affection was by keeping still and avoiding alarm of any kind. She would stand and, instead of thinking about the unpleasantness and risk of going back to Eltham House, fix her mind upon the events which prompted her flight. She could not hope to keep her mind free from considering her present position, and the occurrences leading to it, but it is less distressing to review the unpleasant past than to contemplate a lowering immediate future.

Owing to the loss of the little money left her by her father, she had been obliged to try and get something to do, as she could not consent to encroach on the slender income of her grandmother, Mrs. Grace, the only relative she had in the world. As she had been so long with Mrs. Grace, she thought the thing to suit her best would be a companionship to an elderly or invalid lady. She advertised in the daily papers, and the most promising-looking reply came from Mr. Oscar Leigh, of Eltham House, Millway, who wanted a companion for his infirm mother. Mr. Leigh could not give much salary, but if advertiser took the situation, she would have a thoroughly comfortable and highly respectable home. Mr. Leigh could make an appointment for a meeting in London.

The meeting took place at Mrs. Grace's lodgings in Grimsby Street, Westminster, and although Miss Grace shrank from

the appearance and manners of Mr. Leigh, she accepted the situation. The poor old grandmother was so much overcome by the notion of impending separation between her and Edith, that she took no particular notice of Mr. Leigh, and looked upon him simply as a man indifferent to her, save that he was arranging to carry beyond her sight the girl she had brought up, and who now stood in the place of her own dead children who had clung to her knees in their curly-headed childhood, grown-up, and long since passed away for ever.

Mr. Oscar Leigh was very short, and had shoulders of unequal height, and a slight hunch on his back. His face was long and cadaverous, and hollow-cheeked. The eyes small and black, and piercingly bright. His expression was saturnine, sinister, cruel; his look at one and the same time furtive and bold. His arms were long to deformity. His hands and fingers long, and thin, and bony, and where they were not covered with lank, shining black hair, they were of a dull brown yellow colour. His teeth were fang-like and yellow. His voice hollow when he spoke low, and harsh when he raised it. His breath came in short gasps now and then, and with sounds, as though it disturbed dry bones in its course. He drooped towards the right side, and carried a short and unusually thick stick, with huge rugged and battered crook. When he stood still for any time, he leant upon this stick, keeping his skinny, greedy, claw-like hand on the crook, and the crook close against his right side. He wore a glossy silk hat, a spotless black frock coat, and moved through a vapour of eau-de-cologne. His feet

were large, out of all proportion to the largest man. They were flat, with no insteps, more like a monkey's than a man's. She would have pitied him only for his impudent glances. She would have loathed him only she could not forget that his deformities were deserving of pity.

"You will have one unpleasantness to endure," he had said. "You will have to make your mind up to one cruel privation." He smiled a hard, cruel, evil smile.

"May I know what my child will have to do without?" asked Mrs. Grace. And then, without waiting for an answer, she said: "I know what *I* shall have to do without."

"And what is that, madam? What will you have to do without?"

"I shall have to do without *her*."

"Ah, that *would* be a loss," he said, with hideous, offensive gallantry. "You are to be pitied, madam. You are, indeed, to be pitied, madam. Miss Grace will have to make up her mind on her side to do without-"

"Me; I know it," broke in the old woman, bursting into tears.

"Yes, madam; but that is not what I was going to say. I was about to say your granddaughter will have to do without *me!*" Here he leered at Edith. "I am much occupied with my mechanical studies in London, and am seldom at Eltham House. I hope you may be always able in your heart to do without *me*." He was standing leaning his misshapen, crooked body on his misshapen, crooked stick. He did not move his right hand from

his waist, into which it was packed and driven by the weight of his body upon the handle of the stick. He put his long, lean, left, dark hand on his right breast, and bowed low by swinging himself to the right and downward on the crook of his stick. "Miss Grace will see, oh! so little of me," he added, as he rose and looked with his bold eyes at Edith and her grandmother.

"Oh!" cried the unhappy, tactless old woman, "I dare say she can manage that."

"I dare say she can," he said, gazing at Edith with eyes in which boldness and scorn seemed strangely, abominably blended, or rather conflicting.

At the time she felt she could cry for joy at the notion of seeing little of this hideous, deformed, monstrous dwarf.

The bargain was there and then completed, and it had been arranged that she should go to Eltham House that day week.

This night that was now upon her and around her, this dull, dark, heavy-perfumed, rain-drowned midsummer night, was the night of that day week. Only one week lay between the visit of this hunchback to their place in Grimsby Street, Westminster, and this day. This morning she had left London and seen Millway for the first time in her life. She had got there at noon and driven straight to Eltham House, two miles south of the little coast town. The hire of the cab had made considerable inroad on the money in her pocket. The sum was now reduced to only a few pence more than her mere train fare to London-not allowing even for a cab from Victoria Terminus to Grimsby

Street, Westminster. When she got to Victoria she should have to walk home. Oh! walking home through the familiar streets thronged with everyday folk, would be so delightful compared with this bleak, solitary Eltham House, this hideous, insolent, monstrous, deformed dwarf.

It was impossible for her to stay at Eltham House, utterly impossible. This man Leigh had told her he should see little or nothing of her at the place, and yet when she reached the house his was the first face and figure she laid eyes on. He had opened the door for her and welcomed her to Eltham House, and on the very threshold he had attempted to kiss her! Great heavens! it was incredibly horrible, but it was true! The first man who had ever dared to try to kiss her was this odious beast, this misshapen fiend, this scented monster!

Ugh! The very attempt was degradation.

The girl shuddered and looked around her into the dim, dark gloom abroad, beyond the trees where the grass and corn lay under the invisible sky, and where the darkness of the shadow of trees did not reach.

And yet, when she halted here, she had been on her way back to Eltham House! There was no alternative. She had nowhere else to go. For lack of courage and money she could not venture upon an hotel. She had never been from home alone before, and she felt as if she were in a new planet. She was not desperate, but she was awkward, timid, afraid.

Wet and lonely as the night was, she would have preferred

walking about till morning rather than return to that house, if going back involved again meeting that horrible man. All the time she was in the house he had forced his odious, insolent attentions upon her. He had followed her about the passages, and lain in wait for her with expostulations for her prudery in not allowing him to welcome her in patriarchal fashion to his house! Patriarchal fashion, indeed! He had himself said he knew he was not an Adonis, but that he was not a Methuselah either, and his poor, simple, paralysed mother told her he was thirty-five years old. She would not take all the money in the world to stay in a house to which he was free. At eight o'clock that evening she had pleaded fatigue and retired to her own room for the night. She then had no thought of immediate flight. When she found herself alone with the door locked, she thought over the events of the day and her position, and in the end made up her mind to escape and return to town at once, that very evening. She wrote a line to the effect that she was going, and placed it on the dressing-table by the window.

Her room was on the ground-floor, and the window wide open. Mrs. Brown, the only servant at the house, slept not in the house but in the gate lodge. Mrs. Brown had told her the gate was never locked until eleven o'clock, when she locked it before going to bed in the lodge. So that if she got back at any hour before eleven, she could slip in through the gate and get over the low sill of her bed-room window. She could creep in and change her wet boots and clothes and sit up in the easy-chair till morning. Then

she could steal away again, walk to the railway station and take the first train for London.

She felt rested and brave now. She would go on. Heaven grant she might meet no one on the way!

CHAPTER II
VOICES OF THE UNSEEN

Edith Grace gathered her cloak around her and began walking once more. The road, under the heavy trees, was now blindly dark. She had taken nothing out of that house but the clothes she wore, not even her dressing bag. In the first place, she had not cared to encumber herself; and, in the second place, if she by chance met Mrs. Brown or Oscar Leigh, she would not appear to be contemplating flight. She could write for her trunk and bag when she found herself safely at home once more.

She was new to the world and affairs. She did not know or care whether her action in leaving Eltham House was legal or not. The question did not arise in her mind. If she had been told she had incurred a penalty, she would have said: "All I own on earth is in that house; but I would forego it all, I would die rather than stay there." If she were asked why, she would have said: "Because that odious, insolent man lied when he said I should see little of him. He was the first person I met. Because he dared-had the intolerable impudence to try and kiss me. Because, having failed in his attempt, he pursued me through the house with his hateful attentions. I am very poor. I am obliged to do something for a living. I am not a cook or a dairymaid. My father was a gentleman, and my mother was a lady. We come of an old

Derbyshire family. I am a lady, and you can kill me, but you cannot make me bow my head or shame my blood. If, when he tried to kiss me in the hall, I had had a weapon, I should have stabbed him or shot him. If I had a father or a brother he should be chastised. I know nothing of the law, care nothing for it."

If she had been asked: "Do you think his offence would have been less if you happened to be a cook or a dairymaid?"

She would have answered: "I am not concerned to answer in a purely imaginary case. I am not a cook or a dairymaid. I am a lady. All I know is that attempting to kiss me was an unpardonable outrage, and if he ventured upon such an attempt again I should kill him if I had a weapon by me. Yes, kill him!"

And now, for want of a few shillings, she was returning to the house from which she had fled in indignation and dread a little while ago. She could not walk about all night in this unknown country. She had not the means to secure accommodation at an hotel. She could not spare money enough even for a cab from the railway station. She had in her pocket no more than her fare to London, and a few odd, useless pennies.

Dark and unfamiliar as the road was to Edith Grace, there was no chance of her losing the way. It was an unbroken line from the little town of Millway to Eltham House. A few by roads right and left made no confusion, for they were at right angles. The road itself was not much frequented by day, and by night was deserted. The heavy rain of the evening kept all folk who had the choice under cover. From the time the girl cleared the straggling

outskirts of the town until she gained the high hedge and gateway of her destination she did not meet or overtake a soul.

With serious trepidation, she pushed the gate open and entered the grounds. The gate groaned in opening and shutting, and she was thankful that no dog found a roof in that house.

The tiny gate lodge was dark and silent. From this she judged Mrs. Brown had not retired for the night. Mrs. Brown had told her that when Mr. Leigh was not at home, and Mrs. Leigh had no companion, she slept at the house. But that when there was either Mr. Leigh or a companion, she always spent the night in her own little home, the gate lodge. This night Mr. Leigh, his mother, and Mrs. Brown believed a companion and Mr. Leigh would be in the house. Well, there would be, but not exactly as it was designed and believed by them. She had given no word-made no sign that she was leaving. She had found her bed-room window open, and she had not shut it. Owing to the warmth of the night, that fact was of itself not likely to claim attention.

The unshaded carriage-drive from the gate to the house was winding, and about a hundred yards long. A straight line across the ill-kept lawn would not measure more than fifty paces. Edith chose this way because of the silence secured to her footsteps by the grass, and the additional obscurity afforded by its darker colour. In front of the house ran a thick row of trees and evergreen shrubs. So that in daylight, when the trees were in leaf, the ground-floor of the house was hidden from the road, and the road from the ground-floor of the house.

The house itself was of modest appearance and dimensions. In the front stood the porch and door, on each side of which was a window. On the floor above were three windows, and in the roof three dormers. On the right hand of the hall lay the drawing-room, on the left-hand side the dining-room, behind the drawing-room the library, which had been converted into a sleeping chamber for Mrs. Leigh, who, owing to her malady, was unable to ascend the stairs. Behind the dining-room stood the breakfast parlour, which had been converted into a sleeping chamber for Mrs. Leigh's companion, so that the companion might be near Mrs. Leigh in the night time. At the rear of the companion's sleeping chamber was a large conservatory in which the invalid took great delight, seated in her wheeled chair. Behind the library was the kitchen, no higher than the conservatory. The back walls of the breakfast-room and library formed the main wall of the house. The conservatory and kitchen were off-builds, and separated from one another by a narrow flagged yard, in which were a large uninhabited dog kennel, water butts, a pump, and ashbin. Beyond the flagged yard lay a large, neglected vegetable garden. The flower garden spread beneath the conservatory, and on the other side of the house to the right of the kitchen, as one looked from the lawn, languished an uncared-for orchard.

The floor above consisted wholly of bed and dressing-rooms, except the large billiard-room, in which there was no table. Above the first floor nestled a number of attics, for servants and bachelors in emergency. Only two of the bedrooms on the first

floor were furnished, and the attic story had been locked up all the time Mrs. Brown acted as lodge-keeper, about five years.

The few people who had ever asked Oscar Leigh why he kept so large a house for so small a household, were informed by him, that it was his white elephant. He had had to take it in lieu of a debt, and he could neither sell nor let it at a figure which would pay him back his money, or fair interest on it. Besides, he said his mother liked it, and it suited him to go there occasionally, and forget the arduous, scientific studies in which most of his days were spent in London.

But very little or nothing of Mr. Oscar Leigh or his affairs was known in Millway. He had no friends or even acquaintances there, and spoke to no one in the town, save the few tradespeople who supplied the household with its modest necessities. Indeed, he came but seldom to his mother's home; not more than once a month, and then his arrival brought no additional custom to the shops of the town, for he generally brought a box or hamper with him full, he told the driver of the fly he hired, of good things from the Great Town. The tradespeople of Millway would gladly have taken more of his money, but they had quite as much of his speech and company as they desired-more than they desired.

Edith Grace walked straight to the left hand corner of Eltham House, and looked carefully through the trees and shrubs before venturing out on the drive. Not a soul was stirring. She could hear no sound but the rain which still fell in heavy sheets. No light was visible in any room, but whether this was due to the absence

of light inside, or to heavy curtains and blinds she could not say. Against the glass of the fan-sash in the porch a faint light, like that of a weak candle or dimmed lamp, gleamed, making a sickly solitary yellow patch upon the black, blank front of the house.

The rain and the soddenness of the gravel were in Edith's favour. The sound of the rain would blunt the sound of her footsteps, and the water among the gravel would lessen the grating of the stones.

She emerged from the cover of the trees, and hastened across the open drive. She gained left-hand corner of the house, and passed rapidly under the dining-room windows in the left side.

Should she find the sash of her room down? That would be a distracting discovery. It would mean she should have to pass the night in the open air. That would be bad enough. It would mean that her flight had been discovered already. It might mean that Oscar Leigh was now lying in wait for her somewhere in this impenetrable darkness behind her back. That would be appalling-unendurable. Hurry and see.

Thank heaven, the window was open!

It was much easier to get out through that window than back through it. But at last, after a severe struggle, she found herself in the room. Strange it seemed that she should feel more secure here, under the roof which covered this man, than outside. Yet it was so. He might, in the dark, outside, spring upon her unawares. He looked like a wild beast, like some savage creature that would crouch, and spring, and seize, and rend. Here she felt

comparatively safe. The door was locked on the inside. She had locked it on coming into the room hours ago. If she sat down in the old arm-chair she could not be approached from behind. However, ere sitting down she must get some dry clothes to put on her, and she must find them and effect the change without noise or light. It was now past ten o'clock, and no one in the house must fancy she had not gone to bed, or there might be knocking at her door to know if she required anything. She required nothing of that house but a few hours' shelter.

With great caution she searched where she knew her trunk lay open, found the garments she needed, and replaced her wet clothing with dry. This took time; she could not guess how long, but as it was at length accomplished, and she was taking her first few moments of rest in the easy-chair, she heard the front door shut. Mrs. Brown had gone back to her lodge, and under the roof of Eltham House were only Oscar Leigh, his paralysed mother, and herself.

The banging of the front door made her shudder. The knowledge that Mrs. Brown had gone away for the night increased the isolation of the house. There were now only three people within its walls instead of four, and this circumstance seemed to bring the loathsome Oscar Leigh closer to her. She resolved to sit still. It was eleven o'clock. It would be bright daylight in a few hours. As soon as the sun rose she should, if the rain had ceased, leave the house and wander about in the bright open daylight until the time to take the first train for London. It

would be dawn at three o'clock. From eleven to three was only four hours. Four hours did not seem long to wait.

The chair she sat in was comfortable, spacious, soft. There was little danger of her falling asleep. In her present state of excitement and anxiety sleep would keep off. But even if she should happen to doze, there was small risk. Nothing could be more unlikely than that she should slip out of that capacious chair and attract attention by the noise of her fall to the floor.

She sat herself further back in the chair to avoid the possibility of such an accident. She had remarked during the day, that sound passed easily and fully through the building, owing, no doubt, to the absence of furniture from many of the rooms and the intense stillness surrounding the house.

Until now, she had not noticed the utter silence of the place. All day long she had been too much agitated to perceive it. She was accustomed to the bustle and hum of Great London, which, even in its quietest streets, day and night, never suffers solution of the continuity of sound, artificial sound, sound the product of man. In that deepest hush, that awful calm that falls upon London between one and three in the morning, there may be moments when distinct, individualized sound is wanting, but there is always a faint dull hum, the murmur of the breathing of mute millions of men.

Here, in this room, was not complete silence, for abroad the rain still fell upon the grass and trees with a murmur like the secret speeding of a smooth fast river through the night.

She sat with her back to the partition between her and the dining-room. She had not dared to move the heavy chair for fear of making noise. The chair stood with its back to the partition. It was midway between the outer wall of the house and the partition of the inner hall. On her left, four yards from where she sat, rose a pale blue luminous space, the open window through which she had entered. On her right, at an equal distance, was the invisible door which she had locked upon retiring hours ago. The large, old-fashioned mahogany four-posted bedstead stood in the middle of the room, between the door and the window. The outline of the bedstead facing the window was dimly discernible in mass. No detail of it could be made out. Something stood there, it was impossible to say what. All the rest of the furniture was lost, swallowed up in gloom, annihilated by the dark.

The room was large and lofty. It was wainscotted as high as a man could reach. Above the wainscot the wall was painted dark green. A heavy cornice ran round the angles of the walls. From door to window was twenty feet. From the partition against which she sat to the wall opposite her was twenty-four feet. The curtains of the bedstead were gathered back at the head and foot posts.

Of all this, beyond the parts of the bedstead fronting the window, Edith could see nothing now. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, her arms close to her side, her head resting on the back of the chair. She closed her eyes, not from drowsiness, but to shut out as much as possible the memory of the place, the thoughts of her situation. She told herself she was once more

back in her unpretending little room in Grimsby Street. She tried to make herself believe the beating of the rain on the trees and glass of the conservatory and gravelled carriage sweep in front of the house was the dull murmur of London heard through some new medium. She should hear her grandmother's voice soon.

"Have you done, Oscar?"

"Yes, mother. I have finished for the night."

Edith Grace sat up in her chair and gasped with terror. The words seemed spoken at her ear. The voices were those of Oscar Leigh, the hunchback dwarf, and his mother, Mrs. Leigh, the paralysed old woman! Whence came those voices? What was she about to hear?

For a moment Edith hardly breathed. She had to exercise all her powers of self-control to avoid springing up and screaming. The voices seemed so close to her she expected to hear her own name called out, to feel a hand placed upon her shoulder.

"Yes," the voice of the man said, "I have made the drawings and the calculations. It has taken me time. A great deal of time, mother. But I am right. I have triumphed. I generally *am* right, mother. I generally *do* triumph, mother." He spoke in a tone of elation that rose as he progressed in this speech. His accents changed rapidly, and there was a sound of some one moving. "But, mother, you are tired. It has been a long day for you. You would like to go to your room." His voice had fallen, and was low and guttural, but full of eager solicitude and tenderness.

"Not tired; no, Oscar. I am feeling quite well and lively and

strong to-night. For an old woman, who has lost the use of her limbs, I keep very well. When you are with me, Oscar dear, I do not seem so old as when you are away from me, my son." The voice was very low, and tremulous with maternal love.

"Old! Old!" he cried with harsh emphatic gaiety. "You are not old, mother! You are a young woman. You are a girl, compared with the old women I know in London, who would fly into a rage if you hinted that they were past middle life-if you did not, in fact, *say* they were young. Why, mother, what is seventy? Nothing! I know dozens of women over eighty, and they keep up their spirits and are blithe and gay, and ready to dance at a wedding, if any man should only ask them. Up to sixty-five, a woman ages faster than a man, but once over sixty-five, women grow young again." Towards the end his voice had lost its tone of unpleasant excitement, it became merely jocular and buoyant.

"My spirits are always good when you are here, my son. But when you are away I am very dull. Very dull, dear. It is only natural for me to feel dull, when half of my body is dead already. I cannot be long for the world, Oscar."

"Nonsense," said the other voice gaily. "Your affliction has nothing to do with death. The doctors say it is only a local disturbance. Besides, you know, cracked vessels are last broken. You are compelled to take more care of yourself than other women, and you *do* take care of yourself, I hope. If you do not, I shall be very angry, and keep away altogether from Eltham."

"I take every care of myself, Oscar dear. Every care. I do not

want to go away from you. I want to stay with you as long as I can. Oscar dear, I hope it may be granted to me to see your children before I die, dear." The voice was low and tremulous and prayerful. The mournfulness of a mother's heart was in the tone.

"And so you shall, mother," he said briskly, cheerfully. "I mean to astonish you soon. I mean to marry a very handsome wife. I have one in my eye already, mother." He added more gravely, "I have a very handsome wife in my eye. I mean to marry; and I mean to marry her. You know I never make up my mind to do anything that in the end does not come off. But before I marry I must finish my great work. When I have put the last touches to it I shall sell it for a large sum, and retire from business, and live here with you, mother, at my ease."

"And when, my dear son, do you think the great clock will be finished? Tell me all about it. It is the only thing in the world I am jealous of. Tell me how it gets on. Have you added any new wonders to it? When will you be done with it?"

The fright had by this time died out of Edith's heart. She now understood who the owners of the voices were, why the speakers seemed so near. Oscar Leigh was talking to his mother in the dining-room. They both believed she was in deep sleep and could not hear, or they forgot the thinness of the substance separating them. Between the dining-room and where she sat was only the slight panel of a folding door. This room, now a sleeping apartment, had once been the breakfast-parlour. She had not in the daytime noticed that the two rooms were divided only by

folding doors. If she had the alternative, she would have got up and left the room. But she had no alternative. She would much rather not hear the words, the voices of these two people. If she coughed, or made a noise, she would but attract attention to herself, bring some one, perhaps, knocking at her door. Nothing could be more undesirable than a visitor, or inquiries at her door. If she coughed, to show the speakers that she was awake, Mrs. Leigh, or he, might knock and speak to her. Mrs. Leigh might, on some plea, ask to see her, ask to be allowed to roll her invalid chair into the room, and then she would find the tenant of it dressed for out of doors, the bed untossed, the floor littered with the scattered contents of her trunk, the wet bedraggled clothes and boots she had taken off. There was nothing for her to do but to remain perfectly still. She was not listening, in the mean or hateful sense of the word. She did not want to overhear, but she could not help hearing. She could not cover her ears, for that would shut out all sound, and the use of hearing was essential to her own safety, her own protection, situated as she found herself. Leigh had given her to understand he was a mechanician. He was telling his mother of his work. He was about to give her particulars of a clock upon which he was engaged. Let them talk on about this clock. It was nothing to her. She was interested intensely in the passage of time, but in no clock. She did not want to hear of an hour-measurer, but of the hour-maker. She cared nothing for man's divisions of time: she prayed with all her heart for a sight of God's time-marker, the sun.

CHAPTER III
AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE

"Soon, soon, mother. I shall be finished soon. I cannot tell exactly when, but not very far off. I see the end of my labours, the reward of all my study, the fruit of all my life," said the voice of the hunchbacked dwarf.

There was a pause in the speech. "Hah," breathed Leigh, in loud inspiration. Then there was a snuffing sound, and another loud inspiration. "Hah! that is refreshing-most refreshing. Will you have some, mother? Do. You won't? Very well. What was I saying?"

The strong, subtle vapour of eau-de-cologne penetrated through the slits and joints of the folding-doors, and floated past Edith towards the open windows.

"About the clock," said Mrs. Leigh. "You were going to tell me what new wonders you have added to it, and when the crowning wonder of all was to be fixed."

"What?" cried the voice of the dwarf, loudly, harshly, angrily. "What do you know of the crowning wonder? Tell me, woman, at once!" His tone was violent, imperious, threatening.

"Oscar! Oscar! What is the matter? What do you mean by calling me 'woman'? Oscar, my son, are you ill? What is the matter? Why do you look at me in that way? You are crushing

my hand. What is the matter, Oscar, my own boy?" The woman's accents were full of alarm.

"Agh! Agh! Pardon me. Agh! Pardon me, my dear mother. Agh!" he coughed violently, hoarsely. "The spirit of the eau-de-cologne must have gone down my throat and caught my breath. I am quite right now. Pray excuse me, mother. What was I saying?"

"Something about the clock, dear. But, Oscar, do not mind telling me about it now. You seem not well. Perhaps you had better rest yourself. You can explain about the clock to-morrow."

"Oh, ay, the clock. Of course. I am quite well, mother. You need not be uneasy about me. What was I going to tell you about the clock?"

"You were going to tell me-I do not know really what. I asked you when it would be completed. That is my chief anxiety, for then you will be always here-always here, near me, my dear son."

"Certainly; when I sell my unrivalled clock, I'll give up living in London and come down here to you, mother, and become a private gentleman."

"But why can't you come down and stop here always, my Oscar? Surely your clock could be brought to Millway, and back to London again when 'tis finished?" The voice of the woman was caressing, pleading. "I have not very long to live, Oscar. Might not I have you near me that little time?" The tone was tremulous and pathetic.

"Dear, dear mother," he said softly, tenderly. "I cannot-I cannot move the clock. You forget how large it is. I have told you

over and over again it would half fill this room. Besides, I have other business in London I cannot leave just now. I will come as soon as ever I can. You may take my word for that. Let us say no more on that subject at present. I was going to explain to you about my marvellous clock. Let me see. What have I already told you?"

"Oh, it was too wonderful to remember. Tell me over again."

"Very well. To begin with, it will, of course, measure time first of all. That is the principal and easiest thing to contrive. It will show the year, the month, the day of the month, the day of the week, the hour of the day, the minute of the hour, the second of the minute, the tenth of the second. All these will be shown on one dial."

"That much alone puzzles and astonishes me. It will be the most useful clock in the world."

"So far that is all easy, and would not make it even a very remarkable clock, mother. It will take account of leap year, and be constructed to run till the year ten thousand of the Christian era."

"When once wound up?"

"Oh no, you simple mother. It will have to be wound up every week."

"But will not the machinery wear out?"

"Yes, the metal and the stones will wear out and rust out before eight thousand years. But the principle will have eight thousand years of vitality in it. Steel and brass and rubies yield to friction

and time, but a principle lives for ever if it is a true principle-"

"And a good principle," interrupted the voice of the old woman, piously.

"Good or bad, if it is true it will last," said the voice of the hunchback, harshly. Then he went on in more gentle and even tones. "On another face it will tell the time of high water in fifty great maritime cities. There will be four thousand Figures of Time, figures of all the great men of the past, each bearing a symbol of his greatest work, or thought, or achievement, and each appearing on the anniversary of his death, thus there will be from eight to twenty figures visible each day, and that day will be the anniversary of the one on which each of the men died years ago."

"Four thousand figures! Why, it will cost a fortune!"

"Four thousand historic figures each presented on the anniversary of death! I am at work on the figures of those who died on the 22nd of August just now. They are very interesting to me, and one of them is the most interesting of all, the most interesting of all the four thousand figures."

"And who died on the 22nd of August, Oscar? Whose is the figure that interests you most of all, my son?"

"Richard Plantagenet of Gloucester," fiercely.

"Eh?" in a tone of intense pain.

"Richard Plantagenet of Gloucester, commonly called Richard the Third of England, and nicknamed the Hunchbacked Tyrant," maliciously.

"Oscar!" in a tone of protest and misery.

"Yes. Hump and all, I am now making the figure of the most famous hunchback in history. I take a delight in modelling the figure of my Hunchback Tyrant. In body and soul I can sympathise with-him." He spoke furiously, and there was a sound in the room as if he rose.

"Oh, you break my heart, my boy, my boy, my son! Don't, for God's sake, don't. You cut me to the soul! You frighten me when you look in that way." She spoke in terror and anguish.

There were hasty, halting, footsteps pacing up and down the dining-room. The folding-doors behind Edith's head trembled, the windows of the dining-room rattled. The girl wondered he did not think of her. He knew her room lay beyond the dining-room, and he must be aware nothing divided her room from the front one but the thin panels of the folding-doors. It was plain to her now he did not care whether she heard or not.

"Break your heart, mother!" he went on in a tone of excitement but less acerbity. "Why should what I say break your heart? What hurt can words do? Look at me! Me! If I were to say my heart was broken, no one would wonder. I am not reproaching you. Heaven knows, if I turned upon you, I should have no friend left in all the world. Not one soul who would care for me-care whether I lived or died, whether I prospered or was hanged by the common hangman on a gibbet!"

"Oh, Oscar, what is it? What has done it? What has soured you so? You never talked in this way until now. What has changed you?" The voice of the woman was broken. She was weeping

through her words.

"A girl's face. A girl's face has changed me. I, who had a heart of adamant, a heart of the core of adamant befitting the crooked carcase in which it is penned and warped and blackened by villainous obstructions. But there! I have been vapouring, mother. Let my words pass. I am a fool and worse to break out in such a way before you, my good, gentle mother." His voice became less excited, his steps more slow and light. "It is passed. I am myself again. I know your advice is good. I mean to follow it. I will marry a wife. I will marry a pretty, shapely wife. You shall have grand children at your knee, mother, before long, before you go. Well-favoured and gay and flawless, and straight-backed, and right-limbed little children who will overtop me, exceed me in height before they begin their teens, but will never, never, never mother, grow to near the degree of love I have for you." His voice and steps ceased, as though he paused at her side.

"Do not kneel," she whispered huskily. "Do not kneel, my son. I was frightened a moment ago, and now I feel suffocated with joy. There! That is right. Sit in your own chair again."

For a while Edith heard sobs-the sobs of a man.

The woman had ceased to weep.

When the sobbing stopped, the woman said: "Who is she? Do I know her? Do I know even her name?"

"All that is my secret, mother. I will not say any more of her but that I am accustomed to succeed, and I will succeed here. I will keep the secret of her name in my heart to goad me on. I am

accustomed to succeed. Rest assured I will succeed in this. We will say no more of it. Let it be a forbidden subject between us until I speak of it again; until, perhaps, I bring her to you."

"As you will, Oscar. Keep your secret. I can trust and wait."

"It is best. I feel better already. That storm has cleared the air. I was excited. I have reason to be excited to-day. At this moment-it is now just twelve o'clock-at this moment I am either succeeding or failing in one of my most important aims."

"Just now, Oscar. Do you mean here?"

"No, not here. In London. You do not believe in magic, mother?"

"Surely not. What do you mean? You do not believe in anything so foolish?"

"Or in clairvoyance or spectres, mother?"

"No, my child. Nor you, I hope. That is, I do not believe in all the tales I hear from simple folk."

"And yet not everything-not half everything-is understood even now."

"Will you not tell me of this either?"

"Not to-night, mother. Not to-night. Another time, perhaps, I may. You know I had a week ago no intention of coming here to-day. I did not come to welcome Miss Grace. I had another reason for coming. I am trying an experiment to-night. At this moment I am putting the result of many anxious hours to the touch. If my experiment turns out well I shall come into a strange power. But there, I will say no more about it, for I must not explain, and it is

not fair to tell you, all at once, that I have two secrets from you. And now, mother, it is very late for you. We must go to bed. That patent couch still enables you to do without aid in dressing?"

"Yes. I am still able to do without help. I think some of the springs want oiling. You will look at them to-morrow?"

"Yes. But it must be early. I am going back to town at noon."

"So soon? I did not think you would leave till later, Oscar. I don't want to pry into your secrets, but you spoke of gaining some strange powers. Do you think it wise to play with-with-with?"

"With what, mother?"

"With strange powers."

"That depends on what the strange powers are."

"But tell me there is no danger."

"To me? No, I think not."

"Oscar, I am uneasy."

"We have sat and talked too long. You are worn out. I will wheel you to your room. I am sleepy myself."

Edith Grace heard the sound of Mrs. Leigh's invalid chair moving towards the dining room door, then the door open and the chair pass down the hall and into Mrs. Leigh's bedroom. Words passed between the mother and son, but she did not catch their import. She heard the door of Mrs. Leigh's room opposite her own close and then the dragging, lame footsteps of the hunchback on the tiles of the back hall.

The girl listened intently. She did not move. She was sitting bolt upright in her chair with her face turned towards the door

of the room.

Leigh's irregular, shuffling footsteps became more distinct. He was crossing the hall from his mother's room to the stairs, which began at the left-hand side of the back hall, close to the door of the room where Edith sat.

"He is going upstairs to his own room. When he is gone the house will be still and I shall be at ease. Daylight will soon come and then I can slip away again and wait till the first train for London-for home! He must be mad. Even if he had not pressed his hateful attentions on me I would not stay in this house for all the world," thought Edith Grace.

The slow, shuffling footsteps did not ascend the stairs. They paused. They paused, she could not tell exactly where. All her faculties were concentrated in hearing, and she heard nothing, absolutely nothing, but the rain. Could it be he had reached the stairs and was ascending inaudibly? Could it be he had already ascended? She thought it was but a moment ago since he closed his mother's door. He might have gone up unheard. It might be longer since the door shut than she thought. She could not judge time exactly in the dark, and when she was so powerfully excited. Should she get up out of that chair, open the door as quietly as possible, and peer into the hall? What good would that do? If he were there he would see her; if he were not there all was well. Besides, it would be quite impossible to unlock the door and open it without making a noise, without the snap of the lock, the grating of the latch, the creaking of the hinge. It was better

to remain quiet.

Suddenly she heard a sound that made her heart stand still, her breath cease to come. She grew rigid with terror.

She heard a something soft sliding over the outside of that door. A hand! It touched and rattled the handle. The handle turned, and with a low, dull sound the door opened! She could not see the door. The light which had illumed the fan sash in the porch had evidently been extinguished, for there was no gleam through the open door. That part of the room was so intensely dark, even the masses in it were invisible. But she knew by the dull, puffing sound the door had been opened, and by the surge of the heavy, damp, warm air.

She could not move or cry out if she would. She was completely paralysed, frozen. She was aware of possessing only two senses, hearing and seeing. She was not conscious of her own identity beyond what was presented to her sensations through her ears or her eyes. She did not even ask herself how he had come there, how he had opened from the hall the door she had left locked upon the inside.

He entered the room with slow, deliberate, limping steps. She could hear the footfall of his left foot and the slight, brushing touch of his right foot as he drew it after the left.

On slowly he came until he touched the bed. She could dimly make out the white of his face and shirt-front against the gleam from the window as he advanced. It was plain he could not see as well as she, for he walked up against the bed. His eyes had not

become accustomed to the darkness.

He turned to his left, towards where she sat, and came on, feeling his way by the bed. She heard him feeling his way. As soon as he reached the foot-post he turned right, round where she sat in the deepest gloom of the room and then walked to the window.

When he reached the window he stood full in front of it and muttered: "Rain, rain still." He thrust his arms out of the window and drawing them back in a moment, rubbed his face with his hands. "That is refreshing," he muttered. "Hah! They say rainwater is the best lotion for preserving the beauty of the skin. Hah! They do. They say Ninon de L'Enclos kept her beauty up to past seventy by rain-water. Hah! They do. They say she did. Hah! I wonder how long would it preserve *my* beauty. Ha-ha-ha! More than a century, I suppose. I wonder would rain-water preserve the beauty of my hump. I believe my hump is one of the most beautiful ever man wore. But it doesn't seem to count for much among a man's attractions. People don't appear to care much for humps, whether they are really beauties of this kind or not. Hah! They don't. People don't. Hah! They are not educated up to humps. Hah!"

At each exclamation "Hah!" he made a powerful expiration of breath. Before each exclamation he rubbed his forehead with one hand drawn in wet from the rain falling outside the window.

"*She*, for instance," he went on, "doesn't care much for humps. She prefers straight-backed men with straight strong

legs. And yet straight-backed men with straight strong legs are common enough in all conscience. Most of the beggars even are straight-backed and strong-legged. I am not. Hah! How cool and refreshing this rain-water is. I am a novelty and yet people don't care for such a novelty as I am. No; they prefer men cut to pattern. *She* would rather have a straight-backed beggar than me, and yet I am more interesting, more uncommon. I am more remarkable to look at, and then I have genius. Yes; I have a form of body far out of the common, and a form of mind far out of the common, too. I have a hump and genius. Hah! But no one cares for a hump or genius. *She* doesn't, for instance. Hah! But I mean that she shall like me. I mean to make love to her. I mean to woo her, and to win her. Hah! She doesn't know me now as well as she will know me later. I have never been in love before. I can't say I like the feeling. I used to be very valiant and self-sufficing, and at my ease in my mind. Hah! I looked on women as the mere dross of humanity-not worthy to associate with cripples. Hah! Of course, I except my mother, who is the best and dearest soul God ever sent to earth. But now I am in love, and this girl, this young girl, seems precious to me. Hah! Certainly I shall win her. I have not yet learned to fail, and I don't mean to learn how to fail now. Hah! How cool and refreshing the rain is. What is it I came into this room for? Stay. Let me think. Oh, yes! my mother asked me to put the window down before I went upstairs. Hah! Yes. I will. There!"

He let the window down without any regard to the noise. It

smote harshly upon the sill. Edith did not move, did not make a sound. She was glad at the moment, though she did not realize that she was glad, because he had let down the window. The diminished light would reduce the chance of his seeing her even now that his eyes had grown used to the darkness. She did not realize that she was glad until afterwards. All her consciousness was still concentrated on hearing and seeing.

Leigh turned away from the window, and began slowly retracing his steps to the door, muttering as he went along the side of the bed opposite the window:

"Yes, she has run away. Run away from this house a few hours after entering it. Run away, frightened, terrified by my ugliness."

He had reached the foot of the bed by this time, and, crossing between where she sat, turned in the darkness at the foot-board. Only his head rose above the high foot-board. His hand moved in dim relief against the background of the white head part of the bed discernible over the foot-board.

As he spoke these words her first thought beyond a desire to hear and see entered her mind. It gave her instant and enormous relief, although as before she was not at the moment attentive to the relief. The feeling, however, took in her mind the form of words. "He knows I left the house. He does not know I have come back."

He paused directly in front of her, and seemed to rest against the foot-board. He muttered in a voice more deep and faint than the one in which he had hitherto spoken:

"She ran away, this Edith Grace, she ran away from my ugliness. Ha-ha-ha! We shall see, Edith Grace. We shall see. I did not tell my mother the name of the girl I mean to marry. She shall know it soon enough, and not all the wiles or force of man shall keep me from my purpose, keep Edith Grace from me!"

He thrust his arms out to their full length in front of him and drew them back swiftly towards him. The air from the motion of his long thin hands touched her cheek.

She drew her head back a hand's breadth. Otherwise she did not stir. She sat motionless. She had no power over the actions of her body. She could not cry out or move further.

Oscar Leigh turned, crept slowly along the foot and right side of the bed, fumbled for the door handle, and, having found it, went out of the room, closing and latching the door quietly after him.

Then she heard him toilfully, ponderously, going up stairs. Presently a door above was closed and complete silence fell upon the house.

The spell lifted from the girl, and covering her face with her hands she sank back in the chair with a tremulous, heavy sigh of relief.

CHAPTER IV
ON THE WING

Edith lay in the large easy-chair for a long time without stirring. She did not even think. It was enough that she had been delivered from the danger of discovery, and that she was free to take wing and fly away at the streak of earliest dawn.

She did not know how long she sat with her face covered with her hands. She had resolved not to move for a long time, and for a long time she remained motionless. There was no fear of her sleeping. Although her mind was not actively employed about anything it was sharply awake. The first thing to challenge her attention was a sound. No boding or terrible sound, but the faint, weak shrill chirp of a bird. She scarcely realized what it was at first, for she was unfamiliar with the country and unused to the early notes of field and wood.

She took her hands from before her face and looked at the window. The light was still very grey and blue. But it was light, and, moreover, light that would grow stronger every minute, every second. When the day is breaking for joy or deliverance, the light fills the veins with an ethereal intoxication. Thoughts which during darkness can be met only with pallid terror can, when the shadow of night has passed away, be faced with vital courage and endurance.

She rose with care, but there was firmness and decision in her movements. She was fully dressed for walking. The rain had stopped and the sky above the trees spread clear and stainless, a vast plain of open blue.

Oscar Leigh had lowered the window. She caught the sash and raised it very gently but with no trepidation. If the door had that moment opened, she would have simply sprung through the window, without a word. The want of sleep dulls the apprehensions of fear as well as the other faculties of the mind. It sobers the judgment and reduces the susceptibility to extravagance of emotion.

When she had got the sash up to its full height, she stepped resolutely out on the gravelled carriage-sweep. She felt almost at ease. She paused a moment, looked back into the room, and under the shadow of her hand saw that the note she had placed on the table was gone. She turned away from the window and began walking along the gravelled drive towards the gate.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.