

Henty George Alfred

A Search For A Secret: A Novel. Volume 2



George Henty

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CHAPTER I

A FAMILY CONCLAVE

For some little time after Dr. Ashleigh's carriage drove off from Harmer Place, not a word was spoken. The scene through which its occupants had passed, had left a deep impression upon them – even upon Mr. Petersfield, who was by no means of a nature to be easily moved. Dr. Ashleigh felt greatly the words he had spoken, the wrong which had been committed, and the thought of his children's altered future. Harry felt more indignant than hurt; he was too astonished and angry to reflect yet how much it would affect himself. Perhaps if he had one wish more predominant than another, it was that the Misses Harmer were but men – men of about his own age, and that he could get them into some quiet spot – by Jove, would not he find out where the will was hidden!

But Robert Gregory felt the disappointment with all its force. To him the blow had been so overwhelming and crushing, that his fierce temper was beaten down and mastered by it; and he had borne it with a sense of dull despair, very unlike the passionate outburst of wrath which might have been expected from him. Only when Miss Harmer had turned upon him so fiercely, had the blood rushed to his cheek, and had not Dr. Ashleigh interposed, he would doubtless have given way to a burst of passion; but with a great effort he had checked himself; desperate as he was, he knew that Dr. Ashleigh stood in a far higher and better position in the case than he did himself; it was to his interest that the doctor should take the lead, for he felt that what hopes remained rested solely in him.

Dr. Ashleigh was certainly favourably impressed with his conduct throughout this trying interview; he knew that to this man the loss of the will was a terrible blow, the defeat of all his plots and schemes, and he was surprised and pleased that he had behaved with so much self-control, and had avoided creating a stormy and violent scene.

"Mr. Gregory," he said at last, breaking the silence for the first time as they were entering Canterbury, "I know that this is a grievous blow to you, as it is to us all. I think you had better follow out your original plan of returning this evening to your wife in London. You can safely leave the matter in my hands; I am, for the sake of my children, interested in this affair equally with yourself, and you may rely that I shall spare no pains to come to the bottom of it. What search and stir is made, will come with a far better grace from me than from yourself, and you may depend upon my letting you know, the instant the slightest clue is gained to the mystery."

Robert Gregory in a few words thanked the doctor, agreed that such a course was best, and that at any rate until Sophy was perfectly recovered, he would leave the affair in his hands.

Dr. Ashleigh then turned to Mr. Petersfield and asked him if he would come on to Ramsgate, and stay the night with him, to chat over the affair in quiet, and determine upon the best course to be pursued. Mr. Petersfield agreed to stop for the night, saying that he must return to town by the early train in the morning, but that if they would promise that he should do that, he would accompany them.

As this was arranged, they drove into the station, and here the party separated; Dr. Ashleigh, Harry, and Mr. Petersfield to go on to Ramsgate, Robert Gregory to return to London. The latter preserved his quiet demeanour until he was alone in a railway carriage, and then he gave full vent to his fury and disappointment. He raved aloud; he cursed himself, his fortune, and all connected with him; he poured imprecations of every kind and description upon the heads of the Misses Harmer; and his last exclamation as he flung himself down in a corner of the carriage, was, "Let them beware, for by – I will find it, if it is in existence, if it costs me my life! – or," he added, after a pause, "them theirs!"

I now resume my own narrative. How surprised I was that evening when they came in. Of course, just at first I was too much occupied in kissing Harry – whom I now saw for the first time, as he had only arrived from the North the evening before – to notice anything strange about their manner. Then papa introduced me to Mr. Petersfield; and after I had spoken a word or two to him, and had time to look at all their faces, I saw that there was a great gloom upon them, greater even than the occasion warranted; for I had been expecting some little joking remark from papa about my being a woman of property now, so that I was the more struck by the subdued expression of his face.

"Is anything the matter, papa?" I asked, quietly.

"Yes, my dear, a great deal is the matter, I am sorry to say. Mr. Harmer's will is missing."

"Missing, papa!" I exclaimed, almost incredulously.

"Yes, my love; you must not take it too much to heart; it may come to light yet, but at present it is missing."

I sat down with a faint feeling in my heart. It was not that I cared for the money for its own sake; but I thought of Lady Desborough, and I felt a rush of coming trouble sweep round me. However, after a moment, I drove back the feeling, and asked, in as cheerful a voice as I could, —

"But how is it missing, papa?"

"Ah, my dear, that is the rub. Mr. Harmer had it in the house, and now it is nowhere to be found. We all believe – indeed, there can be little doubt – that Miss Harmer has concealed it, or, at any rate, that she knows where it has been hidden away. I have noticed the last week a strange manner, a sort of secret understanding between the sisters, but thought little about it at the time. Now, however, I can understand it all by the light of the present state of affairs; and I remember now, what I smiled at at the time as an impotent threat, that Miss Harmer said, in her passion, that while she lived, Sophy's husband should never enter the doors of Harmer Place."

"But, papa," I said, "she has a very good life-income; why should she do such a thing as this?"

"There are several reasons, my dear; but we will talk them over after tea. I am hungry and tired, and I am sure Mr. Petersfield and Harry are the same; so let us have tea at once; that will do us all good, and we shall be able to look at matters in a far more cheerful light afterwards. What are you going to give us, my dear?"

"Cold pie, papa, and some fresh-boiled mackerel, and a dish of prawns and some muffins."

"Capital! Now we will go and wash our hands, and make ourselves comfortable, and by that time you will be ready for us."

They were soon down again, and seated round the table, and papa began to question Harry about his work in the North; and Harry, who was never depressed above five minutes about anything, entered into a most amusing description of his life on the railway; and we were all laughing merrily, in spite of our troubles, before tea was over. I am sure no one who had looked in upon us would have guessed that we had that day as good as lost £50,000 between us. When we had done, papa said, —

"There, my dear, we are all a hundred per cent better. Now, as we have taken one great consoler – tea, let us take another – tobacco. I am sure Harry is dying for a pipe; and although I do not often smoke indoors, on this special occasion I will make an exception. What say you, Mr. Petersfield?"

"I am very fond of a good cigar," the lawyer said, producing a cigar-case; "but will not Miss Ashleigh object?"

"Not at all," I said. "Harry always smokes when he is at home, and I am quite accustomed to it. If I find it too much, I can easily open the window a little."

The tea-things were soon cleared away, and we took our seats round the fire. For although the weather was not actually cold, we usually had a fire in the evening, as, indeed, by the seaside one can do almost all the year round with comfort. Papa sat on one side, I on a stool by him, Harry next, and Mr. Petersfield on the other side. As soon as the cigars and pipe were fairly alight, the table cleared, and we alone, papa began, —

"Now, my dear, I will answer the question you asked me before tea; and I shall do so at length, as what I am saying to you may be some sort of guide and assistance to Mr. Petersfield, who – from his late partner, Mr. Ransome, having had the management of Mr. Harmer's affairs – does not know very much of the business."

Papa then explained the whole history of the Harmers nearly as I have told it, although of course in far fewer words. "Thus you see," he concluded, "there are several reasons which we may suppose, actuate the Miss Harmers. The first and principal, is the religious question. The Misses Harmer were, as I have said, educated in a convent; they were brought up to, and have ever since lived a life of ascetic severity. They have been taught to look upon the advancement of their Church as the thing to be striven for upon earth, the *summum bonum* to be aimed at. They were accustomed to consider the Harmer estate as destined to go to the furtherance of that object; and when Herbert Harmer by the accidental death of his two brothers, suddenly succeeded to it, they looked upon it as absolutely stolen from the Church, to which it was, by the elder brother's will, to have gone. They then left the house, went abroad, and did not return until the death of Gerald Harmer seemed again to open the way for them. They have since resided there off and on, in hopes probably that their brother might return to his old faith, might die without a will, or, in fact, that some unexpected contingency might happen. The last three or four years since Mr. Harmer's declared intentions relative to Sophy and yourselves, they have very much intermitted their visits, and only returned on the news of their brother's first paralytic seizure. Thus, you see, the last twenty years of their lives, may be said to have been given to the endeavour; and the temptation to them to suppress the will is of course enormous, in order that the property may come to them, and afterwards, as their eldest brother intended, to the Romish Church. They have, besides this, another motive now, and one which, no doubt, greatly soothes their consciences. They are mercilessly severe upon Sophy, they look upon her as their brother's murderess, and they therefore have the twofold satisfaction of punishing her – and so of avenging their brother's death – and of enriching their own Church."

"Strong inducements, my dear sir," Mr. Petersfield, who was a bachelor, said, "religion and malice, the two strongest motive powers in the female, especially the elderly female, mind."

"Mr. Petersfield," I said, "remember that I am here, and that you are talking treason."

"I apologize humbly, Miss Ashleigh," he said, smiling. "But really," he continued to papa, "what you say explains the whole matter, and gives it an even more awkward appearance, in my eyes, than it had before. The question is, what is to be done?"

"Ah! what is to be done?" papa repeated; "that is indeed a difficult question to decide upon. I believe the will to be in existence, and I do not think they will venture to destroy it; it is one thing to allow a will to lie hid in a secret drawer, another to take it out and deliberately burn it: one requires a very different degree of courage and hardihood to the other. No, I do not think they will venture to destroy it."

"I do not think they will," Mr. Petersfield said; "they quailed so unmistakably under your denunciations. Do you know, doctor, I give you great credit for that, it was grand, sir!" and the lawyer rubbed his hands at the thought. "I give you my word, I never saw anything better done in the whole of my professional experience."

Harry laughed. "Yes, father, you actually alarmed me at the time; you were awfully impressive."

Papa could not help smiling a little. "Was I?" he said. "Well, I meant to be. I the women to be extremely superstitious; I have heard them confess to a belief in spirits and apparitions; and it flashed across me that the best thing I could do, to prevent them destroying the will, was to touch them on that score, and I do think it is safe for a time. One of the worst features to my mind is the appearance of that Father Eustace. Where does he come from? Who sent for him? They said he had come from abroad, and as he is an Italian, they must have telegraphed for him."

"I think I can find that out," Harry said. "Dick Thornton, who is one of the telegraph clerks, was at school with me, and I have no doubt I can get out of him who the message was sent to, and who sent it, even if I cannot get the words themselves."

"Do," Mr. Petersfield said; "that message might be of great value to us."

"By the way, Mr. Petersfield," papa said, "there is a point which has just occurred to me, which may serve to guide us materially in our search. Do you keep all Mr. Harmer's deeds and papers?"

"Not all; we keep the title-deeds of the property, and that sort of thing, but he himself keeps the copies of his tenants' leases, and papers of that kind, to which he may have occasion to refer in his dealings with them. But why do you ask the question?"

"It is a very important one, my dear sir, and I am pleased with your answer."

"How so?" the lawyer asked, rather puzzled.

"In this way: if the will had been the only important document at Harmer Place, it might have been kept in any of the drawers we searched to-day, and the Misses Harmer might have removed it last week, and either destroyed or concealed it in their rooms, or in any other place, where we could never find it. Now, we have every reason to believe it is not so, for in that case, they would have left the leases, and other documents, and we should have found them. It is quite clear to my mind, then, that Mr. Harmer had some secret place of concealment, to which he alluded when he told your clerk that all the burglars in the world could not find it; and in this place of concealment the whole of these papers, together with the will, are stowed away, and the Misses Harmer, who no doubt know of the existence of this place of concealment, will be perhaps content to let them remain there, and relying upon the secrecy of the hiding-place, will not be tempted to destroy the will."

"Capital, my dear sir," Mr. Petersfield exclaimed energetically, "you are quite right, and it is indeed, as you say, a great point gained. Before, we had a solitary document to look for, which might be contained and hid away in any small space, a drawer with a double bottom, a woman's desk, or sewed up in her stays – I beg your pardon, Miss Ashleigh – in fact, in any small out-of-the-way corner. Now we have some regular receptacle to look for, capable of holding bulky documents – at any rate, a good-sized box. This is indeed a great point gained. There the will is beyond doubt, for I think the Miss Harmers' faces were quite sufficient evidence that it is not destroyed; besides, we may reasonably suppose that the box is not concealed about the Misses Harmer's rooms, but is where it was originally placed by their brother; the question arises, 'Where the deuce is that?'"

"I can guess where it is," I said.

"Where?" the other three exclaimed, simultaneously.

"In the 'priest's chamber,' wherever that may be," I answered. "I remember well, that when I was once talking to Mr. Harmer about the old times, and old houses and their hiding-places, he said that Harmer Place was celebrated as having one of the snuggest hiding-places in the kingdom, and that many a priest had lain hidden there for months. I asked him if he knew where it was, and he told me that he did; for that when a boy he had gone into it on some occasion or other with his father, and that when he came back and took possession of the house, he had again examined it, and found it such a snug hiding-place, that he used it as a sort of strong room; he promised that some day or other he would show it to me, but I never thought to ask him, and, unfortunately, he never mentioned it again."

"By Jove," Harry exclaimed, "we shall find it yet!" while papa and Mr. Petersfield uttered exclamations of surprise and satisfaction.

"Sure enough, doctor, the will is in the 'priest's chamber.' The only question is, how are we to find it, and how are we to get into it when we do?"

"I should think there can be no difficulty about that," Harry said; "all we have to do is to go before a magistrate, and swear that the will is there, and get a search warrant to examine for it."

Mr. Petersfield smiled. "You would find a great difficulty in getting such a warrant."

"Why so?" Harry asked indignantly. "Do you mean to say that if we knew there was a will hidden in a certain place, which will left us all the property, that we should have no right to go in and search for it?"

"It would be a very delicate matter indeed," Mr. Petersfield said, "very delicate; but still not impossible. By the 7 and 8 statute of the 14 of George, chapter 29, s. 22, it is enacted that if any person shall either during the lifetime or after the death of any person steal, or for any fraudulent purpose conceal any will, codicil, or other testamentary instrument, they shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof, be liable to various punishments. And by the same statute, chapter 29, s. 63, it says if any credible witness shall prove upon oath before a justice of the peace, a reasonable cause to suspect that any person has in his possession, or on his premises, any property whatsoever, or in respect to which any such offence (such as stealing a will, &c.,) shall have been committed, the justice may grant a warrant to search for such property, as in the case of stolen goods. Now by this Act it is clear that a warrant could be obtained upon an affidavit that you believed, as you do believe, that the will exists; but that would not allow you to pull the house to pieces, and it is quite certain that in no other way would you discover a chamber built for the purpose of concealment, and which you say baffled the priest-hunters of the old time – men who were pretty well accustomed to the finding of this sort of hiding-place, and who knew exactly where they were likely to be situated. You would never find it; and even while you were searching for it, Miss Harmer might enter by the secret door – wherever that may be – and abstract or destroy the will, without your being one bit the wiser; or, at any rate, she would be certain after you had given up the hopeless search and left, to destroy the will to prevent the possibility of your ever trying again with better fortune. No, your best course is to find out, first, where the chamber is; next, how to get into it; and when these two points are discovered, we can arrange about going in and taking possession of the will without asking any one's leave in the matter. That is, I believe, our only chance of recovering it – by strategy. Take one of the servants into your pay, and get her to search for the chamber. This I leave to you, as of course you are acquainted with some of the domestics. I do not know that I have anything more which I can suggest at present. Should anything strike me, I will write from town, and, as I go by the early train, I will now, with your permission, retire to bed. You will of course write to me immediately you find out anything which may seem to you to have the smallest bearing upon the affair. I should especially advise that you do not hint to any one your belief in the existence of the will, as it may get to Miss Harmer's ears; and although, if she believes that no search is being made for it, she may be content to let it remain for years concealed as at present, you may be assured that should she believe that you are working to find it, either she or the priest will destroy it at once." We all agreed in the propriety of following this advice, and then separated for the night.

The next morning I got up at six, to make breakfast for Mr. Petersfield before he started. He was pleased at my having done so. We had not much time for talk, but before he went, I said, —

"Honestly, Mr. Petersfield, do you think we shall ever find the will?"

"Honestly, my dear Miss Ashleigh, I am very much afraid you never will. It is a lamentable affair, and I am certain in my own mind that it is in existence, and that its place of concealment is known to the Misses Harmer; but under the circumstances of the case, I feel assured that, even on their death-beds, there is no chance of their ever revealing where it is. Your only chance, in my mind, is in finding the hiding-place; direct all your energies to this point; find that chamber, and you may be assured you will find the will."

When the others came down to breakfast at nine o'clock, I proposed that we should return at once to Canterbury; but papa said that this affair would cause so much talk and excitement in the place, that we should be quite overwhelmed with calls from every one, and have to repeat the whole story a dozen times a day, which would be a terrible infliction, and that as he and Harry would be mostly out, I should have to bear the whole brunt of the attack. So it was settled that we should stay there, at any rate a week or ten days longer, until the first stir and excitement were over. So papa and

Harry went over every day to Canterbury, and I remained quietly down at Ramsgate. For some days they brought back no news of any importance, but one day towards the end of the week papa came back to dinner alone, and Harry did not arrive until nearly ten o'clock. As he came in he told us that he had had a long chat with his friend Thornton of the telegraph office.

"And what have you learnt, Harry?" I asked.

"I will tell you all about it, my dear, directly I have made myself comfortable;" and he proceeded with the most provoking coolness to take off his coat and gloves, and to arrange himself in a chair before the fire. "Now I will tell you. I went down to the station to-day, and there I saw Dick Thornton. He shook hands with me, and said – what every one says – 'This is a bad job, Harry.' 'A devilish bad job' I answered."

"Never mind the expletives, Harry," I put in, "we can imagine them."

"Don't interrupt me, Agnes, or I won't tell you anything. 'I want to have a chat with you, Thornton,' I said. 'When can I see you?' 'I don't get away from here till six.' 'Well, suppose you come round to our place and have a chat with me when you get away.' 'Done,' he said. Accordingly I had a snug little dinner cooked, got a bottle of wine up from the cellar, and at about half-past six Dick came in. After we had dined, and had talked over the whole affair, I told him he could do me a great service by telling me whether the Misses Harmer had sent off a telegraphic message, and if so, where. 'It would lose me my place, if it were known I had told you, Harry,' he said. 'I know it would,' I answered; 'but what you say will not go any further; indeed it is more as a matter of curiosity that we may find out where the priest came from, than from any action we can take from it.' 'Well, Harry,' he said, 'I will tell you all about it, and you can make what use you like of it; the place is not so first-rate that I should care very much if I did get the sack in consequence. One of the servants from Harmer Place – I should say Miss Harmer's own maid, for she was a stiff foreign-looking woman – came down upon that Friday afternoon, with a note and a message. I was alone at the time, for the other clerk happened to be away. The message was in Italian; it was that which made me notice it particularly, and when I got home I took the trouble to get a dictionary to see what it was about. I could not make much of it, and I forget the Italian words, but the English was – 'To the Bishop of Ravenna, Italy. He is dead – much can be done, if lawful, for the mother – send advice and assistance.' 'And did you get an answer,' I asked. 'Yes, the answer came on Sunday morning; I always attend there between half-past nine and half-past ten. It was also in Italian. 'All is lawful for the mother – advice and aid have started.'"

"Father Eustace to wit," papa said.

"That is all," Harry concluded, "that Thornton told me. Of course I said I was very much obliged to him, and that I would take good care that it never was known from whom I got the information. And now, I suppose the mother they talk of means Mother Church, but who is the Bishop of Ravenna?"

"I remember," papa said thoughtfully, "that about three years ago Miss Harmer said she was delighted to hear that the confessor, or visitor, or whatever they call him, of the convent where they formerly lived so many years, and where they always stayed whenever they went upon the Continent, had just been made a bishop; and her only regret was that it was to some place in the north of Italy, whereas their convent was at Florence. I remember the fact specially, because, after the sisters had left the room, their poor brother said to me, 'Between you and I, doctor, I should have been much better pleased to have heard that the excellent priest had received his promotion to heaven. That man has had a complete ascendancy over my sisters for many years. He is, I believe, some four or five years younger than they are, but at any rate he has been the confessor or whatever it is of their convent, ever since they were there, twenty-four or five years ago. He is, I judge by what they say, a gloomy fanatical man, whose ambition is to do service to his Church, and, I suppose, rise in it – at any rate, he has a complete ascendancy over them, by his ascetic life and devotion to the Church. They correspond with him frequently, and I cannot help thinking that his advice and orders – given in his letters, and whenever they go over there, which they do constantly – have tended greatly to make

them the gloomy unhappy women they are. They were, it is true, brought up with extreme strictness and austerity, but I cannot help thinking that much of that would have worn off, if it had not been for this man's influence.'

"No doubt," papa continued, "Mr. Harmer was right, and all their actions are dictated by this priest; it was he who ordered them to make friends with their brother, at Gerald Harmer's death, and to come over here and take up their abode, – I know they were at that convent when they heard the news, and that they had announced their intention of staying there permanently – and now he has sent over this Father Eustace. The man looks a religious enthusiast, and there is no doubt that he will never allow them to change their minds even were they disposed. Altogether, my children, it is evident the only remaining chance is to find out the secret chamber. If we can discover that, well and good; if not, it will be wiser for us, painful as the disappointment is, to give up all hope of finding the will, and to endeavour to go on as if it had never had an existence. It is a most unfortunate affair now, Sir John having died."

"It is, indeed," Harry answered, "Sir John would have pushed me on, and I should have had no difficulty, even without capital, in making my way."

Sir John, to whom papa alluded, I should say was the engineer to whom Harry had been articled. Harry's time had run out now three or four months, and he was only remaining in the North on a small salary, completing the piece of work on which he was engaged. His old master had died only a month before this time. When this piece of work was finished, Harry had intended buying a partnership in some good business, with the £10,000 Mr. Harmer had promised him for the purpose.

"Yes, it is very unfortunate his having died," Harry said; "unless one has a good patron of that sort to push one on, it makes up-hill work of it. Not that I care much; I can fight my way well enough;" and Harry stretched his great shoulders, and looked as confident and cheerful as if he had just gained a legacy, instead of losing one. "I shall go back in another two or three days to my work," he said; "it will not last much more than another month; and in the meantime I shall be on the look-out for something else."

CHAPTER II

SWIFT RETRIBUTION

Sophy Gregory might have excited pity even in the minds of her enemies could they have seen her as she lay, pale and sad, in her lonely room, during the long hours of the day upon which her husband had gone down to hear the reading of the will of Mr. Harmer. The week which had passed since she left home had indeed been a terrible one. Her punishment had followed, bitter and heavy, ere the fault was scarce committed. Only one day of happiness and life, and then that crushing blow which met her the very day after her marriage, in the words of the telegraphic message, "Mr. Harmer is dead." It had reached them at York, where, after wandering through the old streets, they had come back to their hotel to lunch. It lay upon their table. Robert had opened it eagerly. Sophy needed not that he should tell her what were its contents. The sudden start, the deadly pallor, the look of horror that he could not control, told their tale too plainly. Her grandfather was dead; she had killed him.

She did not faint, she did not scream; one faint, low, wailing cry broke from her, and then she stood, rigid and immovable, her eyes open and staring, her lips parted, and every vestige of colour gone from her face. One hand clasped her throat; the other, clenched and rigid, rested on the table.

Robert Gregory forgot his own heavy interest in the news, forgot that a fortune might have been gained or lost by the few words of that telegram. Sophy's face frightened him as he had never been frightened before. He spoke to her, he called her every loving name; but it was of no avail. No movement of the rigid face, no change in the fixed eyes, showed that she had heard him. He dared not touch her; she might break into dreadful shrieks – her reason might be gone. What was he to do? He pealed at the bell, and then went to the door, and told the waiter who answered it to beg the landlady to come up instantly. In another minute the landlady arrived, all of a fluster – as she afterwards expressed it when describing the matter – at this sudden summons, and at the brief account the waiter had given her of the manner of Robert Gregory.

"My wife has had a terrible shock; she has just heard of the sudden death of her father, and I don't know what to do with her. She does not hear me; I am afraid she is going to be ill or something terrible. For God's sake speak to her, or do something or other." Such was the hurried greeting which met her at the door.

The landlady was somewhat accustomed to sudden emergencies, but she saw at a glance that this was beyond her, and she said to the waiter, who had followed her up, to hear, if possible, what was the matter, —

"James, the lady is ill. Send Hannah here with some cold water, and my scent bottle, and run across to Dr. Cope's opposite, and tell him to come over at once. If he is out, run for the nearest doctor."

Then, closing the door, she advanced towards Sophy.

"Don'tye, don'tye, take on so, dear!" she said, in a kind, motherly way, as if she was speaking to a little child; "don't, now, for your husband's sake; try and rouse yourself, dear." But it was no use. There was a slight, a very slight quiver of the eyelids, but no other sign of life or movement.

The landlady paused. She was almost as much frightened at Sophy's face as Robert Gregory had been, and she dared not touch the rigid hand. They stood, one on each side of her, watching her helplessly; with faces almost as much blanched by apprehension as was her own and listening breathlessly for the footstep of the doctor outside. It was not long in coming, although it seemed an age to them. He entered quietly: a tall, slight man, with silvered hair, and took the whole state of things in at a glance.

"A sudden shock?" he asked; and then gave orders to the servant to bring such things as were necessary. Then he spoke to Sophy, and put his finger upon the motionless wrist. "It is a serious case,

sir," he said to Robert, "very serious; the shock to the brain has been very great. I must bleed her; it is the only thing to be done. Help me to place her upon the sofa."

Between them they gently lifted the rigid figure and placed her, half sitting, half lying, upon the sofa. There was no sign of consciousness. In another minute the doctor had opened a vein in her arm. At first no blood came, then a few dark drops, and then gradually a steady stream.

The doctor gave a sigh of relief. Still the blood flowed, on and on, till Robert Gregory was frightened at the quantity, and looked anxiously at the doctor, who, with his fingers on her pulse, was watching Sophy's face. Presently a change came over the stony expression, the eyes lost their fixed look, the eyelids began to droop down, and the whole figure to yield; then, as she fell back on the sofa, he prepared to stop the bleeding.

It had had its effect; Sophy had fainted. The first crisis was over, but not as yet was the danger past. Very anxiously they watched her waking, and intense was the relief when they found that she was conscious of what had happened; but there were still grave apprehensions for the future. Weak as she was, she was in a state of almost delirious grief and excitement; indeed, at times her mind wandered.

No reproaches which the Misses Harmer had lavished upon her were one-tenth as severe as those she bestowed upon herself. Over and over again she called herself her grandfather's murderess. Constantly she pictured up harrowing scenes of his death, and how he had died, invoking the curse of heaven upon her and hers with his latest breath. Above all, she insisted on returning at any rate to London, that Robert might go down to Canterbury to hear the particulars.

The doctor had a long talk next day with Robert, who explained, to some extent, the facts of the case.

"I hardly know what to do, Mr. Gregory. Your wife is in a most critical state. She has set her mind upon going to London, and ill as she is, I almost question whether there would not be less danger in her doing so than remaining here in her present state of nervous anxiety. It is most essential that, if possible, her mind should be relieved of the present strain, and that she should obtain some intelligence as to the last moments of her adopted father. You tell me that he had a seizure before; it is likely, therefore, that the present attack was very sudden, and in that case he may not – probably would not – have said anything against her. This alone would be a relief to her; and, at any rate, she would be pacified by knowing that she was doing all she could to learn the truth. I fear that brain fever will be the termination of her attack, but its character may be modified if her present anxiety is to some extent allayed. By applying to-day at the railway office, you can have a carriage with a sleeping couch ready by to-morrow, and I should advise your taking her up without delay. Of course, upon your arrival there, you will at once call in medical assistance."

And so it was carried out. Sophy bore the journey better than could have been anticipated; indeed, the very fact that she was getting nearer to Canterbury soothed and satisfied her. But she was still in an almost delirious state of remorse and grief. The doctor who was called in to her had shaken his head in talking over her case with her husband, and had told him that unless her mind could be relieved from the terrible weight upon it, he would not answer for her reason.

And so, leaving a nurse to take care of Sophy, Robert Gregory went down to Canterbury and saw Dr. Ashleigh. The news which he brought back of Mr. Harmer's forgiveness before his death, saved her from an attack of brain fever, if not from entire loss of reason. And yet, although it allayed her fears, and relieved her mind of the harrowing pictures of her grandfather's death which she had before conjured up so constantly, it scarcely lessened her sorrow and remorse; indeed, the knowledge that his forgiveness had been so instant, and his last thoughts those of kindness to her, caused her to reproach herself more than ever; but her grief was now quieter, and the doctor believed that she would escape the fever he had feared for her. She could now shed tears, and in long and bitter fits of crying found exhaustion and relief. In another two or three days she was calmer and better.

Robert had been everything which was kind and consoling to her, and very gentle and thoughtful in his talk and manners. In her wildest outbursts of grief she had never blamed him for his share in her

fault, and would not listen to the reproaches which, in the hope of relieving her conscience somewhat, he would have gladly bestowed upon himself. But this Sophy would not allow. He had not deceived a benefactor; he had been actuated only by his love for her, and his entreaties for her to elope with him had been but natural; it was she only who had been wrong and wicked in neglecting her plain duty, and in deceiving her more than father; and upon her, and her only, must the blame and grief fall.

She was very quiet and pale, as she lay that day that he had gone down to the funeral, and she waited and thought all those long hours that he was abroad. She thought a good deal of the future, and planned that they should go upon the Continent first for a while, and upon their return spend the great proportion of their income in doing good, living quietly themselves upon very little; she thought that in any other way she should feel as if this fortune were a curse to her, for it had never even occurred to her that Mr. Harmer might have altered his will.

It was late in the evening before Robert returned; he came in quiet and grave, but with no sign of passion or disappointment upon his face as he kissed her, and asked her how she had been all the long day. Robert Gregory was not a good man. In many respects he was bad and vicious; but, as in most men, there was some good in him, and what there was came out at its brightest in his relations with Sophy.

Deep as had been his disappointment, bitter and fierce the invectives and curses which, during his journey, he had showered upon the Misses Harmer, his own unfortunate luck, and upon the world in general, yet, as he approached the hotel, he curbed himself in, and became calm and quiet. As he thought of her love and suffering, of the sacrifices her attachment for him would entail upon her, and upon her trust in himself, he determined that, come what might, she should not see his disappointment, and that in addition to her other troubles, she should never come to know that he had married her for her money; and as he came into the room where she was lying, pale and weak, upon the sofa, his brow cleared, his voice softened, and he tried, and tried hard, that she should see no sign in his face of that bitter sense of disappointment he was feeling in his breast.

Sophy answered his inquiries as to her health, and then, as he sat down on a chair close to the sofa, so that she could lean her head upon his arm, and look up into his face, she said, —

"I am afraid that this has been a very painful day for you, Robert?"

"Not very pleasant, love," he said, almost cheerfully; "but, of course, I had made up my mind for that."

"Did you see the Misses Harmer, Robert, and did they say anything about me?"

"I saw them, Sophy, but we did not exchange many words."

"And Dr. Ashleigh, did he speak as kindly as before?"

"More so, Sophy; he could not have been more kind; he took me back in his carriage to the station."

Sophy looked pleased. There was a little silence. Robert did not know how to announce his intelligence, and his wife considered all that part of the affair as so much a matter of course that she did not even think it necessary to ask any question about it. In a short time Sophy went on, —

"Do you know, Robert, I have been thinking so much about the future, and I think that when we come back from our travels we ought to put aside almost all our money to do good with."

"My dear," Robert said, gently, "I hardly think we need enter into that now, for an event has occurred which will alter all our plans. The fact is, darling, the will is missing."

"The will missing, Robert!" Sophy repeated, opening her eyes in astonishment — "how can it be missing?"

"It is a curious business, darling, and looks very bad. Mr. Harmer, it seems, had it down some little time since to make some slight alteration. We know that he did not destroy it upon that morning, but it is not to be found, and there is strong reason for supposing that the Misses Harmer have concealed it. In that case, although it may yet turn up, still we must look the worst in the face, and consider that it is very probable that it may never be heard of again."

"And in that case should I get nothing?" Sophy asked, eagerly.

"Not one penny, Sophy; it will all go to the Misses Harmer."

Sophy closed her eyes, and leaned back, with a faint "Thank God!" She looked upon it as a punishment – as a sort of atonement for her fault. Then in an instant a fresh thought struck her. How would Robert bear it? Would he love her any the less, now she was penniless, instead of being a great heiress? And she looked up again with a frightened, inquiring glance into his eyes. He bore it well, and said, gently, —

"We must bear it bravely, Sophy. It is, of course, a heavy blow. I have never disguised from you how I am situated. Still, darling, we must do our best, and I have no doubt we shall pull through somehow. I am very sorry for your sake, dear, and I bitterly accuse myself for tempting you. It will be a different life from what you expected, but I will try hard to make it easy for you."

He spoke tenderly and earnestly, for he, at the time, almost felt what he said. Sophy had raised herself, and, as he finished, was crying softly, with her head upon his shoulder, but her tears were quite different to those which she had shed during the last week.

"I am not crying, Robert, because I have lost the fortune – I am crying because I am so happy. I know now that you love me quite for my own sake, and not for my money."

"You did not doubt it, did you, Sophy?" her husband asked, rather reproachfully, although he felt that he was but a hypocrite while he said so.

"I never really doubted you, Robert – no, no – I would not have married you if I had. At times, when I felt low, I could not help wondering how much my money had to do with it, but I always drove away the thought, dearest, as an injustice to you; and now I shall never think so again. Do you know, Robert, this news has been quite a relief to me? I should always have felt that the wealth was a burden; and now that I am punished for my fault, I shall not reproach myself quite so much with it. But I am sorry for your sake, dear. It must be a great blow for you, and I feel how kind it is of you to hide your disappointment for my sake. I will try very hard, Robert, to make it up to you by loving you more and more; and you shall see what a useful little wife I will make you as soon as I get strong again, which I mean to do very fast now."

CHAPTER III

THE SEARCH COMMENCED

Papa wrote several times in the fortnight following the funeral of Mr. Harmer to Robert Gregory, in answer to his letters inquiring what progress he was making towards the discovery of the will. At the end of that time I received a letter from Sophy, and from the handwriting I could see how ill and shaken she must be. Her letter was very, very pitiful; she was still evidently suffering the greatest remorse and sorrow for the death of Mr. Harmer, and she said "she was sure she should never have recovered at all had she not received the news of the forgiveness he had written to her before he died." It had been a dreadful shock to her; but she accepted the loss of her fortune as a deserved punishment for her wicked conduct. "My husband," she said, "is very kind indeed to me; and it is on my account entirely that he regrets the loss of the fortune, as he says that my listening to him has been my ruin." If the will was not found shortly, he intended to get something to do, and she meant to try to get some pupils for music. She begged me to write to her, for that I was the only person she could hope to be a friend to her now.

Of course I answered her letter, and from that time we kept up an occasional correspondence.

Papa told me that in his early letters to him, Robert Gregory had expressed his determination to discover the will at all hazards, but that he had now, to a certain extent, acquiesced in papa's view, that an unsuccessful attempt would be certain to prove the signal for the instant destruction of the will, and that therefore nothing should be attempted unless success was pretty certain. Robert Gregory was the more obliged to acquiesce in this decision, as far as he was personally concerned, for he was unable to appear in Canterbury, as he would have been arrested if he had done so.

We returned from Ramsgate, as we had agreed upon, about a fortnight after the funeral. Harry having already left for the North, papa would still further have postponed our return; but I said it would be very unpleasant whenever we returned, and we might as well go through it sooner as later.

Indeed, I got through the next fortnight better than I had expected. Every one, of course, came to call; but by that time people had heard pretty well all there was to tell, – namely, that the will was missing, – so that all I had to do was to receive their condolences. Almost all were, I believe, sincerely sorry for us, and every one remarked what an extraordinary business it was; indeed, popular opinion was strongly against the Misses Harmer, whom every one accused of having hidden the will. However, papa and I were careful never by any remarks of ours to appear to confirm these suspicions, as it was evidently our best policy to keep quiet, and let the matter seem to drop.

In the meanwhile I had commenced taking steps towards what was now our only hope, the discovery of the "priest's chamber."

The day after I returned from Ramsgate, I went round the garden to see how things were looking after my long absence, and I found our servant Andrew – who acted in the general capacity of coachman, groom, and gardener, having a boy under him to assist in all these labours – busy banking up some long rows of celery, an article on which he particularly prided himself. Andrew had been in papa's service a great many years, and papa would not have parted with him on any account. He was a very faithful, attached old man. When I say old man, I believe he was not more than seven or eight and forty; but he looked much older: his face was pinched and weatherbeaten, he stooped very much, walked with a short, quick, shuffling step, and looked as if he were momentarily on the point of falling. This was not to be wondered at, for he had never, as long as I can remember, had any legs to speak of; and now there did not seem to be the least flesh upon them. They looked, as Harry once said, exactly like a pair of very crooked mop-sticks; and as he always dressed in drab breeches and gaiters to match, it showed the extraordinary thinness of his legs to the greatest advantage. Andrew,

however, had not the least idea but that he was an active, able man; and, indeed, would sometimes in confidence lament to me, —

"Master going out in wet, cold nights to visit patients."

"But it is much worse for you than for him, Andrew," I would urge; "you are outside all in the wet, while he is inside in shelter."

"Lor', Miss Agnes, it is no account along of me. I am a young man by the side of master. He must be nigh fifteen years older than I am."

And so he was; but papa was a hale, active man, whereas poor Andrew looked as if a strong wind would blow him off his seat on the box. Even when he was at his best, and came to papa when we first went to Canterbury, and he was only thirty, I have heard papa say that he never had been at all strong; and yet he was so willing, and careful, and indefatigable, that papa put a great value on him.

Andrew ceased from working among the celery when I came up, and, touching his hat to me, inquired how I had been all this longtime.

"Bad doings at Harmer Place, Miss," he said, after a few remarks about the weather, the garden, and the horses.

"Are there, Andrew?" I asked; "anything new?"

"Very bad, Miss; half the servants have had notice to leave. There's my Mary, who has been there three years last Michaelmas, and who your papa was kind enough to recommend there as housemaid — she's got warning, and she came to me last night as savage as ever was; not because she was going to leave, miss — don't go to think such a thing; but she wanted to have given warning at once, when we found that Miss Harmer had hid away the will, and cheated you all out of your money. But I said to her, 'Don't you go to do nothing in a hurry, Mary; the will is hid away, and you may be useful somehow in watching what they two old cats — saving your presence, Miss Agnes — is up to. At any rate, you wait.' And now she's got warning to go, and she's as savage as may be that she did not have the first word. Didn't she let on to me last night though, till her mother up and told her to sit down and hold her tongue; but it were enough to aggravate the girl, surely."

"I am sorry to hear that she will have to leave, Andrew, both for her own sake and because she might, as you say, have been useful to us in making a few inquiries."

"That's just what I said to my son Thomas last night when Mary came in with the news; but he said that it did not matter so much on that account, because his Sarah's not got warning to leave, and she will find out everything that is wanted."

"And who is your son Thomas's Sarah?" I asked, smiling.

"She is the under-housemaid, Miss; and she used to go out walks with Mary on her Sunday evenings out. Thomas, he used to go out to meet his sister, and so met Sarah too; at last he goes to meet her more than Mary, and, I suppose, one of these days they will get married. She is one of the few that are to stay, Miss, for most of the old ones are going because they don't mean to keep so many servants, and they have got some new ones coming. All those who are going were recommended to Mr. Harmer by Master; and they seem to have picked them out a-purpose. Now Sarah was not; she came from the other end of the county, and was recommended to Mr. Harmer by some lady last year, at the time of all those grand doings over there; and as they don't know that her young man Thomas is my son, seeing he is in service in another place, they have not given her warning to go."

"And do you think, Andrew, that Sarah would be willing to do anything to help us?"

"Lor' bless you, Miss, she would do anything for you; she said the other day she would, and that she did not care whether she lost her place or not; she did not want to stop with thieves. Oh, you may depend on her, Miss."

"Well, Andrew, do you think I could get her to come here and have a talk with me quietly?"

"Sure enough, Miss Agnes. To-day is Friday. On Sunday evening she goes out, and will walk into town with Mary — and for the matter of that, with Tom too — and she can very well come here; no one will know her in the dark, and so she will be quite safe."

Accordingly, on Sunday evening our maid came in to say that Andrew's daughter, Mary, and another young woman, were in the hall, and would be glad to see me. And so Mary and Thomas's Sarah were shown in. Mary I knew well; indeed she had learnt her work with us as under-housemaid before she went to Mr. Harmer's. She was a stout, well-made, active girl, with a good-natured honest face, but I should have had some hesitation in entrusting any delicate and difficult task to her. Thomas's Sarah, I felt at once, had tact and intelligence sufficient for my purpose, and I was sure that I could trust her, and that she would do exactly for what I required.

Thomas had certainly shown good taste in his selection, for his Sarah was a very pretty little girl, – a slight active figure, a bright clear complexion, brown hair waving back off her forehead, a cheerful smile, large speaking eyes with a little touch of sauciness in them – which I fancied would sometimes vex and puzzle Thomas, who was a steady matter-of-fact young groom, not a little – and a very prettily cut nose and mouth. I was altogether very much taken with her appearance.

I asked them to take seats, and Sarah at once began: —

"Miss Ashleigh, I am told by" – and here she paused a little, coloured, and ended by telling a story and saying – "Mary, that I could be of service to you. I can only say that I shall be glad to do so by any means in my power; we are all at Harmer Place very sorry at your losing your rights, and should rejoice to see you restored to them."

Sarah expressed herself so well that I was really quite surprised. I thanked her for her offer, and said, "You can, indeed, do us a service which may turn out of great importance. Now I do not disguise from you, it will cost you your place if you are discovered; but I need not say that we will take care that you shall be no loser by that. Now I will at once tell you how we stand at present, and what we want to find out. We know, or at least are nearly sure, that the will exists, and that it is with some other papers large enough to fill a good-sized box. Now we strongly believe that this box is hidden away in a secret room we know to exist in the house; and what we want to find out is, where is that secret room? It must be a pretty good size – I mean much larger than a mere closet – because we know people used to lay hid there in old times." Sarah nodded, as much as to say that she had heard legends of the "priest's chamber." "Now, Sarah, the first thing we want to discover is the whereabouts of this room – and this can only be done in one way. I want the exact dimensions – that is to say, the measure, the height, length, and breadth, of every room, passage, closet, and staircase in the old part of the house; because as this room existed in the old time, it is only in the central part of the house, which was the original building, that the secret chamber need be looked for. When I have got all these measurements, and put them all down upon paper, I shall see where there is a space to fill up. Do you understand?"

Sarah did not quite understand; so I got a sheet of paper, drew a rough plan of a house, and explained the matter more fully.

Sarah understood now, and at once entered into it with all her heart.

"You see," I said, "we want the exact position of the doors, windows, and chimneys. Here is a small pocket-book and pencil: take one page for each room; mark down first in this way, the extreme length and breadth, then the positions of the doors and windows thus, and put 'in small figures' their distances from each other."

I then showed her a small plan of Harmer Place, which I had drawn from my recollection of it, and Sarah understood perfectly what she had to do.

"Make a notch the length of a yard on the handle of your broom," I said, "and measure the exact length of the bottom of your apron. With your broom you can get the height of the room, and with your apron the other measurements, so that you will be able to get all the sizes; and even if you are disturbed, no one would have the slightest idea of what you are doing."

I then asked her to measure the room we were in, and to make a little sort of plan of it, and I found her so quick and intelligent, that I felt certain she would execute her task with sufficient accuracy to enable us to find out where the secret room was situated.

The two girls then took their leave, and I really felt strong hope in the success of my plan – not indeed that it was mine, for it was Harry's idea entirely, and I only gave her the instructions he had previously given me.

After this, a small packet arrived every week, sent by Sarah, through Thomas, to his father, containing seven or eight leaves of the pocket-book.

In little more than a month we had all the measurements, and were enabled to make out the entire plan, in doing which, of course our previous knowledge of the house assisted us greatly. Papa assisted me in this. I had not, at first, told him anything of what I was doing, as I wished that, in case by any chance my scheme was detected, he should be able to say that he knew nothing about it. At last, however, I was obliged to let him into the secret, and when I told him, he was very much interested and pleased; and I do not think that I should ever have succeeded in putting the parts together, and certainly have never arrived at any accurate conclusion, without his assistance.

When it was done, we found the blank space precisely where we had anticipated that we should do. It is difficult to explain the exact position, but I will endeavour to do so.

On entering the house, from the front, one found oneself in a large square hall, from one side of which the library opened, and from the other the dining-room. Opposite to the front door was an immense fireplace, in which still stood two large iron dogs, and in which in winter a great wood fire always blazed; on one side of this fireplace, the grand staircase went up, and on the other a passage led down to a room which had originally been a drawing-room, but which, from its windows being at the back of the house, had been long since turned into a kitchen; the fireplace of this room stood back to back to the one in the hall. It was in the block contained in the square formed by the backs of the kitchen and hall, the staircase and the passage, that we came to the conclusion that the secret room must be, for, even allowing for immense thickness of masonry, there was yet a large space unaccounted for. On the floor above there was also a space, directly over this, considerably larger than would have been required for the chimneys of the hall and kitchen fire, even had there been two of them – which there were not, for Sarah found that the chimney of the hall made almost a right angle, and ran into the kitchen chimney.

Papa, after going very carefully into the measurements, came to the conclusion that the room itself was situated nearly over the hall fireplace; that it might be some seven or eight feet long, by five or six wide, and that it could be little over six feet high. He thought it was approached by some short staircase opening into the hall fireplace, or into one of the bedrooms above, which abutted on the vacant space on that floor. One of these rooms had been occupied by Herbert Harmer, and the other had been, and was still, Miss Harmer's room.

Indeed papa suspected both entrances to exist, as by them, in case of necessity, provisions could be so much more readily and secretly supplied, and escape made in some disguise from the one exit, should an entrance be forcibly made at the other.

"All this is mere guesswork, my dear; but when there is so much ground to go upon as we have got, one can guess very closely indeed to the truth."

"And where should you think, papa, that the entrance is most likely to be discovered?"

"Most likely in the hall fireplace. The back and sides, if I remember right, are formed of iron, with rude ornaments upon it. The mantelpiece, too, is of old oak, and is covered with carving; undoubtedly in some of all this the secret spring is concealed. The hall is the best place to try for another reason; early in the morning, and at various times indeed, Sarah might search among all these ornaments and knobs for the spring, and if any one came suddenly into the hall, her presence there would appear only natural; whereas in either of the bedrooms, and especially that of Mr. Harmer, which is not now in use, she could hardly be often without exciting suspicion."

Sarah came on the following Saturday evening, and I showed her the plan we had made, and explained to her where we thought the entrance was, and how she was most likely to find the secret spring.

Sarah was much pleased with the success which had so far attended her efforts, and promised to find the spring if it existed. She said she would get up half an hour before the other servants, and try every knob and roughness on or near the grate.

However, week after week rolled on, and every Saturday came a message, "No result;" and the week before Christmas she sent to say she had tried every possible place, but could not find any signs of it. I sent back in answer to ask her to try all the stones and bricks as far up the chimney as she could reach.

With Christmas, Polly came home from school, and this time to stop for good, for papa could not very well afford to keep her at so expensive a school as Grendon House; and indeed we wanted her bright face and happy laugh back again among us. Papa's practice was not very lucrative; it was a large, but not a good-paying one. A great proportion of it lay among the lower classes; in any serious cases among them he was always ready to give his time and skill. Indeed for the last three years, since there was an apparent certainty that we should be all so handsomely provided for, papa had purposely given up much of his paying practice. Many among the upper classes have the habit of calling in a medical man on the slightest pretext, and like him, indeed, to call regularly, and have an hour's chat on all sorts of subjects; this time papa could not spare, and indeed I know that he said to two or three of his very best patients, —

"You have nothing serious the matter with you. All you want is a little occasional medicine, and a good chat of a day to do you good and cheer you up; this I have no time to give you, when I have half a dozen dying people waiting anxiously for me. Send to Harper; he is a clever fellow; knows all about everything; will amuse you more than I do. He has a large family, and your money will be of use to him. If you get seriously ill, and want me, I will of course come to you."

So papa had gradually withdrawn himself from much of his paying practice; he had still an income sufficient to keep us comfortably, but it was not nearly what it had been four or five years before. However, he was quite content to work as he did, giving his skill and time to those who most required but were least able to pay for them.

Harry came home, too, a little before Christmas. He had finished his last piece of work, and had now obtained an appointment of £150 a year to superintend a railway in the course of construction in the north of Ireland.

The evening after Christmas Day I received a note from Sarah, saying, that that morning, she had, in feeling up the chimney, found a projecting knob immediately behind the mantelpiece; that on pressing this it went into the wall, and that every time it did so, she could hear a click, but that she could not find that anything else moved.

"Hurrah, Sarah!" Harry shouted when I read the note aloud; "we are on the right track. 'The king shall enjoy his own again!'" he sang in his stentorian way.

"I really do begin to think we are on the track," papa said. "You must tell Sarah that no doubt there is some other spring which must be pressed either together or before or after this; for generally there were two springs to these old hiding-places, in case one should be touched accidentally."

This I told Sarah, who came on the next Sunday evening to see me. She had rather begun to despair before; but now that she had found something tangible she became quite enthusiastic, and said that she was determined to find the other spring if she were years engaged in the search. She was now certain that we were right, that the secret chamber existed, and that the entrance was there, of neither of which facts had she been quite sure in her own mind before.

CHAPTER IV

EVIL DAYS

With the cheering thought that she was punished, and that perhaps her fault was thus in some little way atoned for, and with the happy conviction that her husband loved her for her own sake, and not for that of her money, Sophy Gregory recovered from the weight of her sorrow and remorse more quickly than could have been expected; and by the end of another ten days she was able to leave her room, and go for a little walk leaning upon Robert's arm. That evening they were sitting before the fire; Robert looking moodily into it, but sometimes rousing himself and trying to talk pleasantly to Sophy, who was watching him a little anxiously, when she said, after one of these pauses, —

"I think, Robert, now that I am getting strong again, we ought to talk about the future. I am sure that by the time we have paid all we owe here, we shall not have much left out of our hundred pounds."

Sophy might have said, "my hundred pounds;" for it was she who had furnished the funds for their elopement. Mr. Harmer had been in the habit of giving her money from time to time, for which she had little use; and this had, at the time she left home with Robert Gregory, accumulated to rather more than a hundred pounds.

"The first thing to be done, Robert, is to find some very cheap lodgings. How cheap could you get two little rooms?"

Robert roused himself; he was pleased at Sophy's broaching the subject; for he had been all day wondering what they were to do, as of course it was out of the question that they could remain where they were. It was a small private hotel where Robert had gone the night of their return from Scotland, thinking that their stay there would not have exceeded three or four days at most, whereas now it had run on to more than a fortnight.

"You are quite right, Sophy, although I did not like to begin the conversation. It seems so hard for you, accustomed as you have been to luxury, to go into all the discomfort of small lodgings."

"My dear Robert," Sophy said, "please don't talk in that way. I am your wife, and shall be very happy anywhere with you; besides I have not been always accustomed to luxury. I was born and lived until I was twelve or thirteen in a cottage as a poor village girl. And please do not remind me of scenes where I had no right, and where I never deserved to have been. Do not let us think of the past at all, Robert; it is perhaps not very pleasant for either of us. Let us think of the future — it is all before us, and we are not worse off than thousands of others; but you did not answer my question, how cheap could we get a little parlour and bedroom?"

"We could get them, Sophy, in some out-of-the-way place, such as Islington, or Camberwell, or Chelsea, at about twelve shillings a week; but remember, they would be very small."

"That is of no consequence at all," Sophy said, cheerfully. "Now I will tell you what I have been thinking of. I have been thinking that when we have gone into some little lodgings, and people come to know us, the tradesmen round will let me put some cards into the windows, saying that a lady wishes to give some lessons in music, French, and German. If I charge very little, say one shilling an hour, I should think I might get five or six daily pupils, which would bring us in some thirty or thirty-six shillings a week, and we might manage on that, Robert, for a time; after paying our bill here, there will be enough to keep us for some time till I can get some pupils."

"Sophy," Robert said, in a deep, husky voice, "God forgive me, I have been a great scoundrel. I have ruined you. I have dragged you down to this; and here are you now, hardly able to walk, offering to support us both. Oh, Sophy, I wish to heaven I had never known you." And the strong, bad man put his face between his hands and fairly cried.

"But I do not wish so, Robert," Sophy said, getting up from her seat, taking his hands from his face, kissing him fondly, and then seating herself on his knees, and nestling up to him as a child

might have done; "I do not, and therefore why should you? Would it not be a pleasure to you to work for both of us, if you had any way to do so? but as of course you cannot, why should I not have the pleasure? It need not in any case be for long, dear. Agnes Ashleigh in her letter this morning says that she does not give up hope, and that she has already got a servant at Harmer Place to look for the secret chamber; let us wait for the issue of the search, and let me do as I propose for that time. If after a time the will cannot be found, will it not be better for us to go either to Australia or America? I hear any one can get work there, and we will both work and get quite rich, and that will be much more enjoyable than owing it to another. I am sure Dr. Ashleigh will lend us enough money to take us out there. What do you think, Robert?"

"Yes, darling, it will be far best. I shall never do any good here: out there I may. But I shall not give up the will for a long time yet; but once assured, quite assured, that it is not in existence, I shall be ready to start with you at once."

And then they talked over a new life in a new land, as thousands and thousands have done since then; and the future looked bright and happy out there. Australia is indeed a land of promise, a bright star in the horizon, to countless numbers whose fate it never is to reach it; but who have yet – when almost hopeless of keeping themselves afloat in the fierce struggle for existence in this crowded land – looked longingly over across the wide ocean, and said, "At the worst, we can go there, where every strong arm and willing heart is welcome. If we cannot get on here, we will go." Perhaps they never do go, but still it has served its purpose; it has given them hope when hope was most needed, and when without it they might have yielded in despair to the reverses of fortune.

The next morning Robert Gregory started in search of lodgings, and returned in the afternoon, saying that he had found some across in Lambeth, which were very small, but were clean and respectable, and which were to be had for the twelve shillings a week. Into this they moved next day, and they found on paying their hotel bill, that they had twenty pounds left out of Sophy's hundred, and this they calculated would, with care, last for three months. The lodgings, which were situated in King Edward Street, Westminster Bridge Road, consisted of a parlour, and bedroom behind it. The parlour was very small, but clean, and Sophy felt quite happy as mistress of her little domain, which under her care soon assumed a homelike appearance.

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