

Boothby Guy

The Childerbridge Mystery



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CHAPTER I

One had only to look at William Standerton in order to realise that he was, what is usually termed, a success in life. His whole appearance gave one this impression; the bold unflinching eyes, the square, resolute chin, the well-moulded lips, and the lofty forehead, showed a determination and ability to succeed that was beyond the ordinary.

The son of a hardworking country doctor, it had fallen to his lot to emigrate to Australia at the early age of sixteen. He had not a friend in that vast, but sparsely-populated, land, and was without influence of any sort to help him forward. When, therefore, in fifty years' time, he found himself worth upwards of half-a-million pounds sterling, he was able to tell himself that he owed his good fortune not only to his own industry, but also to his shrewd business capabilities. It is true that he had had the advantage of reaching the Colonies when they were in their infancy, but even with this fact taken into consideration, his was certainly a great performance. He had invested his money prudently, and the rich Stations, and the streets of House Property, were the result.

Above all things, William Standerton was a kindly-natured man. Success had not spoilt him in this respect. No genuine case of necessity ever appealed to him in vain. He gave liberally, but discriminatingly, and in so doing never advertised himself.

Strange to say, he was nearly thirty years of age before he even contemplated matrimony. The reason for this must be ascribed to the fact that his life had been essentially an active one, and up to that time he had not been brought very much into contact with the opposite sex. When, however, he fell in love with pretty Jane McCalmont – then employed as a governess on a neighbouring Property – he did so with an enthusiasm that amply made up for lost time.

She married him, and presented him with two children – a boy and a girl. Within three months of the latter's arrival into the world, the mother laid down her gentle life, leaving her husband a well nigh broken-hearted man. After her death the years passed slowly by with almost monotonous sameness. The boy James, and the girl Alice, in due course commenced their education, and in so doing left their childhood behind them. Their devotion to their father was only equalled by his love for them. He could scarcely bear them out of his sight, and entered into all their sports, their joys and troubles, as if he himself were a child once more.

It was not, however, until James was a tall, handsome young fellow of four-and-twenty, and Alice a winsome maid of twenty, that he arrived at the conclusion that his affairs no longer needed his personal supervision, and that he was at liberty to return to the Mother Country, and settle down in it, should he feel disposed to do so.

"It's all very well for you young folk to talk of my leaving Australia," he said, addressing his son and daughter; "but I shall be like a fish out of water in the Old Country. You forget that I have not seen her for half-a-century."

"All the more reason that you should lose no time in returning, father," observed Miss Alice, to whom a visit to England had been the one ambition of her life. "You shall take us about and show us everything; the little village in which you were born, the river in which you used to fish, and the wood in which the keeper so nearly caught you with the rabbit in your pocket. Then you shall buy an old-fashioned country house and we'll settle down. It will be lovely!"

Her father pinched her shapely little ear, and then looked away across the garden to where a railed enclosure was to be seen, on the crest of a slight eminence. He remembered that the woman

lying there had more than once expressed a hope that, in the days then to come, they would be able to return to their native country together, and take their children with them.

"Well, well, my dear," he said, glancing down at the daughter who so much resembled her mother, "you shall have it your own way. We will go Home as soon as possible, and do just as you propose. I think we may be able to afford a house in the country, and perhaps, that is if you are a very dutiful daughter, another in London. It is just possible that there may be one or two people living who may remember William Standerton, and, for that reason, be kind to his son and daughter. But I fear it will be rather a wrench for me to leave these places that I have built up with my own hands, and to which I have devoted such a large portion of my life. However, one can be in harness too long, and when once Australia is left behind me, I have no doubt I shall enjoy my holiday as much as any one else."

In this manner the matter was settled. Competent and trustworthy managers were engaged, and the valuable properties, which had contributed so large a share to William Standerton's wealth, were handed over to their charge.

On the night before they were to leave Mudrapilla, their favourite and largest station, situated on the Darling River, in New South Wales, James Standerton, called Jim by his family and a multifarious collection of friends, was slowly making his way along the left bank of the River. He had ridden out to say good-bye to the manager of the Out Station, and as his horse picked his way along the bank, he was thinking of England, and of what his life was to be there. Suddenly he became aware of a man seated beneath a giant gum tree near the water's edge. From the fact that the individual in question had kindled a fire and was boiling his billy, he felt justified in assuming that he was preparing his camp for the night. He accordingly rode up and accosted him. The man was a Foot Traveller, or Swagman, and presented a somewhat singular appearance. Though he was seated, Jim could see that he was tall, though sparsely built. His age must have been about sixty years; his hair was streaked with grey, as also was his beard. Taken altogether his countenance was of the description usually described as "hatchet-faced." He was dressed after the swagman fashion, certainly no better, and perhaps a little worse. Yet with it all he had the appearance of having once been in better circumstances. He looked up as Jim approached, and nodded a "good evening." The latter returned the salutation in his customary pleasant fashion.

"How much further is it to the Head Station?" the man on the ground then enquired.

"Between four and five miles," Jim replied. "Are you making your way there?"

"That's my idea," the stranger answered. "I hear the owner is leaving for England, and I am desirous of having a few words with him before he goes."

"You know him then?"

"I've known him over thirty years," returned the other. "But he has gone up in the world while, as you will gather, I have done the opposite. Standerton was always one of Life's lucky ones; I am one of Her failures. Anything *he* puts his hand to prospers; while I, let it be ever so promising, have only to touch a bit of business, and it goes to pieces like a house of cards."

The stranger paused and took stock of the young man seated upon the horse.

"Now I come to think of it," he continued, after having regarded Jim intently for some seconds, "you're not unlike Standerton yourself. You've got the same eyes and chin, and the same cut of mouth."

"It's very probable, for I am his son," Jim replied. "What is it you want with my father?"

"That's best known to myself," the stranger returned, with a surliness in his tone that he had not exhibited before. "When you get home, just tell your governor that Richard Murbridge is on his way up the river to call upon him, and that he will try to put in an appearance at the Station early to-morrow morning. I don't fancy he'll be best pleased to see me, but I must have an interview with him before he leaves Australia, if I have to follow him round the country to get it."

"You had better be careful how you talk to my father," said Jim. "If you are as well acquainted with him as you pretend to be, you should know that he is not the sort of man to be trifled with."

"I know him as well as you do," the other answered, lifting his billy from the fire as he spoke. "William Standerton and I knew each other long before you were born. If it's only the distance you say to the Head Station, you can tell him I'll be there by breakfast time. I'm a bit foot-sore, it is true, but I can do the journey in an hour and a-half. On what day does the coach pass, going South?"

"To-morrow morning," Jim replied. "Do you want to catch it?"

"It's very probable I shall," said Murbridge. "Though I wasn't born in this cursed country, I'm Australian enough never to foot it when I can ride. Good Heavens! had any one told me, twenty-five years ago, that I should eventually become a Darling Whaler, I'd have knocked, what I should have thought then to be the lie, down their throats. But what I am you can see. Fate again, I suppose? However, I was always of a hopeful disposition, even when my affairs appeared to be at their worst, so I'll pin my faith on to-morrow. Must you be going? Well, in that case, I'll wish you good-night! Don't forget my message to your father."

Jim bade him good-night, and then continued his ride home. As he went he pondered upon his curious interview with the stranger he had just left, and while so doing, wondered as to his reasons for desiring to see his father.

"The fellow was associated with him in business at some time or another, I suppose?" he said to himself, "and, having failed, is now on his beam ends and wants assistance. Poor old Governor, there are times when he is called upon to pay pretty dearly for his success in life."

James Standerton was proud of his father, as he had good reason to be. He respected him above all living men, and woe betide the individual who might have anything to say against the sire in the son's hearing.

At last he reached the Home Paddock and cantered up the slope towards the cluster of houses, that resembled a small village, and surrendered his horse to a black boy in the stable yard. With a varied collection of dogs at his heels he made his way up the garden path, beneath the trellised vines to the house, in the broad verandah of which he could see his sister and father seated at tea.

"Well, my lad," said Standerton senior, when Jim joined them, "I suppose you've seen Riddington, and have bade him good-bye. It's my opinion he will miss you as much as any one in the neighbourhood. You two have always been such friends."

"That's just what Riddington said," James replied. "He wishes he were coming with us. Poor chap, he doesn't seem to think he'll ever see England again."

Alice looked up from the cup of tea she was pouring out for her brother.

"I fancy there is more in poor Mr. Riddington's case than meets the eye," she said sympathetically. "Nobody knows quite why he left England. He is always very reticent upon that point. I cannot help thinking, however, that there was a lady in the case."

"There always is," answered her brother. "There's a woman in every mystery, and when you've found her it's a mystery no longer. By the way, father, as I was coming home, I came across a fellow camped up the river. He asked me what the distance was to here, and said he was on his way to see you. He will be here the first thing to-morrow morning."

"He wants work, I suppose?"

"No, I shouldn't say that he did," James replied. "He said that he wanted to see you on important private business."

"Indeed? I wonder who it can be? A swagman who has important private business with me is a *rara avis*. He didn't happen to tell you his name, I suppose?"

"Yes, he did," Jim answered, placing his cup on the floor as he spoke. "His name is Richard Murbridge, or something like it."

The effect upon the elder man was electrical.

"Richard Murbridge?" he cried. "Camped on the river and coming here?"

His son and daughter watched him with the greatest astonishment depicted upon their faces. It was not often that their father gave way to so much emotion. At last with an effort he recovered himself, and, remarking that Murbridge was a man with whom he had had business in bygone days, and that he had not seen him for many years, went into the house.

"I wonder who this Murbridge can be?" said James to his sister, when they were alone together. "I didn't like the look of him, and if I were the Governor, I should send him about his business as quickly as possible."

When he had thus expressed himself, Jim left his sister and went off to enjoy that luxury so dear to the heart of a bushman after his day's work, a swim in the river. He was some time over it, and when he emerged, he was informed that his presence was required at the Store. Thither he repaired to arbitrate in the quarrel of two Boundary Riders. In consequence, more than an hour elapsed before he returned to the house. His sister greeted him at the gate with a frightened look upon her face.

"Have you seen father?" she enquired.

"No," he answered. "Isn't he in the house?"

"He went down the track just after you left, riding old Peter, and as he passed the gate he called to me not to keep dinner for him, as he did not know how long it might be before he would be back. Jim, I believe he is gone to see that man you told him of, and the thought frightens me."

"You needn't be alarmed," her brother answered. "Father is quite able to take care of himself."

But though he spoke with so much assurance, in his own mind he was not satisfied. He remembered that it had been his impression that the swagman bore his father a grudge, and the thought made him uneasy.

"Look here, Alice," he said, after he had considered the matter for some time, "I've a good mind to go back along the track, and to bring the Governor home with me. What do you think?"

"It would relieve me of a good deal of anxiety if you would," the girl replied. "I don't like the thought of his going off like this."

Jim accordingly went to the end of the verandah, and called to the stables for a horse. As soon as the animal was forthcoming he mounted it, and set off in the direction his father had taken. It was now quite dark, but so well did he know it, that he could have found his way along the track blindfolded, if necessary. It ran parallel with the river, the high trees on the banks of which could be seen, standing out like a black line against the starlit sky. He let himself out of the Home Paddock, passed the Woolshed, and eventually found himself approaching the spot where Murbridge had made his camp. Then the twinkle of the fire came into view, and a few seconds later he was able to distinguish his father standing beside his grey horse, talking to a man who was lying upon the ground near the fire. Not wishing to play the part of an eavesdropper, he was careful to remain out of earshot. It was only when he saw the man rise, heard him utter a threat, and then approach his father, that he rode up. Neither of the men became aware of his approach until he was close upon them, and then both turned in surprise.

"James, what is the meaning of this?" his father cried. "What are you doing here, my lad?"

For a moment the other scarcely knew what reply to make. At last he said: —

"I came to assure myself of your safety, father. Alice told me you had gone out, and I guessed your errand."

"A very dutiful son," sneered Murbridge. "You are to be congratulated upon him, William."

James stared at the individual before him with astonishment. What right had such a man to address his father by his Christian name?

"Be careful," said Standerton, speaking to the man before him. "You know what I said to you just now, and you are also aware that I never break my word. Fail to keep *your* part of the contract, and I shall no longer keep mine."

"You know that you have your heel upon my neck," the other retorted; "and also that I cannot help myself. But I pray that the time may come when I shall be able to be even with you. To think

that I am tramping this infernal country, like a dead beat Sundowner, without a cent in my pocket, while you are enjoying all the luxuries and happiness that life and wealth can give. It's enough to make a man turn Anarchist right off."

"That will do," said William Standerton quietly. "Remember that to-morrow morning you will go back to the place whence you came; also bear in mind the fact that if you endeavour to molest me, or to communicate with me, or with any member of my family, I will carry out the threat I uttered just now. That is all I have to say to you."

Then Standerton mounted his horse, and turning to his son, said: —

"Let us return home, James. It is getting late, and your sister will be uneasy."

Without another word to the man beside the fire, they rode off, leaving him looking after them with an expression of deadly hatred upon his face. For some distance the two men rode in silence. Jim could see that his father was much agitated, and for that reason he forbore to put any question to him concerning the individual they had just left. Indeed it was not until they had passed the Woolshed once more, and had half completed their return journey that the elder man spoke.

"How much of my conversation with that man did you overhear?"

"Nothing but what I heard when Murbridge rose to his feet," James replied. "I should not have come near you had I not heard his threat and seen him approach you. Who is the man, father?"

"His name is Murbridge," said Standerton, with what was plainly an effort. "He is a person with whom I was on friendly terms many years ago, but he has now got into disgrace, and, I fear has sunk very low indeed. I do not think he will trouble us any more, however, so we will not refer to him again."

All that evening William Standerton was visibly depressed. He excused himself from playing his usual game of cribbage with his daughter, on the plea that he had a headache. Next morning, however, he was quite himself. He went out to his last day's work in the bush as cheerfully as he had ever done. But had any one followed him, he, or she, would have discovered that the first thing he did was to ride to the spot where Richard Murbridge had slept on the previous night. The camp was deserted, and only a thin column of smoke, rising from the embers of the fire, remained to show that the place had been lately occupied.

"He has gone, then," said Standerton to himself. "Thank goodness! But I know him too well to be able to assure myself that I have seen the last of him. Next week, however, we shall put the High Seas between us, and then, please God, I shall see no more of him for the remainder of my existence."

At that moment the man of whom he was speaking, was tramping along the dusty track with a tempest of rage in his heart.

"He may travel wherever he pleases," he was muttering to himself, "but he won't get away from me. He may go to the end of the world, and I'll follow him and be at his elbow, just to remind him who I am, and of the claims I have upon him. Yes, William Standerton, you may make up your mind upon one point, and that is the fact that I'll be even with you yet!"

CHAPTER II

Childerbridge Manor is certainly one of the finest mansions in the County of Midlandshire. It stands in a finely-timbered park of about two hundred acres, which rises behind the house to a considerable elevation. The building itself dates back to the reign of Good Queen Bess, and is declared by competent authorities to be an excellent example of the architecture of that period. It is large, and presents a most imposing appearance as one approaches it by the carriage drive. The interior is picturesque in the extreme; the hall is large and square, panelled with oak, and having a massive staircase of the same wood leading from it to a music gallery above. There are other staircases in various parts of the building, curious corkscrew affairs, in ascending which one is in continual danger of knocking one's head against the ceiling and corners. There are long, and somewhat dark corridors, down which it would be almost possible to drive the proverbial coach and four, whilst there are also numerous secret passages, and a private chapel, with stained glass windows connected with the house by means of a short tunnel. That such a mansion should be provided with a family ghost, goes without saying. Indeed, Childerbridge Manor is reputed to possess a small army of them. Elderly gentlemen who carry their heads under their arms; beautiful women who glide down the corridors, weeping as they go; and last but not least, a deformity, invariably dressed in black, who is much given to sitting on the foot rails of beds, and pointing, with the first finger of his right hand, to the ceiling above. So well authenticated are the legends of these apparitions, that it would be almost an impossibility to induce any man, woman, or child, from the village, to enter the gates of Childerbridge Manor after dusk. Servants who arrived were told the stories afloat concerning their new abode; and the sound of the wind sighing round the house on a gusty night immediately set their imaginations to work, with the result of their giving notice of their intention to leave on the following morning. "They had seen the White Lady," they declared, had heard her pitiful death cry, and vowed that nothing could induce them to remain in such a house twenty-four hours longer. In fact, "As haunted as the Manor House" had become a popular expression in the neighbourhood.

When the Standerton's reached England, they set to work to discover for themselves a home. They explored the country from east to west, and from north to south, but without success. Eventually Childerbridge Manor was offered them by an Agent in London, and after they had spent a considerable portion of their time poring over photographs of the house and grounds, they arrived at the conclusion that they had discovered a place likely to suit them. On a lovely day in early summer they travelled down from London to inspect it, and were far from being disappointed in what they saw.

When they entered the gates the park lay before them, bathed in sunlight, the rooks cawed lazily in the trees, while the deer regarded them, from their couches in the bracken, with mild, contemplative eyes. After the scorched up plains of Australia, the picture was an exceedingly attractive one. The house itself, they could see would require a considerable outlay in repairs, but when that work was accomplished, it would be as perfect a residence as any that could be found. The stables were large enough to hold half a hundred horses, but for many years had been tenanted only by rats. The same might be said of the buildings of the Home Farm!

"However, taking one thing with another," said Mr. Standerton, after he had inspected everything, and arrived at a proper understanding of the possibilities of the place, "I think it will suit us. The Society of the neighbourhood, they tell me, is good, while the hunting is undeniable. It is within easy reach of London, and all matters taken into consideration, I don't think we shall better it."

In this manner it was settled. A contract for repairs and decorations was placed in the hands of a well-known Metropolitan firm, a vast amount was spent in furnishing, and in due course Childerbridge Manor House was once more occupied. The County immediately came to call, invitations rained in, and having been duly inspected and not found wanting, the newcomers were voted a decided acquisition to the neighbourhood. William Standerton's wealth soon became

proverbial, and mothers, with marriageable sons and daughters, vied with each other in their attentions. James Standerton, as I have already said, was a presentable young man. His height was something over six feet, his shoulders were broad and muscular, as became a man who had lived his life doing hard work in the open air, his eyes were grey like his father's, and there was the same moulding of the mouth and chin. In fact, he was an individual with whom, one felt at first glance, it would be better to be on good terms than bad.

One evening a month or so after their arrival at the Manor House, Jim was driving home from the railway station. He had been spending the day in London buying polo ponies, and was anxious to get home as quickly as possible. His horse was a magnificent animal, and spun the high dogcart along the road at a rattling pace. When he was scarcely more than half a mile from the lodge gates of his own home, he became aware of a lady walking along the footpath in front of him. She was accompanied by a mastiff puppy, who gambolled awkwardly beside her. As the dogcart approached them the puppy dashed out into the road, directly in front of the fast-trotting horse. As may be imagined the result was inevitable. The dog was knocked down, and it was only by a miracle that the horse did not go down also. The girl uttered a little scream, then the groom jumped from his seat and ran to the frightened animal's head. Jim also descended to ascertain the extent of injuries the horse and dog had sustained. Fortunately the former was unhurt; not so the author of the mischief, however. He had been kicked on the head, and one of his forepaws was crushed and bleeding.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am," said Jim, apologetically to the young lady, when he had carried her pet to the footpath. "I am afraid I was very careless."

"You must not say that," she answered. "It was not your fault at all. If my silly dog had not run into the road it would not have happened. Do you think his leg is broken?"

Jim knelt on the edge of the path beside the dog and carefully examined his injuries. His bush life had given him a considerable insight into the science of surgery, and it stood him in good stead now.

"No," he said, when his examination was at an end, "his leg is not broken, though I'm afraid it is rather badly injured."

In spite of the young lady's protests, he took his handkerchief from his pocket and bound up the injured limb. The next thing to be decided was how to get the animal home. It could not walk, and it was manifestly impossible that the young lady should carry him.

"Won't you let me put him in the cart and drive you both home?" Jim asked. "I should be glad to do so, if I may."

As he said this he looked more closely at the girl before him, and realised that she was decidedly pretty.

"I am afraid there is nothing else to be done," she said, and then, as if she feared this might be considered an ungracious speech, she added: "But I fear I am putting you to a great deal of trouble, Mr. Standerton."

Jim looked at her in some surprise.

"You know my name, then?" he said.

"As you see," she answered, with a smile at his astonishment. "I called upon your sister yesterday. My name is Decie, and I live at the Dower House, with my guardian, Mr. Abraham Bursfield."

"In that case, as we are neighbours," said Jim, "and I must claim a neighbour's privilege in helping you. Allow me put the dog in the cart."

So saying he picked the animal up and carried it tenderly to the dogcart, under the seat of which he placed it. He then assisted Miss Decie to her seat and took his place beside her. When the groom had seated himself at the back, they set off in the direction of the Dower House, a curious rambling building, situated in a remote corner of Childerbridge Park. As they drove along they discussed the neighbourhood, the prospects of the shooting, and Jim learned, among other things, that Miss Decie

was fond of riding, but that old Mr. Bursfield would not allow her a horse, that she preferred a country life to that of town, and incidentally that she had been eight years under her guardian's care. Almost before they knew where they were they had reached the cross roads that skirted the edge of the Park, and were approaching the Dower House. It was a curious old building, older perhaps than the Manor House, to which it had once belonged. In front it had a quaint description of courtyard, surrounded by high walls covered with ivy. A flagged path led from the gates, which, Jim discovered later, had not been opened for many years, to the front door, on either side of which was a roughly trimmed lawn. Pulling up at the gates, the young man descended, and helped Miss Decie to alight.

"You must allow me to carry your dog into the house for you," he said, as he lifted the poor beast from the cart.

A postern door admitted them to the courtyard and they made their way, side by side, along the flagged path to the house. When they had rung the bell the door was opened to them by an ancient man-servant, whose age could scarcely have been less than four-score. He looked from his mistress to the young man, as if he were unable to comprehend the situation.

"Isaac," said Miss Decie, "Tory has met with an accident, and Mr. Standerton has very kindly brought him home for me." Then to Jim she added: – "Please come in, Mr. Standerton, and let me relieve you of your burden."

But Jim would not hear of it. Accompanied by Miss Decie he carried the animal to the loose box in the deserted stables at the back of the house, where he had his quarters. This task accomplished, they returned to the house once more.

"I believe you have not yet met my guardian, Mr. Bursfield," said Miss Decie, as they passed along the oak-panelled hall. Then, as if to excuse the fact that the other had not paid the usual neighbourly call, she added: "He is a very old man, you know, and seldom leaves the house."

As she said this, she paused before a door, the handle of which she turned. The room in which Jim found himself a moment later was a fine one. The walls, like the rest of the house, were panelled, but owing to the number of books the room contained, very little of the oak was visible. There were books on the shelves, books on the tables, and books on the floor. In the centre of the room stood a large writing-table, at which an old man was seated. He was a strange-looking individual; his face was lined with innumerable wrinkles, his hair was snow-white and descended to his shoulders. He wore a rusty velvet coat and a skull cap of the same material.

He looked up as the pair entered, and his glance rested on Jim with some surprise.

"Grandfather," said Miss Decie, for, as Jim afterwards discovered, she invariably addressed the venerable gentleman by this title, though she was in no way related to him, "pray let me introduce you to Mr. Standerton, who has most kindly brought poor Tory home for me."

The old man extended a shrivelled hand.

"I am happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Standerton," he said, "and I am grateful to you for the service you have rendered Miss Decie. I must apologise for not having paid you and your father the customary visit of courtesy, but, as you have perhaps heard, I am a recluse, and seldom venture from the house. I trust you like Childerbridge?"

"We are delighted with it," Jim replied. "It is a very beautiful and interesting old house. Unfortunately, however, we have been able to gather very little of its history. I have heard it said that you know more about it than any one in the neighbourhood."

"I do indeed," Mr. Bursfield replied. "No one knows it better than I do. Until a hundred years ago it was the home of my own family. My father sold it, reserving only the Dower House for his own use. Since then the estate has fallen upon evil times."

He paused for a moment and sat looking into the fireplace, as if he had forgotten his visitor's presence. Then he added as to himself:

"No one who has taken the place has prospered. There is a curse upon it."

"I sincerely hope not," Jim answered. "It would be a bad look out for us if that were so."

"I beg your pardon," the old man returned, almost hastily. "For the moment I was not thinking of what I was saying. I did not mean of course that the curse would affect your family. There is no sort of reason why it should. But the series of coincidences, if by such a term we may designate them, have certainly been remarkable. Sir Giles Sheffield purchased it from my father, and was thrown from his horse, and killed at his own front door. His son Peter was found dead in his bed, some say murdered, others that he was frightened to death by something, or someone, he had seen; while his second son, William, was shot in a duel in Paris, the day after the news reached him that he had come into the property. The Shepfields being only too anxious to dispose of it, it was sold to the newly-made Lord Childerbridge, who was eager to acquire it possibly on account of the name. He remained two years there, but at the end of that period he also had had enough of the place, and left it quite suddenly, vowing that he would never enter its doors again. After that it was occupied off and on by a variety of tenants, but for the last five years it has been unoccupied. I hear that your father has worked wonders with it, and that he has almost turned it into a new place."

"He has had the work done very carefully," Jim replied. "It is very difficult to repair an old mansion like Childerbridge without making such repairs too apparent."

"I quite agree with you," said the old man drily. "Your modern architect is no respecter of anything antiquated as a rule."

"And now I must bid you good-evening," said James. "My father and sister will be wondering what has become of me."

He shook hands with Mr. Bursfield, who begged him to excuse him for not accompanying him to the door, and then followed Miss Decie from the room. They bade each other adieu at the gate.

"I hope your dog will soon be himself again," said Jim, in the hope of being able to prolong the interview, if only for a few moments. "If you would like me to have him for a few days I would do what I could for him, and I would see that he is properly looked after."

"I could not think of giving you so much trouble," she returned. "I think he will be all right here. I feel certain I shall be able to do all that is necessary. Will you give my kind regards to your sister? I should like to tell you that I admire her very much, Mr. Standerton."

"It is very good of you to say so," he replied. Then clutching at the hope thus presented to him, he added, "I trust you and she will be great friends."

"I hope so," said Miss Decie, and thereupon bade him good-night.

As he went out to his cart he felt convinced in his own mind that he had just parted from the most charming girl he had ever met in his life. He reflected upon the matter as he completed the short distance that separated him from his home, and when he joined his sister in the drawing-room later, he questioned her concerning her new acquaintance.

"She must lead a very lonely life," said Jim. "I was introduced to the old gentleman she calls grandfather, and if his society is all she has to depend upon, then I do not envy her her lot."

His sister had a suspicion of what was in his mind though she did not say so. Like her brother she had taken a great liking to the girl, and there was every probability, as time went on, of their becoming firm friends.

"It may interest you to hear that she is coming to tea with me on Thursday," said Alice.

Jim *was* interested, and to prove it registered a mental vow that he would make a point of being at home that day. As a matter of fact he was, and was even more impressed than before.

From that day Miss Decie spent a large proportion of her time at the Manor House. In less than a month she had become Alice's own particular friend, and Jim felt that the whole current of his life had been changed. What Mr. Bursfield thought of the turn affairs had taken can be seen now, but at the time his views were only a matter of conjecture. That Jim and Miss Decie had managed to fall in love with each other was quite certain, and that William Standerton approved of his son's choice was another point that admitted of no doubt. Helen Decie with her pretty face, and charming manners, was a general favourite. At that stage their wooing was a matter-of-fact one in the extreme. Jim had

no rival, and at the outset no difficulties worth dignifying with the name. He was permitted unlimited opportunities of seeing the object of his affections and, when the time was ripe, and he informed her of the state of his feelings towards herself, she gave him her hand, and promised, without any hysterical fuss, to be his wife, with the full intention of doing her utmost to make him happy.

"But, Jim," she said, "before you do anything else, you must see Mr. Bursfield and obtain his consent. He is my guardian, you know, and has been so good to me that I can do nothing without his approval."

"I will see him to-morrow morning," Jim replied, "and I fancy I can tell you what his answer will be. How could it be otherwise when he knows that your happiness is at stake?"

"I hope it will be as you say," she answered, but not with her usual cheerfulness. "Somehow or another grandfather always looks at things in a different light to other people."

"You may be sure I will do my best to get him to look at it as we want him to," her lover returned. "I will bring every argument I can think of to bear upon him."

Needless to say, Mr. Standerton, when he heard the news, was delighted, while Alice professed herself overjoyed at the thought of having Helen for her sister. In Jim's mind, however, there was the remembrance of Abraham Bursfield, and of the interview that had to be got through with that gentleman.

"It's no use beating about the bush or delaying matters," he said to himself. "I'll walk back with Helen and get it over to-night instead of to-morrow morning."

He informed his sweetheart of his intention. She signified her approval, and together they strolled across the Park towards the little gate that opened into the grounds of the Dower House. It was a lovely evening, and, as you may suppose, they were as happy a young couple as could have been found in the length and breadth of England. Their engagement had scarcely commenced, yet Jim was already full of plans for the future.

"I shall take you from that dreary old house," he said, nodding his head in the direction of the building they were approaching, "and we will find a place somewhere in the neighbourhood. How you have managed to exist here for eight years I cannot imagine."

"It has been dull certainly," she answered, "but I have the house and my grandfather to look after, so that my time is fairly well taken up."

"You must have felt that you were buried alive," he answered. "In the future, however, we'll change all that. You shall go where, and do, just as you please."

She shook her head.

"To make you happy," she said, "will be enough for me."

CHAPTER III

On reaching the house, Jim bade the butler inform his master that Mr. Standerton would like to see him. Isaac looked at him as if he were desirous of making sure of his business before he admitted him, then he hobbled off in the direction of his master's study, to presently return with the message that Mr. Bursfield would see Mr. Standerton if he would be pleased to step that way. Jim thereupon followed the old man into the room in which he had first made Abraham Bursfield's acquaintance some four months before. As on that memorable occasion, he found that gentleman seated at his desk, looking very much as if he had not moved from it in all that time.

"I wish you good evening, Mr. Standerton," he said, motioning his visitor to a chair. "To what may I attribute the honour of this visit?"

"I have come to you on a most important errand," Jim replied. "Its purport may surprise you, but I hope it will not disappoint you."

"May I ask that you will be good enough to tell me what that errand is," said the old gentleman drily. "I shall then be better able to give you my opinion."

"To sum it up in a few words," Jim answered, "I have this afternoon asked Miss Decie to become my wife, and she has promised to do so. I am here to ask your approval."

Bursfield was silent for a few moments. Then he looked sharply up at the young man.

"You are of course aware that Miss Decie is only my adopted granddaughter, and that she has not the least shadow of a claim, either upon me, or upon such remnants of property as I may possess."

"I am quite aware of it," Jim replied. "Miss Decie has told me of her position, and of your goodness to her."

"The latter of which she is endeavouring to repay by leaving me to spend the rest of my miserable existence alone. A pretty picture of gratitude, is it not? But it is the world all over!"

"I am sure she will always entertain a feeling of profound gratitude towards you," protested Jim. "She invariably speaks of you with the greatest affection."

"I am indeed indebted to her for her consideration," retorted the other with a sneer. "Unfortunately, shall I say, for you, I prefer something more than words. No, Mr. Standerton, I cannot give my consent to your engagement."

Jim could only stare in complete astonishment. He had never expected this.

"You do not mean that you are going to forbid it?" he ejaculated when he had recovered somewhat from his surprise.

"I am reluctantly compelled to admit that that *is* my intention. Believe me, I have the best of reasons for acting thus. Possibly my decision may cause you pain. It is irrevocable, however. At my death Helen will be able to do as she pleases, but until that event takes place, she must remain with me."

He took up his pen as if to continue his writing, and so end the interview.

"But, Mr. Bursfield, this is an unheard-of determination," cried the young man.

"That may be," was the reply. "I believe I have the reputation for being somewhat singular. My so-called granddaughter is a good girl, and if I know anything of her character, she will do as I wish in this matter."

Jim rose to his feet and crossed to the door as if to leave. When he reached it, however, he turned and faced Mr. Bursfield.

"You are quite sure that nothing I can say or do will induce you to alter your decision?" he enquired.

"Quite," the other replied.

"Then allow me to give you fair warning that I intend to marry Miss Decie," retorted Jim, who by this time had quite lost his temper.

"You are at liberty to do so when I am dead," Mr. Bursfield replied, and then continued his writing as if nothing out of the common had occurred.

Without another word Jim left the room. He had arranged that he should meet Helen in the garden afterwards. It was with a woe-begone face, however, that he greeted her.

"While he lives he absolutely refuses to sanction our engagement," he began. "For some reason of his own he declines to consider the matter for a moment. He says that at his death you are at liberty to do as you please, but until that event occurs, you are to remain with him. I consider it an act of the greatest selfishness."

Helen heaved a heavy sigh.

"I was afraid he would not look upon it as favourably as we hoped," she said. "I will see what I can do with him, however. I know him so well, and sometimes I can coax him to do things he would not dream of doing for any one else."

"Try, darling, then," said Jim, "and let us trust you will be successful."

They bade each other good-night, and then James set off on his walk across the Park. Dusk was falling by this time, and the landscape looked very beautiful in the evening light. As he strode along he thought of his position and of the injustice of Bursfield's decision. Then he fell to picturing what his future life would be like when the old man should have relented and Helen was his wife. He was still indulging in this day-dream when he noticed a shabbily-dressed man standing on the path a short distance ahead of him. Somehow the figure seemed familiar to him, and when he drew nearer he could not suppress an exclamation of astonishment. The individual was none other than the man he had seen lying beside the camp fire on the banks of the Darling River, and who, on a certain memorable evening, had caused his father so much emotion, *Richard Murbridge*. Whatever Jim's feelings might have been, Murbridge was at least equal to the occasion.

"Good evening, Mr. Standerton," he began, lifting his hat politely as he spoke. "You are doubtless surprised to see me in England."

"I am more than surprised," James replied, "and I am equally astonished at finding you on my father's premises after what he said to you in Australia. If you will be guided by me you will make yourself scarce without loss of time."

"You think so, do you? Then let me tell you that you have no notion of the situation, or of the character of Richard Murbridge. Far from making myself scarce, I am now on my way to see your father. I fear, however, he will not kill the fatted calf in my honour; but even that omission will not deter me. Tenacity of purpose has always been one of my chief characteristics."

"If you attempt to see him you will discover that my father has also some force of character," the other replied. "What is more, I refuse to allow you to do so. I am not going to permit him to be worried by you again."

"My young friend, you little know with whom you are dealing," Murbridge retorted. "I have travelled from the other side of the world to see your father, and if you think you can prevent me you are much mistaken. What is more, let me inform you that you would be doing him a very poor service by attempting to keep us apart. There is an excellent little inn in the village, whose landlord and I are already upon the best of terms. The Squire, William Standerton, late of Australia, but now of Childerbridge, is an important personage in the neighbourhood. Everything that is known about him is to his credit. It would be a pity if –"

"You scoundrel!" said Jim, approaching a step nearer the other, his fists clenched, as if ready for action, "If you dare to insinuate that you know anything to my father's discredit, I'll thrash you to within an inch of your life."

Then a fit of indescribable fear swept over him as he remembered the night in Australia, when his father had shown so much agitation on learning that the man was on his way to the station to see him. What could be the secret between them? But no! He knew his father too well to believe that the man before him could cast even the smallest slur upon his character. William Standerton's name

was a synonym for sterling integrity throughout the Island Continent. It was, therefore, impossible that Murbridge could have any hold upon him.

"You had better leave the place at once by the way you came into it," Jim continued, "and take very good care that we don't see any more of you."

"You crow very loud, my young bantam," returned Murbridge, "but that does not alter my decision. Now let me tell you this. If you knew everything, you would just go down on your bended knees and pray to me to forgive you for your impudence. As I said a moment ago, it's not the least use your attempting to stop me from seeing your father, for see him I will, if I have to sit at his gate for a year and wait for him to come out."

"Then you'd better go and begin your watch at once, for you shall not see him at the house," retorted Jim.

"We'll see about that," said Murbridge, and then turned on his heel, and set off in the direction of the Park gates. James waited until he had seen him disappear, then he in his turn resumed his walk. He had to make up his mind before he reached the house as to whether he would tell his father of the discovery he had made or not. On mature consideration he came to the conclusion that it would be better for him to do so.

For this reason, when he reached the house he enquired for his father, and was informed that he had gone to his room to dress for dinner. He accordingly followed him thither, to discover him, brush in hand, at work upon his silver-grey hair. That night, for some reason, the simple appointments of that simple room struck Jim in a new and almost pathetic light. Each article was, like its owner, strong, simple and good.

"Well, my lad, what is it?" asked Standerton. "I hope your interview with Mr. Bursfield was satisfactory?"

"Far from it," Jim replied lugubriously; and then, to postpone the fatal moment, he proceeded to describe to his father the interview he had had with the old gentleman.

"Never mind, my boy, don't be down-hearted about it," said Standerton, when he had heard his son out. "To-morrow I'll make it my business to go and see Mr. Bursfield. It will be strange if I can't talk him into a different way of thinking before I've done with him. But I can see from your face that there is something else you've got to tell me. What is it?"

Jim paused before he replied. He knew how upset his father would be at the news he had to impart.

"Father," he said, "I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you. I've been trying to make up my mind whether I should tell you or not."

"Tell me, James," answered the other. "I'll be bound it's not so very bad after all. You've probably been brooding over it, and have magnified its importance."

"I sincerely hope I have. I am afraid not, however. Do you remember the man we saw at Mudrapilla in the Five Mile Paddock, the night before we left? His name was Murbridge."

The shock to William Standerton was every bit as severe as James had feared it would be.

"What of him?" he cried. "You don't mean to say that he is in England?"

"I am sorry to say that he is," Jim returned. "I found him in the Park this evening on his way up to the house."

The elder man turned and walked to the fireplace, where he stood looking into it in silence. Then he faced his son once more.

"What did he say to you?" he enquired at last, his voice shaking with the anxiety he could not control or hide.

"He said that he wanted to see you, and that he would do so if he had to wait at the gates for a year."

"And he will," said Standerton bitterly; "that man will hunt me to my grave. I have been cursed with him for thirty years, and do what I will I cannot throw him off."

James approached his father, and placed his hand upon his shoulder.

"Father," he began, "why won't you let me share your trouble with you? Surely we should be able to find some way of ridding ourselves of this man?"

"No, there is no way," said Standerton. "He has got a hold upon me that nothing will ever shake off."

"I will not believe, father, that he knows anything to your discredit," cried Jim passionately.

"And you are right, my lad," his father replied. "He knows nothing to my discredit. I hope no one else does; but – but there – do not ask any more. Some day I will tell you the whole miserable story. But not now. You must not ask me. Believe me, dear lad, when I say that it would be better not."

"Then what will you do?"

"See him, and buy him off once more, I suppose. Then I shall have peace for a few months. Do you know where he is staying?"

"At the 'George and Dragon,'" Jim replied.

"Then I must send a note down to him and ask him to come up here," said Standerton. "Now go and dress. Don't trouble yourself about him."

All things considered, the dinner that night could not be described as a success. William Standerton was more silent than usual, and his son almost equalled him. Alice tried hard to cheer them both, but finding her efforts unsuccessful, she also lapsed into silence. A diversion, however, was caused before the meal was at an end. The butler had scarcely completed the circuit of the table with the port, before a piercing scream ran through the building, followed by another, and yet another.

"Good heavens! What's that?" cried Standerton, as he sprang to his feet, and hurried to the door, to be followed by his son and daughter.

"It came from upstairs, sir," said the butler, and immediately hurried up the broad oak staircase two steps at a time. His statement proved to be correct, for, on reaching the gallery that runs round the hall, he found a maid-servant lying on the floor in a dead faint. Jim followed close behind him, and between them they picked the girl up, and carried her down to the hall, where she was laid upon a settee. The housekeeper was summoned, and the usual restoratives applied, but it was some time before her senses returned to her. When she was able to speak, she looked wildly about her, and asked if "*it was gone?*" When later she was able to tell her story more coherently, it was as follows.

In the fulfilment of her usual duties she had gone along the gallery to tidy Miss Standerton's bedroom. She had just finished her work, and was closing the door, when she saw, standing before her, not more than half-a-dozen paces distant, the little hump-backed ghost, of which she had so often heard mention made in the Servants' Hall. It looked at her, pointed its finger at her, and a second later vanished. "She knew now," she declared, "that it was all over with her, and that she was going to die. Nothing could save her." Having given utterance to this alarming prophecy, she indulged in a second fit of hysterics, on recovering from which she was removed by the butler and housekeeper to the latter's sitting-room, vowing as she went that she could not sleep in the house, and that she would never know happiness again. Having seen her depart, the others returned to the dining-room, and had just taken their places at the table once more, when there was a ring at the front door bell, and in due course the butler entered with the information that a person "of the name of Murbridge" had called and would be glad to see Mr. Standerton. James sprang to his feet.

"I told him he was not to come near the place," he said. "Let me go and see him, father."

"No, no, my boy," said Standerton. "I wrote to him before dinner, as I told you I should, telling him to come up to-night. Where is he, Wilkins?"

"In the library, sir," the butler replied.

"Very well. I will see him there."

He accordingly left the room.

A quarter of an hour later James and Alice heard Murbridge's voice in the hall.

"You dare to turn me out of your house?" he was saying, as if in a fit of uncontrollable rage. "You forbid me to speak to your son and daughter, do you?"

"Once and for all, I do," came Standerton's calm voice in reply. "Now leave the house, and never let me see your face again. Wilkins, open the door, and take care that this man is never again admitted to my house."

Murbridge must have gone down the steps, where, as Wilkins asserted later on, he stood shaking his fist at Mr. Standerton.

"Curse you, I'll make you pay for this," he cried. "You think yourself all-powerful because of your wealth, but whatever it costs me, I'll make you smart for the manner in which you've treated me to-night."

Then the door was closed abruptly, and no more was seen of him.

William Standerton's usually rubicund face was very pale when he joined his son and daughter later. It was plain that the interview he had had with Murbridge had upset him more than he cared to admit. Alice did her best to console him, and endeavoured to make him forget it, but her efforts were a failure.

"Poor old dad," she said, when she bade him good-night. "It hurts me to see you so troubled."

"You must not think about it then," was the answer. "I shall be myself again in the morning. Good-night, my girl, and may God bless you."

"God bless you, father," the girl replied earnestly.

"I do wish you'd let me help you," said Jim, when he and his father were alone together. "Why did you not let me interview that man?"

"It would have done no good," Standerton replied. "The fellow was desperate, and he even went so far as to threaten me. Thereupon I lost my temper and ordered him out of the house. I fear we shall have more trouble with him yet."

"Is it quite impossible for you to tell me the reason of it all?" James asked, after a moment's hesitation.

"Well, I have been thinking it over," said his father, "and I have come to the conclusion that perhaps it would be better, much as it will pain you, to let you know the truth. But not to-night, dear lad. Let it stand over, and I will tell you everything to-morrow. Now good-night."

They shook hands according to custom, and then departed to their respective rooms.

Next morning James was about early. He visited the Stables and the Home Farm, looked in at the kennels, and was back again at the home some three-quarters of an hour before breakfast. As he crossed the hall to ascend the stairs, in order to go to his own room, he met Wilkins coming down, his face white as death.

"My God, sir," he said hoarsely, "for mercy's sake come upstairs to your father's room."

"What is the matter with him?" cried James, realising from the butler's manner that something terrible had happened.

But Wilkins did not answer. He only led the way upstairs. Together they proceeded along the corridor and entered the Squire's bedroom. There they saw a sight that James will never forget as long as he lives. His father lay stretched out upon the bed, dead. His eyes were open, and stared horribly at the ceiling, while his hands were clenched, and on either side of his throat were discoloured patches.

These told their own tale.

William Standerton had been strangled.

CHAPTER IV

It would be almost impossible to describe in fitting words the effect produced upon James Standerton, by the terrible discovery he had made.

"What does it mean, Wilkins?" he asked in a voice surcharged with horror. "For God's sake, tell me what it means?"

"I don't know myself, sir," the man replied. "It's too terrible for all words. Who can have done it?"

Throwing himself on his knees beside his father's body, James took one of the cold hands in his.

"Father! father!" he cried, in an ecstasy of grief, and then broke down altogether. When calmness returned to him, he rose to his feet, clasped the hands of the dead man upon the breast, and tenderly closed the staring eyes.

"Send for Dr. Brenderton," he said, turning to Wilkins, "and let the messenger call at the police-station on the way and ask the officer in charge to come here without a moment's delay."

The man left him to carry out the order, and James silently withdrew from the room to perform what he knew would be the saddest task of his life. As he descended the stairs he could hear his sister singing in the breakfast-room below.

"You are very late," she said, as he entered the room. "And father too. I shall have to give him a talking-to when he does come down."

Then she must have realised that something was amiss, for she put down the letter which she had been reading, and took a step towards him. "Has anything happened, Jim?" she enquired, "your face is as white as death." Then Jim told her everything. The shock to her was even more terrible than it had been to her brother, but she did her best to bear up bravely.

The doctor and the police officer arrived almost simultaneously. Both were visibly upset at the intelligence they had received. Short though William Standerton's residence in the neighbourhood had been, it had, nevertheless, been long enough for them to arrive at a proper appreciation of his worth. He had been a good supporter of all the Local Institutions, a liberal landlord, and had won for himself the reputation of being an honest and just man.

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