

Dowling Richard

The Weird Sisters: A Romance.
Volume 1 of 3



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The Weird Sisters: A Romance. Volume 1 (of 3)

PART I. A PLAIN GOLD GUARD

CHAPTER I

A CONSCIENTIOUS BURGLAR

Mr. Henry Walter Grey sat in his dining-room sipping claret on the evening of Monday, the 27th August, 1866. His house was in the suburbs of the city of Daneford.

Mr. Grey was a man of about forty-five years of age, looking no more than thirty-eight. He was tall, broad, without the least tendency to corpulency, and yet pleasantly rounded and full. There was no angularity or harshness in his face or figure. The figure was active looking and powerful, the face open, joyous, and benignant. The hair had begun to thin at his forehead; this gave his face a soothing expression of contented calm.

His forehead was broad and white; his eyes were constant, candid, and kindly; his nose was large, with quickly-mobile

sensitive nostrils; and his mouth well formed and full, having a sly uptwist at one corner, indicating strong sympathy with humour. He wore neither beard nor moustache.

His complexion was bright without being florid, fair without being white. His skin was smooth as a young girl's cheek. He stood six feet without his boots. He was this evening in the deepest mourning for his wife, whom he had lost on Friday, the 17th of that month, August.

Although he occupied one of the most important positions in Daneford, no person who knew him, or had heard of him from a Danefordian, ever called him either Henry or Walter. He was universally known as Wat Grey. Daneford believed him to be enormously rich. He was the owner of the Daneford Bank, an institution which did a large business and held its head high.

Indeed, in Daneford it was almost unnecessary to add the banker's surname to his Christian name; and if anyone said, "Wat did so-and-so," and you asked, "Wat who?" the purveyor of the news would know you for an alien or a nobody in the city.

The young men worshipped him as one of themselves, who, despite his gaiety and lightheartedness, had prospered in the world, and kept his youth and made his money, and was one of themselves still, and would continue to be one of them as long as he lived.

Elder men liked him for the solid prudence which guided all his business transactions, and which, while it enabled him to be with the young, allowed him to exercise over his juniors

in years the influence of an equal combined with the authority of experience. Lads of twenty never thought of him as a fogey, and men of thirty looked upon him as a younger man, who had learned the folly of vicious vanities very much sooner than others; and consequently they confided in him, and submitted themselves to him with docility. Young men assembled at his house, but there were no orgies; elder men came, and went away cheered and diverted, and no whit the less rich or wise because discussions of important matters had been enlivened with interludes of gayer discourse.

Wat Grey was one of the most active men in Daneford. He was Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, of the Commercial Club, and of the Harbour Board.

He was Vice-chairman of the Daneford Boat Club, and Treasurer of the Poor's Christmas Coal Fund.

If he was rich, he was liberal. He subscribed splendidly to all the local charities, but never as a public man or as owner of the Daneford Bank. What he thought it wise to give he always sent from "Wat," as though he prized more highly the distinction of familiarity his town had conferred upon him than any conventional array of Christian and surnames, or any title of cold courtesy or routine right. It was not often he dropped from his cheerful level of high-spirited and rich animal enjoyment into sentimentalism, but on one occasion he said to young Feltoe: "I'd rather be 'Wat' to my friends than Sir Thingumbob Giggamarigs to all the rest of the world."

There was nothing Daneford could have refused him. He had been mayor, and could be Liberal member of Parliament for the ancient and small constituency any time he chose when the Liberal seat was vacant. Daneford was one of those constituencies which give one hand to one side and the other hand to the other, and have no hand free for action. Walter Grey had always declined the seat; he would say:

"I'm too young yet, far too young. As I grow older, I shall grow wiser and more corrupt. Then you can put me in, and I shall have great pleasure in ratting for a baronetcy. Ha, ha, ha!"

Of late, however, it had been rumoured the chance of getting the rich banker to consent to take the seat (this was the way everyone put it) had increased, and that he might be induced to stand at the next vacancy. Then all who knew of his personal qualities, his immense knowledge of finance, and his large fortune, said that if he chose he might be Chancellor of the Exchequer in time; and after his retirement from business, and purchase of an estate, the refusal of a peerage was certain to come his way.

As he sat sipping his claret that Monday evening of the 27th of August, 1866, his face was as placid as a secret well. Whether he was thinking of his dead wife and sorrowing for her, or revolving the ordinary matters of his banking business, or devising some scheme for the reduction of taxation in the city, or dallying mentally with the sirens who sought to ensnare him in parliamentary honours, could no more be gathered from his

face than from the dull heavy clouds that hung low over the sultry land abroad.

It was not often he had to smoke his after-dinner cigar and sip his after-dinner claret alone; men were always glad to dine with him, and he was always glad to have them; but the newness of his black clothes and of the bands on his hats in the hall accounted for the absence of guests. He was not dressed for dinner. One of the things which had made his table so free and jovial was that a man might sit down to it in a coat of any cut or colour, and in top-boots and breeches if he liked. Before his bereavement he would say:

"Mrs. Grey – although she may not sit with us – has an antiquated objection to a man dining in his shirt-sleeves. I have often expostulated with her unreasonable prejudice, but I can't get her to concede no coat at all. You may wear your hat and your gloves if you like, but for Heaven's sake come in a coat of some kind. If you can't manage a coat, a jacket will do splendidly."

Mrs. Grey never dined out. In fact, she saw little company; tea was always sent into the dining-room.

Mr. Grey had not got more than half-way through his cigar on that evening of the 27th of August when a servant knocked and entered.

The master, whose face was towards the window, turned round his head slowly, and said in a kindly voice:

"Well, James, what is it?"

"A man, sir, wants to see you."

James was thick-set, low-sized, near-sighted, and dull. He had been a private soldier in a foot regiment, and had been obliged to leave because of his increasing near-sightedness. But he had been long enough in uniform to acquire the accomplishment of strict and literal attention to orders, and the complete suspension of his own faculties of judgment and discretion. Although his master was several inches taller than James, the latter looked in the presence of the banker like a clumsy elephant beside an elegant panther.

"A man wants to see me!" cried Mr. Grey, in astonishment, not unmingled with a sense of the ridiculous. "What kind of a man? and what is his business."

He glanced good-humouredly at James, but owing to the shortness of the servant's sight the expression of the master's face was wasted in air.

James, who had but a small stock of observation and no fancy, replied respectfully:

"He seems a common man, sir; like a man you'd see in the street."

"Ah," said Mr. Grey, with a smile; "that sort of man, is it? Ah! Which, James, do you mean: the sort of man you'd see walking in the streets, or standing at a public-house corner?"

Again Mr. Grey smiled at the droll dulness and droller simplicity of his servant.

A gleam of light came into James's dim eyes upon finding the description narrowed down to the selection of one of two

characteristics, and he said, in a voice of solemn sagacity:

"The back of his coat is dirty, sir, as if he'd been leaning against a public-house wall."

"Or as if he had been carrying a sack of corn on his back?" demanded the master, laughing softly, and brushing imaginary cigar-ashes off the polished oak-table with his white curved little finger.

For a moment James stood on his heels in stupefied doubt and dismay at this close questioning. He was a man of action, not of thought. Had his master shouted, "Right wheel – quick march!" he would have gone out of the window, through the glass, without a murmur and without a thought of reproach; but to be thus interrogated on subtleties of appearance made him feel like a blindfold man, who is certain he is about to be attacked, but does not know where, by whom, or with what weapon. He resolved to risk all and escape.

"I think, sir, it was a public-house, for I smelt liquor."

"That is conclusive," said the master, laughing out at last. "That is all right, James. I am too lazy to go down to see him. Show him up here. Stop a moment, James. Let him come up in five minutes."

The servant left the room, and as he did so the master laughed still more loudly, and then chuckled softly to himself, muttering:

"He thought the man had been leaning against a public-house because he smelt of liquor! Ha, ha, ha! My quaint James, you will be the death of your master. You will, indeed."

When he had finished his laugh he dismissed the idea of James finally with a roguish shrug of his shoulders and wag of his head.

Then he drew down the gasalier, pushed an enormous easy-chair in front of the empty fire-place, pulled a small table between the dining-table and the easy-chair, and placed an ordinary oak and green dining-room chair at the corner of the dining-table near the window; then he sat down on the ordinary chair.

When this was done he ascertained that the drawer of the small table opened easily, closed in the drawer softly, threw himself back in his own chair and began smoking slowly, blowing the smoke towards the ceiling without taking the cigar from his lips, and keeping his legs thrust out before him, and his hands deep in his trousers-pockets.

Presently the door opened; James said, "The man, sir!" the door closed again, and all was still.

"Come over and sit down, my man," said the banker, in a good-natured tone of voice, without, however, removing his eyes from the ceiling.

To this there was no reply by either sound or gesture.

Mr. Grey must have been pursuing some humorous thought over the ceiling; for when he at last dropped his eyes and looked towards the door, he said, with a quiet sigh, as though the ridiculous in the world was killing him slowly: "It's too droll, too droll." Then to the man, who still stood just inside the door: "Come over here and sit down, my man. I have been expecting

a call from you. Come over and sit down. Or would you prefer I should send the brougham for you?"

As he turned his eyes round, they fell on the figure of a man of forty, who, with head depressed and shoulders thrust up high, and a battered, worn sealskin-cap held in both hands close together, thumbs uppermost, was standing on one leg, a model of abject, obsequious servility.

The man made no reply; but as Mr. Grey's eyes fell upon him he substituted the leg drawn up for the one on which he had been standing, thrust up his shoulders, and pressed down his head in token of unspeakable humility under the honour of Mr. Grey's glance, and of profound gratitude for the honour of Mr. Grey's speech.

"Come, my man; do come over and sit down. The conversation is becoming monotonous already. Do come over, and sit down here. I can't keep on saying 'come' all the evening. I assure you I have expected this call from you. Do come and sit down."

Mr. Grey motioned the man to the large easy-chair in front of him.

At last the man moved, stealthily, furtively, across the carpet, skirting the furniture cautiously, as though it consisted of infernal-machines which might go off at any moment. His dress was ragged and torn; his face, a long narrow one, of mahogany colour; his eyes were bright full blue, the one good feature in his shy unhandsome countenance.

"Sit in that chair," said Mr. Grey blandly, at the same time

waving his hand towards the capacious and luxurious easy-chair.

"Please, sir, I'd rather stand," said the man, in a low sneaking tone.

The contrast between the two was remarkably striking: the one, large and liberal of aspect, gracious and humorous of manner, broad-faced, generous-looking, perfectly dressed, scrupulously neat; the other, drawn together, mean in form, narrow of features, with avaricious mouth and unsteady eye, with ragged and soiled clothes.

"Sit down, my good man; sit down. I assure you the conversation will continue to be very monotonous until you take my advice, and sit down in that chair. You need not be afraid of spoiling it. Sit down, and then you may at your leisure tell me what I can do for you."

Mr. Grey may have smiled at the whim of Nature in forging such a counterfeit of human nature as the man before him, or he may have smiled at the obvious dislike with which his visitor surveyed the chair. The smile, however, was a pleasant, cordial, happy one. He drew in his legs, sat upright, and, leaning his left elbow on the small table before him, pointed to the chair with his right hand, and kept his right hand fixed in the attitude of pointing until the man, with a scowl at the chair and a violent upheaval of his shoulders and depression of his head, sank among the soft cushions.

"Now we shall get on much more comfortably," said Mr. Grey, placing what remained unsmoked of his cigar on the ash-tray

beside him, clasping his hands over his waistcoat, and bending slightly forward to indicate that his best attention was at the disposal of his visitor. "What is your name?"

"Joe Farleg."

"Joe Farleg, Joe Farleg," mused, half aloud, Mr. Grey. "An odd name. Why am I fated always to meet people with odd ways or odd names? Well, never mind answering that question, Joe," he said, more loudly, in an indulgent tone, as though he felt he would be violating kindness by insisting on a reply which had little or nothing to do with Farleg. He continued, "I don't think I have ever seen you or heard your name before; and although I did not think it improbable you, or someone like you, would call, I could not know exactly whom I was to see. Before we go any farther, I ask you: Haven't I been good to you without even knowing who you were?"

"Good to me, sir!" cried the man, in surprise.

"Yes; I have been very good to you in not setting the police after you."

The man tried to struggle up out of the chair, but, unused to a seat of the kind, struggled for a moment in vain. At last he gained his feet, and with an oath demanded: "How did you know I did it? Are you going to set them after me now?" His blue eyes swiftly explored the room to find if the officers had sprung out of concealment, and to ascertain the chances of his escape.

With a kindly wave of his hand, Mr. Grey indicated the chair. "I have not even spoken to the police about the matter, and I do

not intend speaking to them. Sit down in your chair, Joe, and let us talk the matter over quietly."

"I'm d – d if I sit in that chair again. It smothers me."

He regarded the banker with uneasiness and the chair with terror.

Mr. Grey laughed outright. The laughter seemed to soothe Farleg a little. He cast his large blue eyes once more hastily round the room, then regarded the banker for an instant, and dropped his glance upon the chair.

Nothing could have been more reassuring than the brilliantly-lighted dining-room, the good-natured, good-humoured face of its master, and the harmlessly seductive appearance of the chair. Farleg was ashamed of his fears; upon another invitation, and an assurance that nothing farther would be said by his host until he had returned to his former position, he threw himself once more into the comfortable seat.

"And now, Joe, that we are in a position to go on smoothly, what can I do for you?"

"You remember, sir, the night of the robbery, sir?"

"Yes; you broke into my house, into one of the tower-rooms, on the evening of the 17th of this month, and you carried off a few things of no great value."

"And you're not going to send the police after me?"

"No."

Farleg leaned forward in his chair until his elbows rested on his knees.

"You missed the things. You said a while ago you expected me, or whoever did the robbery; was that a true word? Did you expect whoever did the robbery to come and see you?"

"I did. I could not be sure you would come, but when I missed the things I thought you might call. There was, of course, the chance you might not."

"That's it. Well, I have come, you see. I found some rings, and I kept three; but I thought you might like to have this one, and I brought it to you, as I am about to leave the country. Look at it. It's a plain gold guard."

As Farleg said these words his eyes, no longer wandering, fixed themselves on the face of Mr. Grey.

For an instant the face of the banker puckered and wrinkled up like a blighted leaf. Almost instantly it smoothed out again; and, with a bland smile, he said:

"Thank you very much. It was my poor wife's guard ring. You were very kind to think of bringing it back to me."

As he spoke he began softly opening the drawer of the little table that stood between him and the burglar.

CHAPTER II

A GENEROUS BANKER

The ring lay on the little table. Mr. Grey did not take it up, but left it where Farleg had placed it.

When the banker had pulled out the drawer half-a-dozen inches, he looked up from the ring, and, with a glance of kindly interest, said:

"So you intend leaving the country. Why? And where do you purpose going?"

Farleg looked down at his boots, and thrust up his shoulders as he answered:

"Well, sir, things are getting hot, and the place is getting hot. It isn't every one has so much consideration as you for a man who has to live as best he can – "

"Poor fellow!"

"And if I and the old woman don't clear out of this soon, why, they'll be sending me away, 'Carriage paid: with care.'"

He paused, raised his head, and turned those prominent blue eyes on the face of the banker. The latter was drawing small circles on the table in front of him with the white forefinger of his left hand, his eyes intently followed his finger, his white right hand rested on the edge of the partly open drawer.

Mr. Grey said, softly and emphatically: "I understand, I understand. Go on, and don't be afraid to speak plainly, Joe.

May I ask you what you were before you devoted yourself to your present – profession? Your conversation and way of putting things are far above the average of men of your calling;" with a smile of sly interest.

"I was a clerk, sir," answered the man meekly.

"In a bank?" demanded the banker, looking up brightly.

"No, sir; in a corn-store."

"Ah, I thought it couldn't have been in a bank. We are not so fortunate as to have men of your talents and enterprise in banks. But I interrupted you. Pray, proceed. You were about to say – " The invitation was accompanied by a gracious and encouraging wave of the left hand.

"I was thinking, sir, that it would be best if I went away of my own accord; and I thought I'd just mention this matter to you when I called with the guard ring of your good lady that's dead and gone."

"Quite right, quite right. And naturally you thought that I might be willing to lend you a hand on your way, partly out of feeling for you in your difficult position, and partly out of gratitude to you for your kind thoughtfulness in bringing me back the guard ring of poor Mrs. Grey."

The white forefinger of the white left hand went on quietly describing the circles, but the circles were one after the other increasing in circumference. The white right hand still rested on the edge of the partly-open drawer.

"That's it," said Farleg, with a sigh of relief. It was such a

comfort to deal with a sensible man, a man who did most of the talking and thinking for you. "You know, sir, I found the rings – "

"Quite so, quite so."

Mr. Grey gave up describing circles, and for a while devoted himself to parallelograms. When he had finished each figure he regarded the invisible design for a while as though comparing the result of his labour with an ideal parallelogram. Then, becoming dissatisfied with his work, he began afresh.

"Quite so," he repeated, after a silence of a few moments. "You need not trouble yourself to go into detail. In fact, I prefer you should not, as my feelings are still much occupied with my great loss. Will you answer a few questions that may help to allay and soothe my feelings?"

He ceased drawing the parallelograms, and looked up at the other with a glance of friendly enquiry.

Farleg threw himself back in his chair, and replied gravely: "I'll answer you, sir, any question it may please you to put."

"At what hour on the evening of the 17th did you break into this house?"

"Eight o'clock."

"By Jove, Joe, you were an adventurous fellow to break into a house in daylight! I do think, in the face of such an enterprising spirit, you ought to seek a new country, where you would be properly appreciated. You have no chance here. Go to some place where the telegraph has not yet struck root. And yet for a man of your peculiar calling a dense population and civilisation are

requisite. Your case, Joe, interests me a good deal, and, rely upon it, I shall always be glad to hear of your welfare and prosperity. I feel for you in your little difficulty, and I applaud your boldness. Fancy, breaking into a man's house at eight o'clock of an August evening! And how did you get in, Joe? I suppose by a ladder the workman had left against the wall?"

"Yes, sir. It was seeing a ladder against the wall that put the idea into my head."

The banker looked at Farleg with an expression of unlimited admiration.

"What a general you would make, Joe!" cried Mr. Grey, in pleasant enthusiasm. "You would use every bulrush as cover for your men! And so, when you saw the ladder against the wall, you thought to yourself you might as well slip up that ladder and have a look round? What a pushing man of business too! And you were alone?"

"Yes."

"You entered the tower first-floor, and gathered up a few things, this ring of my poor wife among the rest. But I don't think you went into any other room?"

"No, sir."

"And I don't think you could have been very long in the room; now, about how long?"

"Short of an hour. I heard you coming back, and I cleared out then."

"Ah! You heard me coming back, and you cleared out then."

Quite so. No doubt it was inconsiderate of me to come back and disturb you. But, you know, I was in a great state of anxiety and alarm – anxiety and alarm which were unfortunately only too well founded, as you, no doubt, have heard; we need not dwell on that painful event now. May I ask you if you have spoken of this affair to anyone?"

"No."

"Not to a soul?"

"Not to a soul."

"What a discreet general you would make! Upon my word I think you ought to go to California. San Francisco is the place for one so daring and so cautious. What a dashing cavalry leader you would make! And yet it would be a pity to throw you away on cavalry. Your natural place would be in the engineers."

Mr. Grey half closed his eyes, and gazed dreamily for a few seconds at the reclining figure of the man before him. Then hitching his chair a few inches nearer to the small table standing between him and Farleg, he said, in a drawling tone, as he softly slipped his hand into the drawer:

"I admire you for your ingenuity in availing yourself of that ladder, and for your boldness in entering the house in daylight. But I am completely carried away with enthusiasm when I think of your coming here to me, telling me this tale, and preserving the admirable calmness which you display. Indeed, Joe, I am amazed."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now, how much money did you think I'd be likely to give to help you out of this scrape, and out of this country?"

"Mr. Grey, you're a rich man."

The banker bowed and smiled.

"And that ring ought to be worth a heap of money to you."

"A guinea, or perhaps thirty shillings. At the very most I should say two pounds."

"But, sir, considering that it was your wife's, and that she wore it on the very day – "

"Quite so. On the very day of her wedding – "

"That is not what I meant – "

"But that is the aspect of the affair which endears the ring to me. Pray let us keep to the business in hand. You bring me a ring which I own I should not like you to have kept from me. You make me a present of this ring, and you ask me to help you out of the country. Now, how much would be sufficient to help you out of the country, and settle you and your wife comfortably in a new home?"

"A thousand pounds."

"A thousand pounds! My dear Joe, if you were about to represent the majesty of the kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland at a foreign court, you could ask little more for travelling-expenses and commencing existence. A thousand pounds! What a lucrative business yours must have been to make you hope you could get a thousand pounds for the goodwill of it!"

"But it is not every day a thing like this turns up. You have a

lot of waiting before you get your chance. In fact, my chance did not belong to the ordinary business at all."

"Quite so. It was a kind of perquisite. Well, now, Joe, don't you think if I gave you twenty-five pounds as a present it would fully provide for your outward voyage?" Mr. Grey made the proposal with a winning and an enticing gesture of his left hand.

Farleg looked down at his boots again, and said very slowly, and with an accent that left no doubt of his earnestness and determination:

"It isn't often a chance of this kind turns up, and I can't afford to let it pass; no honest man could afford to let it pass, and I have a wife looking to me. You have no one looking to you, not even a wife – not even a wife."

"Quite so."

"Well, I want the money. I want to try and get an honest start in life, and I think I shall buy land – "

"Out of the thousand pounds?" queried Mr. Grey, with a look of amused enjoyment.

"Out of the thousand pounds you are going to give me. Can't you see," added Farleg, sitting up in his chair, leaning both his elbows on the small table between them, "can't you see it's to your advantage as well as mine to give me a large sum?"

"Candidly I cannot," answered Mr. Grey, tapping Farleg encouragingly on the shoulder with his white left hand. "Tell me how it is. I am quite willing to be convinced."

"Well, if I take your five-and-twenty, I spend it here, or I spend

it getting there, and then I'm stranded, don't you see, sir?"

"Go on." With two soft appreciative pats from the left white hand.

"Of course, as soon as I find myself hard up I come to you, or I write to you for more, and that would only be wasting your time."

"But," said Mr. Grey, with a sly look and a sly wag of his head, "if you got the thousand you might spend it here or there, and then you might again be applying to me. Ah, no! Joe, I don't think it would do to give you that thousand. You can have the twenty-five now, if you like."

"Well, sir, I've looked into the matter deeper than that. When you give me the thousand, I and my wife will leave this country, go to America, out West, and buy land. There we shall settle down as respectable people, and it would be no advantage to me to rake up the past, once I was settled down and prosperous. So, sir, if you please, I'll have the thousand."

There was respectful resolution in Farleg's voice as he spoke. The faces of the two men were not more than a foot apart now. They were looking as straight into one another's eyes as two experienced fencers when the play begins. Mr. Grey's face ceased to move, and took a settled expression of gracious badinage.

"I think, Joe," said he, "that I can manage the matter more economically than your way."

"What is that way, sir?"

"As I told you before, I look on you as a very enterprising

man. First, you break into a man's house in daylight, and then you come and beard the lion in his den. You come to the man whose house you honoured by a visit through a window, and you say to him – I admit that nothing could have been in better taste than your manner of saying it – "

"Thank you, sir, but you took me so kindly and so gentleman-like."

"Thank *you*, Joe; but I mustn't compliment you again, or we shall get no farther than compliments to-night. As I was saying, you ask him for no less than a thousand pounds to help you out of the country and into a respectable line of life. Indeed, all my sympathy is with you in your good intention, but then I have to think of myself – "

"But you're a rich man, sir, and to you a thousand pounds isn't much, and it's everything to me. It will make me safe, and help me out of a way of life I never took to until driven to it," pleaded Farleg.

"Well put, very well put. Now, this is my position. This is my plan; let me hear what you think of it: On the night or evening of the 17th you break into my house; on the night or evening of the 27th you visit me for some purpose or other – "

"To give you back your dead wife's ring."

"Quite so. You may be sure I am overlooking no point in the case. Let me proceed with my view. You and I don't get on well together, and you attack me. You are clearly the burglar, and I am attacked by you, and I defend myself with force. You kill me;

that is no good to you. You won't make a penny by my death. But suppose it should unhappily occur that the revolver, on the trigger of which, Joe, I now have my finger, and the muzzle of which is about a foot from your heart, suppose it should go off, what then? You can see the accident would be all in my favour."

Farleg uttered a loud whistle.

For a second no word was spoken. No movement was made in that room.

All at once, apparently from the feet of the two men, a wild alarmed scream of a woman shot up through the silence, and shook the silence into echoes of chattering fear.

As though a blast had struck the banker's face, it shrivelled up like a withered leaf. Something heavy fell from his hand in the drawer, and he rose slowly, painfully, to his feet.

Farleg rose also, keeping his face in the same relation, and on the same level as the banker's, until the pinched face of the banker stole slowly above the burglar's.

The hands of Grey rested on the table. His eyes were fixed on vacancy. He seemed to be listening intently, spellbound by some awful vision, some distracting anticipation intimately concerned with appalling voices.

Slowly from his lips trickled the whispered words: "What was that?"

"My wife's voice," whispered Farleg. "You thought it was *yours*. When I told you no one knew, I meant I had no pal. But my wife knows *all*, and if anything came amiss to me she'd tell all."

"I understand," the banker answered, still in a whisper. The dread was slowly descending from his face, and he made a hideous attempt at a smile.

"I, too," pursued Farleg, "was afraid we might quarrel, and left her there. For one whistle she was to scream out to show she was on the watch. For two whistles she was to run away and call help. Do you see, sir?"

"Very clever. Very neat. You have won the odd trick."

"And honours are divided."

"Yes. How is that money to reach you?"

"I'd like it in gold, sir, if you please. You can send it in a large parcel, a hamper, sir, or a large box, so that no one need be the wiser. I'm for your own good as well as my own in this matter."

"You shall have the money the day after to-morrow at four o'clock. It will reach you from London. Now go."

"Well, after what has been done, and our coming to a bargain, shake hands, Wat," said the man, in a tone of insolent triumph.

"Go, sir. Go at once!"

"Honours are not divided; I hold three to your one. Give me your hand, old man. Joe Farleg will never split on a pal."

With a shudder of loathing the banker held out his hand.

As soon as he was alone, the moment the door was shut, he took up the claret-jug, poured the contents over his right hand to cleanse it from the contamination of that touch, and then walked hastily up and down the room, waving his hand through the air until it dried.

"A thousand isn't much to secure him. But will it secure him? That is the question. Yes, I think it will. I think the coast is now clear. With prudence and patience I can do all now," he whispered to himself, with his left hand on his forehead. "Wat Grey, you've had a close shave. Nothing could have been closer. Had you pulled that trigger all would have been lost. Now you have a clear stage, and must let things take their course. The old man can't live for ever; and until he dies you must keep quiet and repress all indication of the direction in which your hopes lie. Maud does not dream of this."

A knock at the door.

"Come in."

James, the servant, entered, holding a slip of paper in his hand.

"What is it, James?" asked the master.

"That man that's gone out, sir, said he forgot to give his address, and as you might want it he asked me to take it up to you."

Mr. Grey was standing by the low gasalier as the servant handed him the piece of paper.

Mr. Grey took the address in his right hand; as he did so the purblind footman sprang back a pace.

"What's the matter?" demanded Mr. Grey with an amused smile.

"Ex – excuse – me – sir," the man faltered, "but your hand –"

"Well, what about it?"

"It's all over blood!"

"What! What do you say?" shouted the master, in a tone of dismay. "Do *you* want a thousand too?"

"Indeed, no, sir; and I beg pardon; but do look at your hand."

Mr. Grey held up his hand, examined it, and then burst out into a loud shout of laughter. When he could speak he cried:

"You charming idiot! You will kill me with your droll ways. That dirty wretch who went out touched my hand. I had no water near me, so I poured some claret over my hand and forgot to wipe it."

He approached James and held out his hand, saying, "Look." Then added, in a tone of solemn amusement: "James, there was once a man who died of laughing at seeing an ass eat. I do think I shall die of laughing at hearing a donkey talk. Bring me the coffee. Go."

And as the servant was leaving the room, Mr. Grey broke out into a laugh of quiet self-congratulation on the fact of his possessing such a wonderful source of amusement in his servant, James.

CHAPTER III

THE MANOR HOUSE

The house occupied by Mr. Grey was very old. It had been the Manor House, and was still called the Manor House, or the Manor, although it had long ago ceased to be the property of the original owner's descendants. For years before Mr. Grey bought it the house had been uninhabited.

It bore a bad name – why, no one could tell. The fortunes of the lords of the manor had gradually mouldered away, and the old house had been allowed to fall into decay and dilapidation.

During the time it was shut up people spoke of it as a kind of phantom house; some regarded it as a myth, and others treated it with a superstitious respect as a thing which might exercise an evil influence over those who fell under the shadow of its displeasure.

Sunken deeply from the road, surrounded by a wild tangle of rugged oaks, its grounds girt with walls ten feet high, there were few points open to the public from which a glimpse of it could be caught, and no spot from which a full view could be obtained.

Boys had scaled the walls and penetrated into the tangled mazes of the neglected undergrowth. But the briars and brambles and bushes were too rough even for boys, and they came away soon.

No boy of Daneford – and there were high-hearted, brave,

adventurous boys there – could say he had penetrated as far as the house. Although those who had once been boys of Daneford had faced the enemies of their country in every clime, by day and by night, on land and sea, and although the boys of that city, at the time spoken of, were made of as stout stuff and inspired by as gallant hearts as the boys who had fought and fallen in Spain, India, America, Belgium, Egypt, where you will, not one of all of them would dare, alone and by night, to break through that jungle, and penetrate to that house.

The soil of the Manor Park was low and full of rich juices, and fertile with long rest, so the vegetation beneath the gnarled boughs of the interlacing oaks could hold the moisture well when the sun was hot, and from that ground to the sun they never saw clearly rose huge green and red and yellow slimy weeds among the brambles and the shrubs.

From the nests of many generations of birds which had built in those distorted trees seeds of all things that grow on this land had fallen, and taken root and prospered in the rich ground of the sultry glens and caverns formed by the scraggy arms and foliage of the oaks; year after year this disorderly growth had burst up out of the fat, greasy soil in unwholesome profusion, unclean luxury, and had rotted down again into the over-lush earth. So that the spring-root and ground-fruit, and all manner of green things, jostled and crushed one another, and the weaker were strangled and eaten up by the stronger.

Thousands of birds yearly built in the trees of the Manor Park;

for here came no guns to kill or scare, no boys to pilfer the eggs or young ones; and this republic of birds overhead was a source of great profit to the soil below.

Often birds fell from the trees dead of cold in the winter nights, and when the sun shone out the industrious mole came and buried them decently, and their bones were of service to the soil.

The mole, too, was useful in another way, for he turned up the clay now and then, here and there, and opened avenues into the earth for water burdened with fructifying juices.

And here, too, was that ever-active sexton of the vegetable world, the fungus. In the vast winds of the winters, when the oaks gored one another, and tore off the fangs of their antlers, great boughs fell with shrieks to the earth. Later the sexton fungus crept over to the shattered limbs and lodged on them, and ate them up silently and slowly, and then the fungus itself melted into the earth.

Here were worms of enormous growth, and frogs and toads, and snails and lizards, and all other kinds of slimy insects and reptiles, and the boys said snakes, but snakes were put forward in excuse of fear on the part of the boys. There were no hares, no rabbits, no deer, no cows, no sheep, no goats, nor any of the gentle creatures that put grass and green things to uses profitable to man.

Here in those vaults of sickly twilight vegetable nature held high saturnalia, undisturbed save by the seasons and worms and

snails and caterpillars and slugs. This was not a prosperous field, a prudent grove, a stately wood, a discreet garden; it was a robber's cave of the green world, in which the plunder of all the fields lay heaped without design, for no good or useful end.

At night the darkness was thick and hot in these blind alleys and inexplorable aisles. When the foot was put down something slipped beneath it, a greasy branch, a viscous fruit, a reptile, or the fat stalk of some large-leaved ground-plant.

The trunks of the trees and the branches of the shrubs were damp with gelatinous dew. If there was a moon, something might always be seen sliding silently through the grass or leaves and pulpy roots.

Strange and depressing odours of decay came stealthily upon the sense now and then, and filled the mind with hints of unutterable fears. If in the branches above a sleeping bird chirped or fluttered, it seemed as though the last bird left was stealing away from the fearful place. The fat reptiles that glided and slipped in the ghostly moonlight were fleeing, and leaving you alone to behold some spectacle, encounter some fate, too repulsive for the contemplation of reason.

Within this belt of rank vegetation and oaks the Manor House stood. The house had a plain stone front with small narrow windows, three on each side of the main door. At the rear was a large paved courtyard, with a pump and horse-trough in the middle.

The chief building consisted of a ground-floor, on which were

the reception-rooms; a first floor of bedrooms; and a second floor, the windows of which were dormar, intended for the servants of the establishment.

The walls of the house were of great thickness and strength. On the ground and first floors most of the doorways into the passages had double doors. Owing to the great thickness of the walls, and the double doors, and the massive floorings and partition walls, sounds, even the loudest, travelled with great difficulty through that house.

In front of the house stretched a broad gravelled drive, which narrowed into a gravelled road as it set off to the main road, a considerable distance farther on. This carriage-road wound in and out through the oaks of the Park. Between the gravelled open in front of the house and the trees stretched a narrow band of shaven grass. This narrow band of grass followed the carriage-road up to the lodge-gate.

Around the paved yard in the rear stood the coach-house, stables, kitchen, laundry, scullery, larder, and other offices, and still farther to the rear of the house, behind the yard, were the flower and kitchen gardens. To the rear of all, surrounding all, and binding all in like suffocating bondage, was the Park of gnarled oaks and rank lush undergrowth and slimy soil.

In looking at the house you were not conscious of anything uncanny or repulsive. At the left-hand end – that is, the end of the house nearest to Daneford – there rose a tower, mounting only one storey above the dormar floor.

Upon the top of this tower was a huge iron tank, corroded into a skeleton of its former self. Looking at that weather-battered and rusted tank, with the undergrowth in the Park behind you, the former resembled the decay of the indomitable natives of America, who perished slowly in opposing themselves to fate, the overripe prosperity of the latter looked like the destruction of the Romans, who ate and drank and slept their simplicity and their manhood away.

One peculiarity of this house was that no green plant or creeper could get a living out of its dry walls. Neither on the house nor on the tower had ever been seen one leaf native to the place. Here was another thing in strong contrast to the teeming vegetation environing this house.

It was not while looking at the Manor you felt its unpleasant influence. In sunshine nothing disturbed your peace while you contemplated its dry, cold front. But when you had gone away; when you were sitting in your own bright room; when you were walking along a lonely road; when you awoke in the middle of the night, and heard the torrents of the storm roar as they whirled round your window; then, if the thought of that house came up before your mind, you shrank back from its image as from an apparition of evil mission. In your mental vision the house itself seemed scared and afeared.

The intense green life that dwelt beneath those oaks stood out in startling contrast with the absolute nudity of those unapparelled stones. The house seemed to shrink instinctively

from any contact with verdure, as though it felt assured of evil from moss or leaf or blade. It appeared to dread that the oaks would creep up on it and overwhelm it in their portentous shadows, beat it down with their giant arms.

That tower stood out in the imagination like an arm uplifted in appeal; that shattered tank became a tattered flag of distress. The windows looked like scared eyes, the broad doorway a mouth gaping with terror. The whole building quivered with human horror, was silent with frozen awe.

In the year 1856 Henry Walter Grey's father died, and the son became sole proprietor of the Daneford Bank. Up to that time the son had lived, with his wife, to whom he had then been married six years, in the Bank-house as manager under his father. There were only a few years' lease of his father's suburban residence, to run, and a likelihood arose that the landlord would not renew, so young Grey had to look out for a home, as he intended appointing a manager and living away from the office.

At that time the Manor House was in the market, and Mr. Grey bought it for, as he said, "a song, and a very poor song, too," considering the extent of the Park, the value of the timber, and the spacious old house. As a matter of fact, no one valued the dwelling at a penny beyond what the sale of its stones would bring; for the impression of the seller was that, owing to its uncanny aspect and bad name, no one would think of buying it to live in.

All Daneford was taken by surprise when it heard that young

Grey, Wat Grey, Wat had bought the fearful Manor House in which no family had lived for generations, and from which even the furniture and servants had been long since withdrawn. Did he mean to take it down, build a new house, and effect a wholesome clearance of those odious groves?

No, he had answered, with a light laugh, he harboured no intention of knocking down the old house to please the neighbours; of course he was going to repair the house, and when it was fully restored he would ask his friends to come and try if beef and mutton tasted worse, or wine was less cheering, under that roof because nervous people had been pleased to frighten themselves into fits over the Park and the Manor House.

In a year the house had been put into thorough order, and even the tower had not been wholly neglected, for one room of it, that on a level with Mr. Grey's own bedroom, had been completely renovated into a kind of extra dressing-room to Mr. Grey's bedroom, from which a short passage led to it.

Nothing was done to the ground-floor of the tower; nothing was done to the floor on a level with the dormar; nothing was done with the floor above the dormar.

Nothing was done to the unsightly tank on the top of the tower.

With respect to the rooms of the tower, Mr. Grey said he had no need of more than the one.

With respect to the tank, he said he would in no way try to diminish the unprepossessing aspect of the exterior of the house; he would rely upon the interior, the good cheer and the welcome

beneath the roof, to countervail the ill-omened outer walls.

There was another reason, too, Mr. Grey said, why he had made up his mind to alter nothing in the surrounding grounds or outward aspect of the house – he wanted to see whether that house was going to beat him, or he was going to beat that house.

So when all was in order, he set about house-warming on a prodigious scale – a scale that was a revelation to the people of Daneford.

He filled all the bedrooms with guests, and had a couple of dozen men to dine with him every day for a fortnight.

He told his servants, as long as they did their work punctually and satisfactorily, they might have friends to see them, and might make their friends welcome to the best things in the servants' hall every day for a fortnight.

There were bonfires in the courtyard, and fiddlers and dancing. A barrel of beer was placed on the horse-trough, and mugs and cans appeared in glittering rows on a table beside the cask, and painted on the butt-end of the cask the words, "Help yourself."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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