

Dowling Richard

The Weird Sisters: A Romance.
Volume 2 of 3



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PART I. A PLAIN GOLD GUARD

CHAPTER XII

THE SHADOW ON THE TOWER OF SILENCE

After giving way to the feelings which had overwhelmed him in the passage, and which had almost betrayed him at the bedside, Grey, by a great effort, collected himself and walked soberly and deliberately until he found the grand staircase of the Castle. This he descended, and when he reached the bottom hastily sought the courtyard, and from the courtyard the grounds.

"I thought it would have killed me in that room. I wish it had," he whispered to himself, as he passed aimlessly over the short dry grass. "No, no, no, no, no! I must not think of it. I must think of something else."

He was now beyond the range of the Castle windows, in a little

fern-clad hollow above a miniature cove.

"Who said I was a coward?" he demanded, in a loud harsh voice, looking fiercely round on the cool silver river that lisped soft whispers at his feet and made low melodious concord of its rippling surge, filling the ear with memories of the far-off sea.

"Who said I was a coward?" He repeated the question to the grave oaks standing above him, motionless and voiceless against the opal ocean of the unclouded sky.

"No coward. I never quailed. I never winced. I held up my head as fearlessly as any undaunted soldier kneeling upon his coffin facing the firing-party. I was not afraid of anything. I only thought I should die there and then. I am sorry I did not die."

He seemed to imagine himself in a dock, and the huge oaks the grave and grey jury empanelled to try him, and the sweet low voice of the river the indictment that never ceased to sound.

"I own I quailed when I heard his first words from the threshold, but that was when he accused me of what I have done." He had once more dropped his voice to a cautious whisper.

"Who would not, being a thief, quake at being called a thief for the first time by the man he had stolen from, and in the presence of her for whom the vast savings of a lifetime had been laid by? No man could have helped quailing at that. But when the old man showed his confidence in me unbroken, when he swore me to take care of her property and of his child, when he kissed, Oh, God! when he kissed my hand, did I quail? No. I stood it like a man. *That* was the vulgar end of the coarse objective

tragedy. That was the poison-bowl, the dagger-thrust. That was the breaking of the last bone on the wheel. I am dead since then. But *that* was only the bell for the curtain to go up on the other tragedy, the subjective play. I am enrolled among the immortals. I play the chief part in a tragico-farce by the Angel of Night. I play the leading part. The stage is in the nether depth. I play to an audience of everlasting Outcasts. The audience are assembled, the curtain is up. I forget my cue, and the prompter is asleep. Judas, I forgot my cue, and the prompter is asleep. What am I to say? What am I to do, comrade Judas?"

"Mr. Grey, I have been looking for you, sir. You are wanted at the Castle, please, sir."

Mr. Grey turned round and saw just above him, on the edge of the little hollow, Sir Alexander's old servant, Michael.

"Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, Michael, is it you?" Mr. Grey laughed and asked.

"Yes, sir," answered Michael promptly, as though he were accustomed to finding his identity doubted.

"I was rehearsing a part I am going to take in an amateur play, Michael, just to get the memory of poor Sir Alexander out of my mind. Well, am I wanted at the Castle?"

"Yes, please, sir; and you will please to come at once. Mrs. Grant wants to see you. The doctors have been, and I am afraid there is bad news about Sir Alexander."

"I hope not, Michael. I shall run. You can take your time."

And with these words the banker started off at a quick pace.

He found Mrs. Grant sobbing violently, and for a while quite unable to command her voice. At length, after a few reassuring and encouraging words from the banker, she spoke through her sobs.

"Oh, Mr. Grey! Oh, my poor darling Maud! Oh, Mr. Grey, what are we to do?"

"It will be kindest and wisest," said he, in a conciliatory voice, "if we all try to keep as calm as we can under the circumstances. Michael told me the doctors had been here, and that the news is bad; but I do not know yet what the news is."

"Oh, my poor child! Mr. Grey, you can't tell how I feel. I, who have been with her now more than six years, until I have grown to look upon her as a daughter. Oh, Mr. Grey, this is dreadful!"

"There is nothing the matter with Miss Midharst, I trust. She is quite well?"

"Quite well."

"In health, I mean?"

"Oh, yes. But think of her thrown out of her father's place without a home or a relative, and so young and so simple."

"But, Mrs. Grant, Miss Midharst is enormously rich, and can make a most handsome home anywhere she pleases."

"But think of an upstart younger son of a whole lot of no-good younger sons turning my darling out into the cold, bleak, cheerless world, turning her out of the house of her forefathers, this grand old place. I never knew how grand it was or how I had grown to love it until now."

The poor woman, in her great sympathy for Maud, could not dissociate the ideas of leaving the home-tree and poverty. When her husband died, and the instable home-tree under which soldiers sling their hammocks had to be abandoned, there were narrow ways and the friendless world that wait on narrow ways to be encountered and endured. In her anxious sympathy she thought the heiress of a rich baronet would have the same hardship and privation to encounter as the widow of a penniless captain in a marching regiment.

The banker placed his hand firmly, though lightly, on the shoulder of Mrs. Grant, and said, in an impressive voice:

"We are all, I am sure, very sorry Sir Alexander is so ill; but we must not add to our grief for him the fear that Miss Midharst will be unprovided for. There will be few richer heiresses, and she and her fortune shall be well taken care of. I wish you would be kind enough to tell me what the doctors said about Sir Alexander."

"Oh, Mr. Grey, I hope you will excuse me. I am so fearfully troubled and excited. I know what trouble is myself. I have had my own sad experience – "

"And the doctors said, Mrs. Grant?" interrupted the banker gently.

"Oh, Mr. Grey, I hope you will forgive me. They are in the banqueting-room, and said they would be glad to see you there."

"Thank you; I will go to them instantly. Dear Mrs. Grant, do try and keep up your spirits, for Miss Midharst's sake."

With these words he left, and walked quickly in the direction

of the great room.

As he did so, the river passenger steamboat *Rodwell* went past on the outer or northern side, in front of the great archway leading to the courtyard of the Island Castle.

Mr. Grey approached the dreary state dining-room, and having entered found the three doctors seated by the open narrow windows, and looking out upon the silent peaceful scene beneath. He approached them quietly, gravely.

Dr. Hardy rose to receive him. The doctor and the banker bowed to one another; then Mr. Grey bowed to the other two doctors, and they returned his salutation with respectful inclinations of the head and in silence.

The banker broke the silence:

"Mrs. Grant informs me that you wish to see me, and I understand that you desire to communicate something very important concerning the health of Sir Alexander. I trust nothing very serious is to be told."

For a moment the three doctors stood admiring Grey, and no one of them answered him. There was such a soothing and reassuring air of capable responsibility about him at the instant, they could not withhold their respect, and it was displayed in silence.

At last Dr. Hardy found his voice:

"We are informed that you, Mr. Grey, had an interview with Sir Alexander Midharst this evening. Are we correctly informed that during the interview Sir Alexander's head was quite clear

and his mind quite free from delusion?"

"Quite clear and quite free from delusion," answered the banker, as carefully as though he were sworn, and the life of a fellow-being hung on his words.

"In that interview did he seem to apprehend any disastrous ending to his illness?" asked Dr. Hardy, with weight and impressiveness.

"I cannot go so far as to say that," answered Grey, with the most circumstantial conscientiousness; "but from the nature of what occurred, I am convinced he regarded what he said as of the very highest importance."

"You are aware that he has made his will?"

"I am."

"Did what occurred between you and him this evening bear in any way upon his will? Observe, we do not want you to trouble yourself with detail; but what we want to know is this: Are you satisfied in your own mind that Sir Alexander has arranged his worldly affairs as fully as you, being a man of the world, could desire?"

Dr. Hardy put this question with all the gravity he could import into his manner.

Throughout the interview the banker could in no way satisfy himself as to what Dr. Hardy was driving at. He, therefore, framed his answers so that they might be the least discursive and most easy of corroboration. But the present question disturbed him greatly. Was all that had hitherto been on this day but the

prelude to the springing of an awful mine under his feet? Did the three men now in front know what he knew? Were they a kind of lay inquisition – a species of infernal council of three – the advocate, judge, and jury destined to cause the lead to overtake the gold? But he had already endured a worse ordeal that evening, and he was not to be cowed by this. He answered in the same self-collected tone as before:

"So far as I know of Sir Alexander's affairs they are in perfect order; and in the interview which I had with him this evening, I think I am justified in assuming he added by word of mouth, and in the presence of Miss Midharst and Mrs. Grant, such matters as may not be embodied in his will, or such additions to what may be in his will as he desired to make."

The three doctors looked significantly at one another, and Grey awaited with perturbation of mind, although he preserved an indifferent exterior, the next move in this strangely shifting drama.

The doctors then nodded to one another that they had agreed to some course understood between them, and Dr. Hardy said, in a tone of relief:

"You are fully in possession, we know, of the business position of Sir Alexander's affairs. The medical position is this: A development of symptoms has occurred since you saw the patient; his mind has sunk into complete darkness, from which, in the natural course of the disease, it never emerges between this and death – "

"This is most sad," interrupted Grey.

"*But,*" said Dr. Hardy, taking note of the interruption with the emphasis on the conjunction, "an operation which might accelerate death would in all likelihood give the patient a few minutes of consciousness to-night. If to-night passes without the operation it would be useless to-morrow. The question, then, is: Are you of opinion there is any need to run the risk of that operation in the hope of getting some final instruction for the disposal of the worldly affairs of Sir Alexander Midharst?"

"That is a very grave question indeed."

"A very grave question. Observe, it consists of two parts. 1. The business portion. 2. The medical portion. You are not expected to answer both responsibly. You are responsible for the business portion; we for the medical. The portion of the question you have to answer is this: Do you know of any business reason for restoring to consciousness at some risk Sir Alexander Midharst?"

"I do not."

"Then we may go. We can do no more. Good evening, Mr. Grey; you have been most admirably careful and conscientious in this matter."

The doctors bowed and withdrew.

Once more Grey found himself alone. He could not remain indoors. He felt oppressed, suffocated. He hastened into the courtyard. Having gained the grounds he turned his face to the east, and walked slowly onward with his hands clasped behind

him and his chin sunk upon his breast.

How that brief interview with the doctors had altered the whole aspect of his affairs, he thought. In that terrible scene at the bedside, he had sworn to take charge of Miss Midharst's fortune; a light responsibility that was now. In that same interview he had sworn to take care of Miss Midharst; a grave responsibility that was now. And yet last night he had been thinking of the most intimate and responsible form of guardianship for her. He had been thinking if he were a widower he might marry Miss Midharst, and so cover up the great scandal. If he married her now, he should be in the best position to keep his oath to the old man.

Last night he had been affrighted by the notion of being left a widower, lest it might enter Sir Alexander's mind a second man should be associated with him in the guardianship of a great heiress.

All this had almost miraculously changed to meet his position. The old man was likely to live some time, but never again to possess his senses; never again to have sufficient recollection to make any change in that will in which his, Grey's, fortune and fate were wholly wound up. That was a tremendous relief.

He was becoming calmer. The memory of that scene by the bedside was gradually growing less troublesome, less insistent, less oppressive. He breathed more freely if it was for nothing else but the knowledge the repetition of such a scene had become impossible.

His thoughts ran on:

Sir Alexander might live days, weeks, months, and then after his death he, Grey, would have a whole year. Yes, a whole year! Of course he had no shadow of hope of replacing the money; but then, in, say a year and three or four months, something might happen.

He might be free.

The burden might be lifted off his shoulders and he might be free. Who could say but —

He had turned round and was looking west.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "I have missed the boat! There she goes past the tail of the Island."

The *Rodwell* had just got round the end of the Island, and was steaming west in the broad river, full in the light of the setting sun.

The air was still. Now and then the lonely notes of a lamenting thrush enriched the silence. In the whole vast arc of the heavens from the violet-purple brooding east to the full crimson activity of the splendid west, not a cloud broke the chromatic scale. There was something fierce and warlike and fine in the sun; something wasted and desolate and forlorn in the deserted realms of the east. It seemed as though the sun, that general of Time, were celebrating in the west his triumph over another day; while the eastern fields of the empyrean lay broken in hope abandoned, fit region for the reign of dusky night, for ghosts of noble hopes, and flitting phantoms of human joys. The northern plains of the

heavens were pale grey blue. To the south the sky was green. Overhead a pulse of liquid pink seemed breaking through the fair soft blue, like the pink that steals into a mother's blue eyes when she hears her baby praised and stoops to kiss it, thinking "Their praises are sweet, but they are only drops of sweetness falling into the ocean of my love."

Although Grey knew there was no chance of his overtaking the boat, he now walked west, keeping on the high ground of the island. He passed the Castle; still the boat was in view. The sight of it distracted his thoughts, and any distraction was better than the subject-matter thrust upon his attention by his mind.

From the tail of Warfinger Island to the bend of the river which would completely conceal the steamer was about two miles. The sun now lay level with the horizon. Against the blazing orb the boat steamed on. The edge of the sun had already touched the low horizon when Grey paused at the top of the high ground and looked west.

"I shall drive from the Ferry to Seacliff. It is only six miles by the road, and I can be there before the boat.

"There go my wife and five thousand pounds of – of the money I laid my hands on in an accursed hour. How strange it is that a few minutes ago when I thought of my position I never thought of that! What a whimsical thing chance is! There are Miss Midharst's five thousand pounds helping to carry my wife from Daneford to Seacliff; and here am I, who owe a hundred times that sum, and with no way out of the thing except I should

chance to be at liberty to marry within a few months.

"Ah, well, let me try and think of something that's probable. Trying to square the circle is an elegant and harmless and profitable way of spending one's time; it pays much better than trying to see the way out of my mess. Possibly in a short time I may go mad. That would be a capital way out of it, particularly if my madness took the form of going over that bedside scene for ever. Bah! I am giddy already. I *must* think of something else. Let me get back. That drive to Seacliff will freshen me. Anyway I ought to be very well satisfied with the substantial events of this evening."

He turned around and began slowly retracing his steps. As he did so, he raised his eyes to the Castle.

Already the walls of the pile were steeped in the shadows of night. But the Witch's Tower – the Tower of Silence – had just caught the fierce gleam of light from the river.

He paused, looked up, and thought:

"How simple the people were long ago! They had no idea of cause and effect. They saw that this tower blazed red after all the rest of the building was laid in shadow. But the poor idiots never thought of the light on the river. I can hardly believe it. An evening like this, when there wasn't a cloud in the heavens, someone must have noticed that the light on the tower first appeared when the sun caught the river and remained steady until the sun had gone altogether. It is incredible that people were ever such fools."

He stopped.

"I will wait until it fades," he thought, by way of honouring his scorn for the past.

Presently and quickly the red glow faded from the tower.

"Now," he cried, "the sun is set, and no witchcraft can rekindle that glow for four-and-twenty – What! The light again! Am I mad already?"

Once more, beyond all doubt, the blood-red glare burnt on the summit of the Tower of Silence.

Grey turned quickly round, and looked in surprise and horror west. He shaded his eyes with his hands. He rushed forward a few paces, shaded his eyes again and looked. He swung himself into the branches of a tree, climbed up, and having reached the highest branches that would sustain his weight, glared into the west, into the track of crimson fire that shot the red shaft at the Tower.

Then he descended heavily, drowsily, as though half asleep.

When on the ground he threw himself on his face, and muttered in a thick voice:

"What is this? What is this? I have not been thinking murder, have I? I have not been thinking wife-murder? Have I? No, no, no, Grey! Not so bad as that."

Then a sudden change passed over him. He became inspired with superhuman energy and strength. He sprang to his feet, and winding his arms wildly about his head rushed towards the Castle, shouting:

"Help! help!"

CHAPTER XIII

ON BOARD THE STEAMSHIP RODWELL

The passenger steamboat *Rodwell* left Daneford on that evening of the 17th of August, 1866, at the usual time, with an average number of passengers for the season and her ordinary crew. She was a saloon boat, and licensed to carry three hundred and fifty passengers between Daneford and Seacliff. As a matter of fact she never, except on very rare occasions, had more than half that number on board. Her crew, all told, were fifteen; and on the evening of the 17th of August, 1866, she carried about one hundred and twenty passengers.

The saloon-deck was abaft the paddle-boxes, and after-deck passengers had access to the saloon and bridge as well as the after-deck; the fore-deck passengers were confined to the fore-deck and the fore-cabin, the latter being a dull, cheerless, dreary place, where no one ever thought of going, unless in bad weather.

Smoking was allowed on the fore-deck to the second-class passengers, but not in the fore-cabin. On neither the saloon-deck, nor in the saloon itself, was smoking permitted; but all smoking Daneford declared that, in the whole world, there could be found no place or circumstances under which a cigar might be tasted with such plenteous peace and enjoyment as upon the bridge of

the *Rodwell*, while she steamed down the broad placid Weeslade of a fine summer's evening.

Although Daneford was not a straitlaced city, there was a good deal of solid propriety in the character of its people. Judged by criminal statistics, it was rather worse than the average city of its size; but if a little prodigal in its crimes, it was discreet and prudent in its sins. If it cheated, it cheated in a legitimate and business-like manner. If it got drunk, it did not brawl. Whatever wicked thing it did, it kept under the rose. So that it enjoyed the double advantage of being highly estimated for its virtue, without allowing itself the unpleasant deprivations which the pursuit of virtue requires.

As regards smoking, Daneford observed one rule in the year 1866, and of that rule a single breach could not be proved against a single resident of the city. The rule was that no man should, while walking through the streets of Daneford in company with a lady, give the death-blow to chivalry and light a cigar.

The mere fact that on the bridge of the *Rodwell* smoking was allowed secured it against the remotest chance of female incursion. The most respectable maiden ladies, who had ceased to be giddy with youth, made it a practice to look as little as possible at that bridge, and, if they could, to sit with their backs to it.

Just forward of the bridge, on the main deck, were the steward's pantry and the cook's galley. The passage between the forward house on deck and the paddle-boxes being very narrow,

the view from the fore to the after deck was so much interrupted as practically to be cut off.

Under the bridge, amidships, were the engines; aft of the engines, the engine-room and stoke-hole, all in one; and farther aft still, the furnaces and boilers.

All first-class lady passengers, whether escorted by men or alone, confined themselves to the after-deck and the saloon.

The defect which had been discovered in the boiler had not become a matter of general knowledge. No one in either Daneford or Seacliff knew anything about it, except a few persons connected with the steamer and the company's office.

There was no railway from the city to the little town, but an omnibus and a coach went daily in and out, the distance between the two places being, by road, not half the distance by water.

The road was no longer a rival of the river as a highway between the two places; but if public faith got cool in the riverway, people might fall back upon the road, which of old had enjoyed the monopoly. Nothing could more effectually shake public faith in the water-way than a suspicion that weakness or defect existed in the steamer. Therefore the fact that the boilers of the *Rodwell* exhibited unfavourable symptoms had been kept a profound secret, and on the 17th of August no passenger on board the boat had the shadow of a suspicion anything was wrong.

Steadily the steamboat held her course down the Weeslade that lovely August evening.

A man with a fiddle at the bow struck up a lively air, and in a few minutes some of the younger and gayer of the forward passengers stood up and began to dance.

The men smoking on the bridge drew near the rail, and looked down with smiles of quiet cordiality upon the dancers.

Then a man with a large white hat, blackened face, huge white shirt-collar, blue-and-white calico coat, red waistcoat, and check-linen trousers approached the fiddler; and having whispered to the fiddler, the latter brought the dance-music to a stop, and the nigger minstrel stepped out into the open space just quitted by the dancers, and sang a pathetic song.

This won great applause, and caused some of the women to weep.

Then the fiddler changed the tune into one of sly and artful purport; and the nigger, assuming an attitude and a manner of audacious drollery, sang a song of such comical force that all the forward passengers greeted the end of each verse with roars of laughter, forgetting, in their own enjoyment, to applaud the singer: a form of commendation doing much more homage to the performer than all the cool and calculating approval that accepts and adopts the dry formula of hand smiting hand as a mark of satisfaction. So successful was this song that some of the critical loungers on the bridge turned to others and said, "Not half so bad," in a tone indicating the possession of responsible critical discernment and chivalric honour in the interests of truth.

Among the men on the bridge was a merchant of Daneford

accompanied by a nephew, a young lad from the country who had come on a first visit to the city; to him the merchant was indicating the various objects of interest they passed on the way down.

"This," said the merchant, pointing, "is the Foundery. Although it is called the Foundery, it is in reality, as you see, a dockyard for building iron steamers. The last one launched was 2,500 tons register.

"That is the Cove, and there bathing is allowed all day long. The water is not clear, and the bottom is very muddy; but in the hot weather city-folk of the lower order are not nice in such matters. We haven't any clear streams or mill-ponds such as you have in the country.

"That is the Glashouse over there, and this part of the river is called Glashouse Reach.

"Farther down you see a windmill on a headland; that headland is called Windmill Head, and that large white house in the glen there is Windmill Hall, the residence of Colonel Wood Maitland, who distinguished himself in the Crimean War. A Cossack thrust at Maitland's colonel, who was wounded and propped up against a dead trooper's dead horse. Captain Wood Maitland (he was only a captain then) lifted the Cossack's lance with an up-cut. The Cossack wheeled, thrust at the captain; the lance caught the captain in the left forearm, and the shaft being wounded by the up sword cut, broke off two feet from the head, and stuck in the captain's forearm. The captain was borne down.

The Cossack wheeled again and drew. Captain Maitland had lost his sword in the fall. The Cossack rode up, brandishing his sword and making again for the wounded colonel, who lay helpless against the belly of the dead horse. Captain Maitland was now unarmed and wounded. A few paces in advance of the captain was a large fragment of a shell; he rose, picked this up, and, at the moment the Cossack was within a few yards of the wounded colonel, threw the piece of the shell with all his force, and struck the horse on the head, causing the horse to swerve and the rider to lose his cut. As the Cossack swept by Captain Maitland pulled the lance-head out of his left forearm, and thrust it through the bowels of the Cossack, who rode on a little and then tumbled out of his saddle. But that was only one of a dozen or more brave things Maitland did.

"That snug little cottage under the slope on the other shore is where Samuel Sholl, the richest merchant in Daneford, lives. He is a Quaker, and many men of five hundred a year have finer houses. But this one is the most beautifully kept in the neighbourhood.

"If you look right ahead now you will see the Island. Its name is Warfinger. On the top of the hill in the Island is the Castle. Sir Alexander Midharst lives there. He has a fine property, worth more than twenty thousand a year; but he is a miser, and saves up nineteen out of every twenty pounds of his income.

"Wat Grey, the banker, a very rich man too, takes care of all Sir Alexander's money. The Castle is old, as you see, and has a

deserted, lonely look.

"Wat Grey lives at the Manor, in the Manor House, another queer house, and he has called the two houses the Weird Sisters. You see that round tower. Now you can see it better as we come in front of the archway to the Castle-yard, the western tower. Well, they used to say it was haunted by the ghost of one of the wives of the family which owned it before the Midharsts came into the property. There's a tower on the Manor also, and no doubt you have heard or read of places in the East – China, I think, or maybe Rangoon – where they put their dead on the top of towers, called the Towers of Silence. The carrion birds eat off the flesh, and the bones fall through a grating. Well, Wat Grey calls these two towers the Towers of Silence.

"That level plain of grass-land between the river and these hills is called the Plain of Spears. A great number of spear-heads have been found there from time to time, and until quite lately it was supposed a battle must have been fought there. But although bones of cows and sheep have been discovered, no human bones ever turn up, and no one has been able to account for the spear-heads. You shall see many of those spear-heads in the rooms of the Weeslade Scientific Institute to-morrow.

"In that little creek there, Glastenbury Cove, three boys were drowned last year. A boat capsized in a squall of wind, and none of the three boys could swim; so they were all drowned.

"That large yellow house at the top of the dip of land is the Hon. Skeldemere Istelshore's. He is the brother of an earl, and

a violent Radical. He has a large property hereabouts, and farms two thousand acres himself.

"The sun is getting down now. Twilight is the pleasantest time on the river at this season. Now, if you look back, you will see as pretty a view as there is on the whole of the Weeslade, Don't the pasture and park lands look well with the hills behind them, and dead astern, in the throat of the river, Warfinger Island with its hill, and on the top of the hill the old Castle standing out sharp against the sky, with the Tower of Silence highest of all?

"By-the-way, in a moment you will see why people got a superstitious feeling about that tower. Right in our wake is the Castle, and we are steering right into the sun. We could not be better placed to see the witch's fire dance on the tower. The sun is just dipping. Now watch the tower. There! Did you see that? That flash on the top of the tower? That's what the people call the witch's fire. There it is again, now. I never saw it brighter – never. Look again. The boat is right in the track of the sun, and the wash of the paddles makes the light flicker. I never saw – "

At that instant he ceased to speak – for ever. An iron bar struck him at the throat, severing the head from the body, and killing also a man who stood behind him.

The after end of the bridge was flung upward, and all upon it, the living and the dead, were shot down upon the fore-deck.

Coal and planks and wreck of the saloon, and bodies of those who had been on the after-deck and in the saloon, toiled upward a moment in a dense cloud of steam and water, hung a moment

suspended in air, while a dull groaning sound spread abroad from the steamer. Then all descended again, falling upon the ruined boat, upon the placid water, with thud and hiss and shriek.

For a second all was still.

Then a dull groan from those forward. Then screams and yells when it was plain the shell of the boat could not float more than a few seconds.

About fifty people were still alive.

The wreck made a drive astern. The water washed over the fore-deck, and, striking the forward bulwark, laid the steamer on an even keel for a breath's space.

Then the water rushed aft once more, and in a stern-board the stern went under water, the boat fell over to star-board, swung half-way back again, and then heeled steadily over and went down.

The boiler of the *Rodwell* had burst, and the steamer *Rodwell* had gone down before any one who still survived had had time to jump overboard.

CHAPTER XIV

ON THE RIVER

Still calling out for help, Grey reached the Castle. When he got in front of the chief gateway he paused a moment, and pressed his hand over his forehead, trying to collect his thoughts.

The *Rodwell* had blown up. Yes, that was clear. And all the people who had not been killed or drowned were now struggling in the water, and his wife had been aboard.

No good purpose could be served by alarming the people at the Castle. They could render no assistance, and they had trouble enough there just now. The best thing to do was to dash across the Island, tell the ferryman to hasten to the scene of the wreck (he could not have seen the steamer from the northern shore of the Island), jump into a boat, and pull rapidly towards the fatal spot.

Grey crossed the Island at the top of his speed; paused a moment to recover his breath; then shouted to the ferryman the news of the disaster, and, bidding him row with all his might to the place, jumped into another boat himself and pulled rapidly down the river.

Under the circumstances nothing could have been better for him than the exertion necessary for driving the boat forward.

He was a powerful man and a skilful oarsman. He bent forward and flung himself back with swift and weighty regularity, that made the boat fly. He deliberately kept his mind

free from thought. He concentrated all his attention upon the physical work. When a young man he had often pulled in local amateur races, but never before with such strictly undivided attention.

"Get all way on the boat! Make her go through the water!" were the thoughts that filled his mind. Gradually as he warmed to his work he felt his power increase. He felt conscious of great skill and enormous strength.

As he drove onward muscle after muscle of his body seemed to come into sympathy with those in his legs and back and arms, to increase his force. While the muscles came into play their action stole the sluggish blood from his head, sent up his pulse, cooled his forehead, and cleared his mind.

"There is no use in thinking now. No use in my thinking until I am there and know all. *Now* I have only to make this boat fly."

As he swung himself backward and forward, and plucked the blades through the hissing water, he felt all things possible to man were possible to him then.

"I could crush this wherry flat in my arms, or command a burning ship, or lead a forlorn hope to certain victory at this moment," he thought. "But I must be careful not to break an oar. To break an oar now would be fatal. How they bend! They are the twisted ropes of the catapult, and the wherry is the bolt, and we are going almost as fast as a flying bolt.

"That's the tail of the Island at last. There is no use in my looking round; it might disturb me. All I have to think of now is,

Eyes in boat, a clean wake, and give way with a will.

"Half ebb, by the marks. Give her a sheer out into mid-stream, and get the crawl of the ebb under her. It's only a crawl compared to what we're doing, although it's a five-knot ebb."

He was out of training, and his mouth became dry, his tongue parched, and his breathing short; his muscles, under the unaccustomed strain, tingled and grew heated, and his joints fiery hot. But he felt all the better pleased for this. He took a fierce delight in squandering the magnificent resources of his strength.

"My will," he thought, "is stronger than my body and my arms and my legs, and if they fancy they are to get the better of my will I'll show them their mistake. On you go! ay, faster." And he tore the blades hissing from the water, and feathered, and switched the blades into the water without a sound or a splash.

"Already," he continued, "the Island dead astern. The Black Rock and the Witches' Tower, my Tower of Silence, in a line, and I out in mid-stream. This means I am near."

"Where are you going? Eh? Where are you going with that wherry?" Grey was hailed from ahead.

Backing water with his right hand and pulling with his left he swung the boat round, bringing her gunwale under.

He had almost run into a four-oared river fishing-boat that had a variety of floating objects in tow, and a few small things in the boat. Four or five other boats were pulling slowly hither and thither, with a man standing up in the bow of each.

When Grey ceased to pull it was growing dusk. For a moment he sat with his oars peaked, staring around him. Then he tried to speak, but when he opened his mouth his tongue rattled like a bone against his teeth, and his throat felt dusty dry. Notwithstanding that the water here was strong and brackish he leaned out of the boat, and filled his right hand and drank. Then his tongue became flexible again, and although his voice was hoarse and ragged, he could speak.

"You were here soon after it happened; how long is it now?"

Notwithstanding the gloom the men in the fishing-boat recognised him, and their manner turned to civility at once.

"Close upon an hour ago, sir. I did not know your back, Mr. Grey; and you were running right into us, and with such way on too."

"One, two, three, four, five, six," counts Grey. "Six boats?"

"Yes, sir, six boats. It's the awfulest thing ever happened on the river in my time; and I'm on the Weeslade, man and boy, upwards of forty year."

"An hour ago. I did not think it was so long. I came as quickly as I could."

"I saw you pull a punt-race twenty-five years ago, sir, and you'd have beaten your pulling in the punt then by your pulling in the wherry this evening. Ay, sir, you'd have pulled that wherry round the punt."

"How many were saved?"

"About forty."

"Were they landed at one or both sides of the river?"

"They were all landed at Asherton's Quay over there."

"Do you know – did you see any of the saved?"

"Most of them. I helped to bring in some thirteen."

"There is, if it is an hour since she blew up, no chance of any more being alive in the water, even clinging on to anything."

"No, Mr. Grey."

"Do you know – " His tongue was dry again, and he dipped his hand into the brackish water and drank out of his palm.

The fisherman shuddered at this. "It's brackish at best," thought the man; "but after what has happened – ugh! He must be drunk or queer in his head."

Grey drew in both oars before completing the question, "Do you know – Mrs. Grey – my wife?"

"Yes, sir, I know her well. I often sold her salmon, and saw her with you on the *Rodwell*. I humbly hope, sir, she wasn't aboard this evening?"

"You did not see her among the saved?"

"Mr. Grey, I may be mistaken – "

"Answer me, man, or – " He suddenly sprang up in the boat, and, whirling an oar in his hands, threatened the fisherman in the other boat. "Answer, man, or I'll brain you, d'ye hear? And if you tell me a lie I'll come back and brain you when I find it out. Is my wife saved?"

"I did not see her," answered the man, shoving off the wherry.

But Grey hooked the fishing-boat to the wherry with his foot,

and, brandishing the oar aloft, whirled it over the head of the cowering man, and shouted out in a voice that crossed the waters and crept up the hushed shores: "Damn you, man, don't you see I mean to brain you if you won't speak?"

"She was not saved. No one on the after-deck or in the saloon was saved. It was the boilers blew up, and all aft were killed or drowned."

Grey unhooked his foot from the fishing-boat, and with his foot pushed off from her. Then throwing down the oar in the boat, he folded his arms tightly across his chest, and, still standing, drifted down the river, his large figure standing out in black against the fading purple of the west, his face turned towards the blackening east.

"Only that he lost his reason with his wife," said the fisherman, "I'd take the law of him."

"Ay," answered another man in the boat, "it's an excuse for a man to do any wild thing to lose his wife like this."

They had drifted a bit, and were now pulling back towards the spot where they had first hailed Grey.

"He's standing up still in that wherry. With a big man like him standing up in a cockleshell of a craft like that, the swell of a steamboat wouldn't think much of twisting her from under his feet," said the first speaker.

"And maybe he wouldn't much mind if it did, poor gentleman," in kindly tone, said the man whom Grey had threatened.

The wherry drifted on, but for a time Grey never altered his position. He was without his coat, without his hat; his white sleeves were rolled up above the elbows, and his powerful arms tightened across his wide chest. Gradually the boat, as it drifted, swung round, and brought his face to the fading east.

There was not a ripple on the river, not a murmur in the trees; a faint thin rustle of the water where it touched the shore was the only sound. Night was coming, with its healing dew and spacious silence for universal sleep.

Upright he stood still. The boat began to swing round once more. He did not move. Again his face was towards the darkening east.

At length the wherry gave a sudden lurch; it had encountered something, and had almost capsized.

He instinctively brought the boat on an even keel by throwing the weight of his whole body on the rising side. In a few moments the boat was still as of old. With a sudden shake and shudder he came back to a consciousness of where he was.

"That is the red No. 4 Buoy I ran foul of; it nearly capsized me," he thought.

Then shading his eyes with his open right hand, he stared back into the eastern gloom long and fixedly.

"My wife and the *Rodwell* are both gone," he whispered. "Bee and my five thousand. My wife and my five thousand pounds are gone. She brought me about five thousand when she came to me, long ago. It was to have gone to her children, if she had any, and

away from me if she had none. Now she is gone, and that five thousand and another five: and I am saved! Saved!

"Saved!"

He sat down in the boat, and, keeping his legs wide apart, rested his elbows on his knees and his head on his hands. His shirt-collar was open, and yet he felt his throat tighten, and put his hand to it. When he found it free he muttered:

"It is only the hangman untying the knot; for in spirit I was a murderer. And yet I remember the day I saw her first. I can tell you all about the day I told her I loved her. I could show you the way she looked; pretty, and with her head this way. Then I knew she was mine. She was small, Bee was small; and I lifted her up and kissed her – not often, but once; once, and I felt weak for joy at that kiss; and something happened in my head or heart, and I saw all my life before me, and felt her always on my arm. And after that I was calm. It seemed we had known one another always, and had been married years.

"And I remember the first thing I said after that was not anything wild or romantic; it was:

"'In the back of the Bank-house there is a bay-window like this, but there are creepers on it.' And she asked me what kind the creepers were; and I laughed and said I did not know. 'But,' I said, a kind of foolish pun, 'my Bee shall come and tell me, won't she?' And Bee said, 'Maybe so.'

"And I remember when I bought the engaged ring, and how she kissed me then the first time of her own accord.

"And I remember how when we were married first she clung to me, and seemed to grudge her eyes for anything but me. And I remember how I used to walk around her and about her through the streets, if anything seemed to threaten her with disturbance – a dog, or a draught, or a cab, or a – "

"He suddenly threw up his face to the deep purple sky, and cried out, in a hoarse whisper:

"And to-night, by God, I am not man enough to weep that she is dead! I am not man enough to wish her back again!"

He looked around the water, as though he expected to see some form of temporal or eternal vengeance approaching him.

As his eyes fell upon the water, something came very slowly floating towards him. Something which was almost wholly submerged, and, owing to that fact, drifted more quickly than the boat. As the thing drew nearer it gradually settled down in the water, and, before he could touch it, sank.

"It looked like a cloak," he whispered. "What have I been doing here? I must get ashore, and see if the – " He could not bring himself to say "body," and without thought sat down, and began rowing rapidly towards Asherton's Quay.

CHAPTER XV

THE FUTURE AS IT SEEMED

When Grey's boat came alongside the little quay he jumped out, and went hastily to a crowd of people assembled round the bodies and wreckage landed already.

His manner was highly excited, and the questions put by him came in such an incoherent torrent the people did not know where to begin the answers.

Some of the survivors, some of those who had been on the fore-deck, stood near: these he asked if they knew Mrs. Grey.

Yes, some of them knew Mrs. Grey.

Had they seen her either before or after the boat went down? Did they see her go aboard? She was to have been on board, and he was to have gone too, but he had been called away. Then he was to have joined the steamer off the Island; but she slipped him by, and he was not able to go on board. Could it be possible no one had seen his wife, Mrs. Grey? Could no one give him any tale or tidings of his wife?

No. No one could tell him anything about her. No one had seen her; but then that was not to be wondered at, for all the people who survived had been on the fore-deck, and from the fore-deck it was impossible, or nearly impossible, to see the people on the after-deck.

But surely some of those who had been saved knew whether

his wife had or had not gone on board at Daneford? That was simple enough.

They could not say; they only knew they had neither seen her nor heard of her that evening on the *Rodwell*, or in connection with the *Rodwell*.

Among that sad group on the shore, Grey was the first who came enquiring for friend or relative, and those who knew him pitied him with all their hearts; for they recollected his marriage had been the result of a love-match, and that he was reputed to be the kindest, most generous, and most loyal husband in the city. His constant good-humour and kindly actions, his generosity, and his great importance and usefulness to the people of Daneford, added in no slight way to increase the sympathy and respect of those who stood on the little quay that night and heard his excited questions, and answered him back gently and with tears in their hearts.

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