

Dowling Richard

The Weird Sisters: A Romance.

Volume 3 of 3



Richard Dowling

**The Weird Sisters: A
Romance. Volume 3 of 3**

«Public Domain»

Dowling R.

The Weird Sisters: A Romance. Volume 3 of 3 / R. Dowling —
«Public Domain»,

Содержание

PART II. THE TOWERS OF SILENCE	5
CHAPTER VII	5
CHAPTER VIII	10
CHAPTER IX	14
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

Dowling Richard

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

PART II. THE TOWERS OF SILENCE

CHAPTER VII WAT GREY'S BUSINESS ROMANCE

Grey found his mother in the front parlour of her own house. She was as bright, intelligent as ever, and put down the *Times* and took off her spectacles as he entered.

"Henry," she exclaimed, as he came in, "what is the matter? You are looking like a ghost."

"It is only that I have seen one, mother," he said wearily, tenderly, as he kissed her, put his arms round her, and placed her in a chair.

"Seen what?" she demanded, looking up impatiently at her stalwart son.

"A ghost, mother."

"Nonsense, Henry. Of late I see but little of you; and when I do see you, you are full of mysteries, only fit for sempstresses in penny parts. You ought not to treat me as if I wanted to be roused into interest in your affairs by secrets and surprises."

She patted her foot impatiently on the floor, and looked with vivacious reproach in his face.

He placed his hand gently but impressively on her shoulder, and said, looking down calmly from his large blue frank eyes into her swift bright gray eyes:

"I am not, mother, practising any art upon you; I am practising a great art upon myself."

She now saw something serious was coming or was in his mind; and while she did not allow her courage to decline, or the resolution of her look to diminish, she asked simply,

"And what is that art, Henry?"

"That of enduring the company of a villain in the presence of the person I most respect on earth."

She looked round the room hastily.

"He can't mean this place," she thought, "for we are alone." Raising impatient eyes to his, she said, "I am listening. Who is this villain?"

"Your son."

"Say that again, my hearing – " She paused and put her hand behind her ear, and bent forward her wrinkled neck to catch the words.

"In your presence, mother, I am trying to endure the presence of your villanous son, my villanous self."

"Sit down, Henry," she said very quietly.

He sat down on a chair a little distance in front of her.

She thought, "His father never told me there was a taint of insanity on his side of the family, and I know there was none on mine. This is terrible, but I must keep cool. Perhaps it will pass away. We shall have the best advice. He looks haggard. The wisest thing is to make little of what he says." Then she said aloud, "Well, Henry, I suppose you are going to tell me something else?"

"I am going to tell you, mother, all man durst utter. The unspeakable must remain unsaid."

He leaned his elbow on a small table, and supported his brow with his thumb and forefinger, shading his eyes with the fingers and the palm of the hand.

She sat upright on her chair. It was an easy chair, but she disdained the support of elbows or back. She thought his words, "The unspeakable must remain unsaid." "My son! my son! what has turned his poor head?" Aloud she said, "Tell me all you please, Henry."

"It is so cool and sweet and pure here, mother, in this house of yours, in your presence; I would give all the world if I might live here."

"Then why not come? That great empty house is too much for you, and you are growing morbid there. Come here at once, and it will be like old times to you and me."

"I am not so lonely in that house as you might think," he said, with a ghastly contraction of the lips and a shudder.

"But you see no one now. You have no company, and even at its best and brightest it was a dismal old barracks. Suppose, Henry, I live with you?"

He looked up suddenly, fiercely, and cried in a loud voice:

"No, no; you must not think of that. That is the last thing likely to happen. How could you think of such a thing?"

His head, his head was clearly gone. Fancy his resisting such an offer from her in such a passionate, ill-tempered way.

"Then come and live with me; the isolation of that house is preying upon you."

He had dropped his head once more to its old position.

"I am not so much alone there as you might suppose."

"I thought you saw nobody lately."

"But I am often, when at home now, in the company of Bee in her better days."

What splendid self-torture this was! To dance thus before his mother on the brink of a precipice she did not see was exhilarating. It was almost worth committing a crime to enjoy the contrast between the ideas these words brought up in his mind and his mother's.

"A bad sign," thought the old woman. "A bad sign of reason, when the mind of a man of his age is always with the past." She said: "I think it would be much better for you to shut up the Manor and come here. If you take my advice you would most certainly leave that hateful house. It was all very well when you were strong and happy to call parts of your house by horrible names, but when you are ill and weak and nervous you get superstitious, and full of foolish notions about those very things you have been playing with."

"Do you know, mother, I would not exchange my Tower of Silence for any castle in England at this moment; no, not for the fee-simple of Yorkshire."

The tone, the words, and the awful smile that accompanied them, cowed the spirit of the woman. "My God!" she thought, "this is worse than death. His reason is toppling, toppling."

She did not speak, but waited for him to go on.

"But, mother, there is another reason for my not selling the Manor."

"And what is that, Henry?"

"I am thinking of getting married."

"Married! Married!"

"Yes. Am I so old or so feeble that I should not think of marrying again?" he asked, with a clumsy attempt at a smile as he half uncovered his pallid face.

"No," she answered slowly.

"Then why are you astonished?"

"I did not say I was astonished."

"No, mother, but you looked astonished; tell me why? Why were you astonished at the idea of my marrying a second time? Do you know any *reason* why I should not?"

This was a fierce pleasure. It was like stirring up a sleeping lion when there was no chance of escape save through a small door, before reaching which he might, if he awoke, spring upon you, seize you by the back, and batter out your brains with one swing against the bars. It was like mounting

a parapet under fire, and standing there thirty seconds, watch in hand, expecting to be struck, and trying to anticipate where.

"Reason for your not marrying! No, I know nothing to prevent your marrying."

She did care to excite him in his very critical mental condition by reference to the little comfort he had derived from his experience of wedlock.

"Well, mother, it is not only that no cause exists why I should not marry, but an absolute necessity – a necessity there is no evading, makes the step inevitable."

He had raised his head from his hand and was looking in her face.

"You have always had good reasons for your acts," she said, humouring his whim.

"And, moreover, it is imperatively necessary I shall marry one particular woman, and no other."

"What! in love again already!" exclaimed Mrs. Grey, with a desperate attempt at archness.

The attempt failed utterly, and her face wore a look of anxiety and pain. It was now clear her son did not suffer from mere hallucination; this was a break up of the whole intellect.

The man was so lost to external things he did not notice the change in his mother's face. He was deliberately rehearsing aloud his plan of campaign, and counting his forces and chances. He had almost forgotten he addressed his mother. He knew he might speak out with safety. This was the first time he had dared to give utterance to his thoughts in the presence of another. There was intoxication in the fearless recital of his case, and, with his bodily eyes indifferent to things around him, he abandoned himself to the delight of speaking his secret thought, and observing how the uttered words lightened his burden.

"You are curious to know her name?" he asked, in a mechanical tone.

"I should like to hear who it is," she returned.

"It's a very good name. It will bring no discredit on the name of Grey. Guess."

"Indeed, I cannot."

"Maud Midharst."

"Maud Midharst!" exclaimed the old woman, relaxing the rigidity of her pose, and falling for support against the back of her chair – "Maud Midharst!" she repeated, in a tone of dismay. For a moment she had forgotten she was listening to a man suffering from severe mental disturbance. Instantly almost she recovered herself, and fixing eyes now full of tenderness and pity upon her son, resumed her upright attitude, and continued her former plan of humouring him. "She is very beautiful, very amiable, and very rich," the woman said.

"She is very beautiful, very amiable, and *very poor*," he said impressively.

Again Mrs. Grey started. His tones were not those of a man of unsound mind; and although his face looked pale and worn, and there was a queer expression in the eyes, the whole conveyed the idea of a man overwrought rather than radically unsound of head. She was so much thrown off her guard that she could not refrain from repeating aloud, "Very poor!"

"Yes, very poor," he went on in the same monotonous voice, and with the same lightless face turned to hers. "And it is because she is very poor I am going to marry her."

"A regular love romance!" cried the old lady in a sprightly voice. The tears were in her eyes. Her son, her only son, the idol of her life, breaking down thus in his strong manhood! Hard sight for a mother! How hard to sit still, and seem calm, and watch the light of departing reason flickering in those large blue eyes, which in the happy warm long ago had looked up to hers as the baby boy lay at her breast.

"A real *business* romance," he said gravely. "A real business romance."

"It must be a romance indeed if you are marrying her because she is poor, for I believe you, Henry, are not rich." She thought, "Perhaps it will be best to take an interest in all this. If I do not he may think I suspect him of being under delusions, and I daresay that would make him worse."

"The Daneford Bank is now secure and in a prosperous condition, but I have nothing beyond its prosperity, so that, compared with the time I got the Bank, I am a poor man, for I have lost all

my private fortune. Does it not seem strange to you, mother, that I, a poor man, should aspire to the hand of a baronet's poor daughter?"

"But, Henry, this is a love romance, and in love romances all things are possible."

"I have explained to you, mother, that it is a *business*, and not a love romance. But I have not told you half the romance yet."

"I am most anxious to hear it."

"I have never said a word of love to her yet. I do believe a word of love has never yet been spoken to her, and already there is a rival in the field, so that now we have every element of success."

"And who is this rival?"

"The new baronet, Sir William Midharst."

"Sir William Midharst! I thought he was in Egypt."

"He has been, but he got back just in time for Sir Alexander's funeral. He walked to the funeral with me, came back and fell in love with his cousin Maud."

"How do you know this?"

"Mrs. Grant told me."

"And does Mrs. Grant know you are in love with Miss Midharst?"

"No, nor any one else."

"I, for instance, know."

"Who told you?"

"You."

"Never."

"He forgets already what he told me a few minutes ago. This is terrible. I shall not be able to stand it much longer. My poor Wat! I wonder what has turned his brain?" the mother thought. She endeavoured to keep on her face an expression of vivacious interest.

He spoke again. "I never told you I was in love with Maud Midharst. I only told you that it is absolutely necessary I should marry her."

"In some things," the mother thought, "he is as clear as ever. Of course all this talk of his marrying Miss Midharst is the result of some way poor Bee's death affected him," she reflected. Aloud she said, "But, Henry, if you do not love her, and if she is poor and you are not rich, why are you compelled to marry her?"

"If any one knew the answer to that question, mother, that person could put me in the dock and convict me of embezzlement."

She started to her feet and placed her hand on his shoulder, and cried in a voice of agony: "My God, my son is mad!"

He rose quietly and put both his hands tenderly on her shoulders, and whispered hoarsely in her ear: "I am not mad now. I never was more sane in my life. I *was* mad when I stole Sir Alexander's savings to the last penny. It was with his money I saved the Bank."

"Great God, what do I hear!"

"The truth. I am no better than a thief. I have stolen the old man's savings and the young girl's fortune, and, unless I marry her, I shall be found out. Did I not tell you I was in the company of a villain when I came in first? Now you believe me."

"And you lied to me when you told me about that money from the Pacific coast? Ten thousand times better madness than this!"

"I did."

"You, Henry, my son, lied to me?"

"Yes."

"Understand my question once for all. When you, Henry Grey, told me, your mother, that the Daneford Bank had been saved by money from the Pacific coast, did you lie to me?"

"I did."

"Then, sir, leave my presence and my house for ever!"

"Mother!"

"Go, sir, at once!"

"Mother, for God's sake! You do not know all!"

"Go, sir, at once! I do not want to see any more of you – hear any more of you. You have brought disgrace on our honourable name. You had not the courage to face ruin, but you had the courage to face crime, and you had the baseness to lie to me, sir. Go, I tell you, sir, and let me see you no more. Let me forget there is a man alive who bears your honourable father's name. Do not let me see you again. Do not let me hear of you. You will not go, sir? Then I shall leave you. Remember, we never meet again."

She swept out of the room.

When she had gone he stood a while holding his forehead in his hands, then shook himself, left the room, and drew the front door after him with a low laugh, muttering: "And I did not tell her all. I forgot a part."

CHAPTER VIII

MAKING HOLIDAY

When Grey awoke the morning after the interview with his mother, he felt calmer than usual. He had slept better, and the air of early November was bright and crisp, and wholesome and invigorating.

He arose, drew back the curtains, and raised the blind. The leaves were all off the trees, and the bright sharp fretwork of oak sprays glittered in the morning sun. The grove was silent. All its winged lodgers had long since taken flight in search of food. The glades and caverns of the grove no longer sweltered under canopies of impenetrable leaves. Aisles, which had been vaults of sultry gloom in summer, lay partly open to the sky. Here and there the eye could pierce the inter-twisted branches and catch sight of the mounds of red rotting leaves.

The grove no longer desired the screen of leaves to hide it from the eyes of man, to cover up the monsters of soft rank vegetation that throve and bloated until they burst with the unclean rottenness of excess. All things perishable in the vegetable domain were now melting down into the ground, there to lie until the spring-hunger of the seed and root moved and drank them in, to thrust them once more whence they lay into the green-giving air.

In the warm weather these juices, as they move about through the earth, are caught in the webs of roots and budding seeds, and are pushed upwards through the crust of earth, and by the sun dyed into a coat of many colours to keep excessive heat from the under earth.

In the winter they are shorn of their beauty, and thrust down into all the crevices of earth, there standing incorruptible sentinels of ice to prevent the penetration of the cold.

The coming and going of these juices through the mould is the respiration of the earth. The breathing of all things grows less frequent as they increase in size. Man breathes twelve times a minute, the earth once a year. Can the heat of all earth's time be its share of one fiery expiration of the sun?

Grey stood gazing vacantly at the skeleton trees and the mounds of red-yellow leaves.

Of late he had observed that his thoughts came much more slowly than of old, and this was a mercy. This morning they scarcely moved at all.

"Like a skeleton," he thought. "The grove is like a skeleton from the bones of which the flesh has rotted, fallen through, and is lying down there under the ribs."

He shuddered, put his hand to his head, muttering: "No, no; I must not think of that; I must not think of that. I must think of anything but that. Of course, the exposure – it is nearly three months there now – has – has – and there is nothing left but – Oh, God! No, no, no; I must not think."

It took him a long time to collect his thoughts latterly. This morning he was much slower than usual. It was those sleepless nights that made him so dull of mornings now. He had such thoughts and visions in the night that in the mornings he felt weary, worn out, jaded.

His mother!

Yes. He had not thought of that until now. That was bad, very bad. These blows were coming too quickly and too heavily, and that one was the heaviest of all. He had sought her in his sorest trouble, his direst fear, and she had spurned him, cast him off, expelled him from her presence for ever. She – she – she had been cruel to him – cruel to him. She was all now left to him in the world. He had squandered everything else in the world but her love and his love for her. He went to her in his direst need, and confessed a small crime and a little sin, an embezzlement and a lie only, and she had spurned him – more, it seemed to him, for the lie than the embezzlement. This was too bad. If she had spurned him for these, what would she do if he had told her of – of the other thing? Called the police perhaps. Well, after all, the police were not so terrible to him now, for there was no one in all the world he cared for who cared for him, and he was free.

All things had gone well with him until now, until the funeral of the baronet. Since then he had learned he was not the absolute guardian of Maud, he had found out Maud had an admirer, and he had lost the affection and esteem of his mother for ever.

The blows were too fast and too heavy.

What should he do? He could not go on in this way. He should break down if he did not get relief. There was no use in going to the castle while that young fellow was there, and even if the young fellow were gone, the thinker was in no state of mind to push forward his fortunes with Maud. Indeed, there was absolute danger in going near the castle. In his present state of mind he might betray his designs on Maud, and that would be ruin beyond retrieval. That young fellow was not likely to propose to the orphan a few days after her father's death. He, the thinker, would take a week's holiday, and come back invigorated for the game.

That day he went to the Bank and arranged everything for an absence of a week or ten days. He wrote a note to Miss Midharst, saying he was compelled by ill-health to leave Daneford for a week or so. He expressed his hope that while he was away Mrs. Grant would advise in any little matter on which Miss Midharst might in the usual course look to him for guidance; as to any matter of importance, they would have his address at the Bank, and a messenger should call every day at the castle for any message, letter, or telegram she might please to send to him. He would send her his address; but he did not know how long he might stay in London, where he was going first, as change was what he needed most.

To Sir William he wrote courteously and blandly to the effect that he hoped Sir William would not forget his promise of drawing on the Daneford Bank for the twenty thousand spoken of, and any further sum the baronet might stand in need of. The banker regretted he was obliged to go away so soon after the sad event at the castle; but he was absolutely done up, and rest was the only thing to restore him to vigour. The writer hoped to be back in Daneford in time to say God speed Sir William, on the baronet's setting out for Egypt. While the banker was away, Mr. Matthew Aldridge, manager of the Daneford Bank, would be delighted to do anything in his power for Sir William.

Grey wrote a few lines to Mrs. Grant. That note was the shortest of the three, and took him the longest time to write. He tore up two copies. Nothing could be simpler or more guileless than the one he sent. It ran:

"Dear Mrs. Grant,

"I am obliged by my health, to take a few days' rest in a new scene. I hope to be no longer than a week or ten days from home. I hope you will not think absenting myself so soon after Sir Alexander's death shows want of devotion to Sir Alexander's child. My first duty in life is to her. I need not say I leave her with implicit confidence in your care. I know you will always be loyal to the wishes of her father, herself, and yours very faithfully,

"Henry Walter Grey."

When these letters had been disposed of and a few other business matters attended to, he took train for the south-east and arrived in London that night.

The journey fatigued him; and change of air, even when from a good into a worse atmosphere, being beneficial, he slept soundly that night, and awoke with less sense of distraction, less difficulty in collecting his thoughts.

In Grey's youth he had spent much time in London, and knew portions of the town, those west of Tottenham Court Road and Trafalgar Square, very well. But he had little acquaintance with the City, and none with the east. He had been frequently in the City on banking business, and knew the ten streets confluent round the Bank. But the bulk of the City was an unknown land to him.

Change was what he sought. Novelty without solitude. Therefore, instead of the quiet hotel in Jermyn Street, where he usually put up, he found himself this morning in a large City hotel not a bow-shot from the cathedral of St. Paul.

A while he lay awake listening to the tremulous mutter of the City traffic. What a contrast, these groans of wheels and clatters of hoofs with the morning silence about the Manor House. Here, the walls vibrated, the solid ground shook, the air fluttered against the window-panes with the sway of bodies moving ceaselessly hither and thither. There, no sound came in upon the desert realms of the morning silence but the faint twitter of a bird or the far-off crack of a carter's whip or a sportsman's gun.

Would it not be better for him to stop here always?

Here were no suggestions of the disastrous past. No one knew him here. Suppose he burnt down the Manor House, took twenty thousand pounds out of the Bank, changed his name, disguised himself, and came to live in the middle of roaring London? Ambition he would abandon. Blows had come so heavily and so quickly, the ambition had been beaten out of him. Security and peace were what he yearned for. Security and peace. Peace.

If he lived in this great whirlpool in the ocean of Man, the shoutings of his fellows would drown the memories of his ears. Who could hear the whisperings of a woman's dress in the tumult of this great city, with its turmoil of multitudinous wheels and clangour of innumerable bells? Here he could take his ease for the rest of his life, and drown the vague hideous whispers of the dead in the loud-toned wrangles of the living.

There was, however, no necessity for his now changing his name or adopting disguises. He had some days to rest and recruit. When these had passed it would be time enough for him to think of precautions.

He went out after breakfast, and strolled along streets he had never been in before.

He moved west through streets running in perplexing zigzags, a little to the north of Cheapside, Newgate Street, and Holborn. He strolled slowly, looking in at shop-windows, and taking interest in the disputes of ragged boys and the bargaining of slattern women at the doors of slopshops and marine store dealers. He was not used to such scenes, and they took his mind off his own affairs and condition better than the deserted parks or richer streets. It seemed to him as though he had already severed his connection with Daneford, and lived emancipated from the past.

At last he came to an open space, in the centre of which stood a large heavy-looking building he had never seen before. Passing along the southern side of this open space, he came to the entrance of that building.

He thought: "Often as I have been in London, I have never seen even the outside of this before. It will be a capital place to spend a few hours."

He entered the enclosure through the small gate, and walked slowly up to the deep portico. Under this portico he stood awhile, watching the pigeons, and the people going in and out. Then turning his back upon the daylight, he entered the British Museum, that storehouse for the unclaimed personal property of intestate centuries and forgotten kings.

Passing slowly through the hall of busts, he reached the Egyptian Room. He had no great love of the antique, no great curiosity in people who staggered through the dark approaches leading up to the still, unspiritualised, unexciting Greek art. He never took much interest in art. He had been many times to the Academy. He had enjoyed going; but it is doubtful if he were offered to be allowed to go through the rooms alone he would have accepted the privilege.

To-day Egypt had a new meaning and a new attraction for him. From Egypt that young man had come unexpectedly to thwart his plans. To Egypt that young man was going back again.

What preposterous and foolish figures those around were! What impossible creatures! Cat-headed men! Was this the kind of country that young man had come from? Alligators, too, and

crocodiles! Tombs. The Egyptians gave more honour to their illustrious dead than we do to our living poor. With them a dead lion was much better than a living dog.

Egypt must have been a land of monsters, fools, and tombs.

Grey was now leaning on the rail which protected a sarcophagus of polished black stone. His eyes were fixed vacantly on the coffin.

"The Egyptians," he followed on thinking, "preserved their dead for ever; the Greeks destroyed them at once; and we put them underground, and let them shift for themselves.

"Put them underground – not all!"

He stopped thinking, and looked around cautiously. There were no protecting noises here. Infrequent footsteps, and occasionally a cough, were the only sounds invading the dull gloomy gallery. Coming up towards the sarcophagus by which he stood was a middle-aged portly man, leading two fair flaxen-haired children by the hand. The man was describing the various objects they passed.

"Sometimes we don't let the living shift for themselves, we shift for them; and sometimes without putting the dead in the ground we leave those whom we shifted out of life to shift for themselves unburied."

The man leading the little girls reached the sarcophagus. He stopped the children and, pointing to the coffin, said:

"This was King Pharoah's favourite coffin. When he was quite a young man he contracted the habit of being buried in this coffin, and as he grew older he gave way more and more to this degrading habit. Stop, let me look closer. Upon my word and honour I have made a mistake. I see by one of the mortuary cards issued at the death, and found when they dug up this coffin out of the Nile, the body was that of one Ibis Cheops, who flourished a long time ago. When he was done flourishing they put him in here. Flourishing long ago was greatly admired; we solicitors are dead against it now. Let me see any of my copying clerks flourishing, and he may take down his hat and overcoat and go and enjoy life."

"Is that in the catalogue, all about this stone hearse?" asked one of the children.

"No, child."

"Then how do you know, uncle? You told us you were never here before."

"My dear child, you forget I am a solicitor; and once a man has anything to do with the Court of Chancery he is up to every mean dodge of human nature. It isn't to say that the muddle-headed ancient Egyptians could deceive or over-reach him in any way, but he is more than a match at cheating for the modern Greeks; and that's about as stiff a competitive examination in roguery as anyone can pass. I beg your pardon, sir; Mr. Grey, I think, of Daneford? Am I right?"

CHAPTER IX

THE END OF THE HOLIDAY

Grey looked up with an uneasy start and a sudden pallor.

"You do not remember me. My name is Barraclough. I am London representative of Mr. Evans, your Daneford solicitor."

"Of course, of course. This is about the last place in the world I should think of meeting you, Mr. Barraclough."

"I may say the same of you, Mr. Grey. Indeed few men – none, practically speaking – of our age come here, unless specialists of some kind."

"I have never been here before."

"Nor have I. That fact explains our presence here to-day at our time of life. As a rule, boys are brought here when young, under the impression they are going to have a treat; they find the thing a pedantic stuck-up bore, get disgusted with the place, and swear an oath (most likely the only one they swear and keep) that they will not enter this building again. Ever after in their memory this building seems the sour, old, crusty, maiden aunt of the sights of London. Now, my dears, just walk on a little before us; I want to speak to this gentleman. Mind to keep a sharp look-out for Pharaoh's favourite coffin. I'm sure it's somewhere hereabouts. You'll know it at once by not being able to distinguish it from the others until you shut one eye and keep the other eye fixed on the Rosetta stone, because that is, as you know, the only key we have to the hieroglyphics. I think they keep the Rosetta stone in one of the cellars, for fear of the daylight fading the inscription. You shall go down and see it presently; but now run on, and look up the coffin. My nieces, Mr. Grey," he explained, as the children with bewildered gravity walked on. "I live quite close – Bloomsbury Square. My wife had to go somewhere or other to-day, and asked me to take the children out for a few hours; so I left word at the office I should be here if they wanted me. You are not looking quite so well as the last time I saw you."

"I have not been very well of late, and came up here for a rest from business."

"I don't know how you bankers live. If I were one, I should worry myself to death in forty-eight hours. I should always be thinking my clerks were pocketing hundred-pound notes, or burglars were breaking into the strong-box."

Grey winced a little, but said nothing. The other ran on:

"I am sure this meeting is most lucky. Will you dine with me to-day? I got the instructions from Evans this morning, and will do the best I can, you may be sure. I have not, of course, been able to do anything in the matter as yet. It will take time. Dine with me, and we can talk the matter over. We shall be quite alone – no one but my wife. We can exchange views over a cigar."

Grey felt perplexed and confounded. He had not the least idea of what Barraclough referred to. Could it be his head had been so much confused he had gone to Evans, given him important instructions, and then forgotten all about them? The thing must be of consequence. There would be no need to discuss a trifle. It would not, however, do to confess his ignorance or forgetfulness to this man.

"Can we not speak of it here?" Grey asked.

Barraclough looked around, shrugged his shoulders in deprecation of the place, and said: "I think business always comes best after dessert. Do dine with me. I promise you an excellent cigar."

Grey was sorely perplexed. He had no hint of what those instructions were. It was absolutely necessary he should find out. This was not a fitting place for a business chat. The idea of dining with anyone was intolerable.

"I am very much obliged to you, and should be very pleased to dine with you, but I – I really cannot. I must keep as quiet as possible. You will excuse my not going; and, as a favour, tell me now what you have to say."

"Certainly, certainly. Let me see – let me see. Of course, Mr. Grey, in a matter of this kind we must be business-like, and take into consideration facts we might otherwise leave out of sight."

"Of course."

What could be coming? This was a very grave prelude.

"You are executor and trustee to the will?"

"Yes." Grey started. "Sole executor and trustee."

"Sole executor and trustee! Are you sure of that? Evans said you were one of the executors and trustees."

"I am sole executor and trustee, I assure you."

What had he said to Evans about the will? In his conscious moments he had no intention of saying anything to Evans about the will. The blows were coming too heavily and too quickly. His head – his head!

"Strange! Evans ought to be more careful. He said he was not sure whether the others were living or not; but he mentioned the fact that it would be necessary to inquire and ascertain if they were living or dead."

The attorney looked cautiously into the sarcophagus, as though he expected the bottom to disappear, disclosing the missing executors and trustees.

Grey glanced at the other man in a bewildered way. The whole of his intellect must be going. Not only had he gone to Evans and given him important instructions about something or other, but, if he was to credit Evans and Barraclough, he had forgotten a feature in that will, and this very feature happened to be enough to destroy him instantly. Could it be, good Heavens, that there was a second name in the will, and he had forgotten it, and was roaming here about London instead of taking the precaution of blowing out his brains!

He felt sick and faint. His head began to swim. What a blessed fate that of those men of Egypt who, three thousand years ago, had died, and been swathed up in bandages, enclosed in huge granite coffins, and buried in the inviolable silence and security of pyramids! Here was he, all naked and raw from crime, out in the rough winds, among the rough ways of unfeeling men; and add to all this his head – his head!

"I am surprised at Evans," said Grey. "He ought to have known. He ought to have known better."

"I should think he ought!" exclaimed the attorney warmly. "To fancy a man instructing another to move in an important matter of this kind, to write and say the consent of the trustees might be relied upon, and then to find out there was but one trustee! Evans must be going mad."

"Yes; he or – I."

"Nonsense," returned Barraclough. "There is no chance of your being wrong. Evans is either careless or mad."

"What do you purpose doing?" asked Grey cautiously.

That question might safely be put in the face of any facts.

"I shall sell, of course. Evans tells me you agree to sell; so that if you are sole executor and trustee, there is no need to look up anyone for consent."

What was he to hear next? This man was telling him he had a co-executor and co-trustee, and that he had authorised Evans to sell. Monstrous! Which was his period of insanity: when he had (if he had) given Evans the instructions, or now? Which was his madness: in giving such instructions, or in now believing his senses and the words of this man? He made a great effort, pulled all his faculties together, knit his brows, and put this question to himself: "Is the lead to overtake the gold – to-night?" Then he put another question to Barraclough:

"What did Evans say altogether?"

"That Mrs. Grey had come to him – " Arrested by the banker's manner, Barraclough paused.

Grey had leaned suddenly forward, thrust a pale, shrivelled face close to Barraclough's, placed one hand on the attorney's shoulder, and, pointing over his own right shoulder with the other hand, whispered:

"*This one?*"

"You are ill?"

"*No. Go on.*"

"You really look very ill. Let me – "

"*No. Go on.*"

"He said she wished to sell out her annuity of two thousand a year – "

"Who said that?"

"Mrs. Grey, your mother."

"*My mother?*"

"Yes."

Suddenly Grey's face changed. It flushed. He drew himself clear of the attorney, and, throwing his arms aloft, uttered a loud long laugh, followed by the words: "Before high Heaven I thought he meant my wife!"

All eyes were now directed to where the tall banker stood, with his arms upraised, and a smile of joy upon his flushed face. Ere the last echo of his voice had died away among these galleries of relics from the wrecks of a hundred religions, Grey's knees shook, and, with a groan, he fell to the ground.

It was hours before Walter Grey regained consciousness. His thoughts were sluggish and dull. The edges of his ideas were blurred, and wavering this way and that against the background. Around him all was dim. It was night. A shaded lamp was somewhere in the room. He did not know where the lamp stood.

Where was that lamp? What a strange thing no one came there to tell him where the lamp lay! He himself could not of course get up to try and find out where the lamp was. Of course not.

Why not? Ay, why not? Wasn't it very strange there should be no one there to tell him where the lamp was, particularly as he could not get up!

But why – why – why?

He lost the sense of sight, and felt his eyes pressed against illimitable void darkness. His ears, too, were dead, plugged with thick silence that was not clear, but confused silence, as in the ears of one deep in water. Then the darkness and the silence shuddered with horror, and he ceased to be aware.

It was daylight, and his tongue was very thick – thicker than ever he had felt it. It was so thick and stiff he could not move it. This was strange. The light, too, was peculiar. It looked as though the dawn or daylight lay far from the window. Of course the dawn was far away from the windows always, but it seemed immeasurably far off this morning. But then the ringing of all those bells made up for the increased distance of the dawn. How dull he had been not to see that at first! Of course the bells more than compensated the distance of the dawn. How he hated Latin! He'd never even try to learn it – never. They might flog him as much as ever they chose, but Latin he'd never learn. Not for all the masters in England. No; not for his father. He would not even pretend to learn it, only for his mother. But for his mother he'd shy a slate at the head-master, and hit the Latin man with the heavy, very heavy knob of the big school-room poker on the bald part, right in the middle of the bald part, of his head. They were ringing a thousand bells more now. How the sound did thin out the dawn! It thinned it out until all was worn away. Well, he had better go to sleep. He had a hard day's work before him. He had promised Bee (this very day six weeks they had been married) to take her on the river, their own river, and show her what he could do with the sculls. He was to pull her down to Seacliff. And yet, with that run on the Bank, how was he to sleep? Bee too was worrying him a good deal. Why did they not stop those bells? They had changed the measure of the bells. They had been ringing peals of joy; they now rang ten thousand times more bells, but they were all ringing death-bells. Ah, yes; how stupid he had been! Of course, they were burying the universe in the Great

Darkness, and these were the great bells swung in the peaked hollows of space, ringing for the burial in chaos of the dead stars. Now he must go.

It was afternoon before he again opened his eyes. He felt something had happened, what he did not know. "I have had a bad fall, or an accident of another kind; my head feels queer and I am weak. What has happened? Where am I?"

He lay still awhile to recover strength. Then he asked feebly: "Is there anyone here?"

A nurse showed herself. She would not allow him to speak much, but she told him the history of his present position briefly:

While speaking to Mr. Barraclough in the British Museum, he had had an attack, of what kind the doctor did not say. From the British Museum Mr. Barraclough had him conveyed to this place, the attorney's house, where he had been insensible for some hours.

Had he raved?

No; not a word.

Had any message been sent home?

Yes. Mr. Barraclough had telegraphed to Mr. Grey's chief man at Daneford, and the gentleman was now waiting below.

Grey asked that Mr. Aldridge might be sent to him. The nurse agreed to admit the manager on an understanding the interview was to occupy no more than a quarter of an hour.

In a few minutes Aldridge entered the room, and having expressed his regrets and hopes, and received suitable replies, Grey's first question was:

"Have you told anyone of the contents of that telegram?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Tell no one on the face of the earth."

"I promise not."

"Aldridge, I have known you some time, and I have every reason to believe and trust you. I am under many obligations to you. Keep this matter entirely to yourself, and you will double all my gratitude."

"Rely on me."

"It may leak out through the telegraph office or through Barraclough. I want you to go back to Daneford at once, see Evans, and tell him not to say anything of my illness. This is most important. Now go. Barraclough may have told Evans. Go at once."

"Any further orders?"

"No."

"I have paid Sir William Midharst's cheque for twenty thousand."

"All right. Don't lose a moment. Don't miss the first train."

Grey fell back exhausted. Though his head ached, it felt clearer than for many weeks.

"It would never do," he thought, "to have all Daneford gossiping over the infirmities of a man who must one of these days be a candidate bridegroom. The least said about me the better. I have neither the humour nor the strength for criticism or sympathy at present."

It was several days before he was well enough to go home. He went back straight to Daneford.

The evening of his arrival he strolled through the city, and took no heed of the direction in which he had wandered until he was attracted by something unusual in a house over the way. The front of the house was all dark. It was his mother's house. The piers of the gate were covered with auction bills announcing in a few days the sale of the lease and furniture.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.