

Fenn George Manville

Blind Policy



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Chapter One.

In Raybeck Square

“Oh, you wicked old woman! Ah, you dare to cry, and I’ll send you to bed.”

“No, no, auntie, don’t, please. What will dear Isabel think? You’re not going to spoil a delightful evening?”

“Of course she is not. Here, old lady; have another glass of claret – medicinally.”

Dr Chester jumped up, gave his sister and the visitor a merry look, took the claret to the head of the table and refilled his own glass.

But the lady shook her grey sausage curls slowly, and elaborately began to unfold a large bordered pocket-handkerchief, puckered up her plump countenance, gazed piteously at the sweet face on her right, bent her head over to her charming niece on the left, and then proceeded to up a few tears.

“No, no, no, Fred; not a drop more. It only makes me worse; I can’t help it, my love.”

“Yes, you can, old lady. Come, try and stop it. You’ll make Bel cry too.”

“I wish she would, Fred, and repent before it’s too late.”

“What!” cried the doctor.

“Don’t shout at me, my dear. I want to see her repent. It’s very nice to see the carriages come trooping, and to know what a famous doctor you are; but you don’t understand my complaint, Fred.”

“Oh yes, I do, old lady. Grumps, eh, Laury?”

“No, no, my dear. It’s heart. I’ve suffered too much, and the sight of Isabel Lee, here, coming and playing recklessly on the very brink of such a precipice, is too much for me.”

The tears now began to fall fast, and the two girls rose from their seats simultaneously to try and comfort the sufferer.

“Playing? Precipice?” cried the young doctor. “Step back, Bel dear; you shouldn’t. Auntie, what do you mean?”

“Marriage, my dear, marriage,” wailed the old lady.

“Fudge?” cried the doctor. “Here, take your medicine. No; I’ll pour you out a fresh glass. You’ve poisoned that one with salt water.”

“I haven’t, Fred.”

“You have, madam. I saw two great drops fall in – plop. Come, swallow your physic. Bel, give her one of those grapes to take after it.”

“No, no, no!” cried the old lady, protesting. “Don’t, Laury;” but her niece held the glass to her lips till she gulped the claret down, and it made her cough, while the visitor exchange glances with the doctor.

“I – I didn’t want it, Fred; and it’s not fudge. Oh, my dear Isabel, be warned before it is too late. Marriage is a delusion and a snare.”

“Yes, and Bel’s caught fast, auntie. Just going to pop her finger into the golden wire.”

“Don’t, my dear; be warned in time,” cried the old lady, piteously. “I was once as young and beautiful as you are, and I said yes, and was married, only to be forsaken at the end of ten years, to become a weary, unhappy woman, with only three thousand four hundred and twenty-two pounds left; and it’s all melting slowly away, while when it’s all gone Heaven only knows what’s to become of me.”

“Poor old auntie!” said Laura Chester soothingly, taking the old lady’s head on her shoulder; but it would shake all the same.

"I had a house of my own, and now I have come down to keeping my nephew's. Don't you marry, my poor child: take warning by me. Men are so deceitful."

"Wrong, auntie. Men were deceivers ever."

"I'm not wrong, Fred. You've been a very good boy to me, but you're a grown man now, and though I love you I couldn't trust you a bit."

"Thank you, aunt dear."

"I can't, my love, knowing what I do. Human nature is human nature."

"Aunt dear, for shame!" cried Laura.

"No, my dear, it's no shame, but the simple truth, and I always told your poor father it was a sin and a crime to expose a young man to such temptation."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the doctor, boisterously. "Here, Bel dear, don't you trust me."

The young people's eyes met, full of confidence, and the old lady shook her head again.

"I know what the world is and what men are," she continued, "and nothing shall make me believe that some of these fashionable patients have anything the matter with them."

"Oh, you wicked old woman!" cried the doctor.

"I'm not, Fred," she cried angrily.

"Oh yes, you are, old lady. You say I don't understand your complaint; it's conscience."

"It is not, sir. I've nothing on my conscience at all."

"I don't believe you, auntie," he cried banteringly. "You must have been a wicked old flirt."

"It is false, sir; and I don't hold with doctors being young and handsome."

"No; I twig. Repentance. You used to go and see one when you were young, and give him guineas to feel your pulse."

"How can you say such wicked things, Fred?" cried the old lady, turning scarlet. "But I will say it now. I'm sure it's not right for you to be seeing all these fine fashionable ladies, scores of them, every day."

"Do take her upstairs, Laury," said the doctor, merrily. "Help her, Bel dear. You hear; I'm a horribly wicked man, and so fascinating that the ladies of Society flock to see me. Now, I appeal to you, dear. Did you ever hear such a wicked, suspicious old woman?"

"Don't, don't, don't, Fred," sobbed the lady in question. "I only spoke for your good. But it can't last long now; and when I'm dead and gone you'll be sorry for all you've said."

"Poor old darling!" said the doctor, affectionately; "she sha'n't have her feelings hurt. Now then, toddle up to the drawing-room. Lie down a bit; and have an early cup of tea, Laury."

"No, no, no," sobbed the old lady. "I'm only a poor, worn-out, useless creature, and the sooner the grave closes over me the better."

She was out at the foot of the stairs, leaning upon her niece's arm, before she had finished her sentence, and Isabel Lee, half troubled, half amused, was following through the door, which the doctor kept open, but he let it go and held out his hands, as the girl looked tenderly up at him. Then the door swung to, and the next moment she was clasped in his arms.

"My darling!" he whispered; and then in the silence which followed they could hear faintly the voice of the old lady on the stairs.

"I'm so sorry, Bel dear," said the doctor tenderly. "She has one of her fits on to-day. Poor old soul, she has had a great deal of trouble."

"I know, Fred dear. I don't mind."

"But it's rather hard on our visitor, whom we want to entertain – queer entertainment."

"Don't talk about it, Fred. Let me go now."

"Without any balm for the suffering, deceitful wretch? Just one."

"Well, only one. Come up soon."

It was, as the doctor said, a very tiny one, and then the girl had struggled free and hurried up to the drawing-room, while the giver went back to his seat.

“Bless her! I honestly believe she’s the most amiable girl in the world,” said the doctor; as he sat sipping his claret. “Only a fortnight now, and then no more going away. I do love her with all my heart, and I say devoutly, thank God for giving me the chance of possessing so good a partner for life.”

He sat sipping thoughtfully.

“Bother the old woman!” he cried suddenly. “To break out like that. Suspicious as ever; but Bel took it the right way. I didn’t know I was such a Lothario. How absurd! Now about to-morrow’s engagements. Let’s see.”

He took out a memorandum book, wrinkled up his forehead, and the next minute was deep in thought over first one and then another of the serious cases in which he had to do battle with the grim Shade, ending by getting up and pacing the room, forgetful of all social ties and the presence of his betrothed overhead.

“Oh, Fred!” brought him back to the present.

“Eh? What’s the matter, dear?”

“Matter? Well, if ever I have a lover I hope he’ll be different to you. There’s auntie fast asleep, and poor Isabel sitting watching the door with the tears in her eyes.”

“Tut-tut-tut!” ejaculated the brother. “Yes; too bad, but I have a very serious case on hand, dear, and I am obliged to give it a great deal of careful consideration.”

“You’re always like that now, Fred,” said his sister, pettishly. “I hope you don’t mean to see patients on your wedding-day.”

“Oh, hang it! no, Laury. Here, I’ll come up and have some music; but you needn’t be so sharp, little one. Gentlemen are allowed to sit over their wine, and you haven’t been gone five minutes.”

“Monster!” cried Laura. “It’s over half an hour!”

“Oh!” ejaculated the doctor, “get out of the way.”

He dashed by his sister, and went up the stair three at a time to enter the back drawing-room where he was saluted by a snore from the sofa, and then passed through the folding-doors, his steps inaudible upon the soft carpet. He stood gazing tenderly at the picture he saw in a great mirror of a sweet, sad face resting upon its owner’s hand; and his conscience smote him as he saw that the eyes were indeed full of tears.

The next moment there was a faint cry of joy, and the face lit up, for he had stolen behind, sunk upon one knee, passed his arm round the slight waist, and was in the act of pressing his lips to those of his betrothed, when there was a gentle cough, and they started apart, to turn and see Laura’s head between the nearly closed folding-doors, with a mischievous look in her eyes.

“Oh, Bel! For shame!” she whispered merrily. “You don’t seem to take poor Aunt Grace’s words a bit to heart.”

“You come in and behave yourself,” said the doctor. “Don’t you begin making mischief.”

“I’m not coming in, Fred,” said the girl, saucily. “I don’t like to see such goings-on. Is that the way people make love?”

The doctor sprang up threateningly and made for the doors, but the head disappeared.

“She’ll never grow into a woman, Bel dear,” said the doctor, turning to her.

“Oh yes, I shall,” came from the door, as the head was thrust in again. “Now I’m going to sit with auntie till she wakes. Go on with your love-making, Daphnis and Chloe. Oh, I shall be so glad when you’ve both come to your senses again.”

This time the door closed with a click, and the doctor sank on his knee again by Isabel, and drew her to him fondly.

“Been thinking of what poor old aunt said, Bel?” he whispered, as her head sank upon his shoulder.

“No, not at all I only wanted you to come.”

“And you trust me fully?”

“Of course, Fred. You know I do.”

“And always will?”

“How can you ask me?”

“It is so pleasant to be told that you have the fullest confidence in your husband to be. Tell me you trust me.”

“It is insulting you, Fred,” said the girl gently as she gazed in his eyes. “How could I accept you if I did not know you to be the truest, bravest – Oh, Fred!”

“I was obliged to stop those flattering lips,” he said. “I’m vain enough of having won my darling, and – Oh, hang it!”

“I beg pardon, sir; I did knock,” said the servant. “Urgent, sir. A lady in your consulting-room.”

“All right; down directly,” said the doctor, who had started up. “I say, Bel darling, I must be more professional. You mustn’t lock me in your dear arms like this without you turn the key. I sha’n’t be long.”

Isabel Lee uttered a low sigh as her betrothed made for the door, and as he passed out there was the sound of voices in the back drawing-room, Aunt Grace having finished her nap.

“Who is it, Laury?”

“I don’t know, aunt dear; something urgent. Smith said a lady.”

“Another lady? and at this time of night?”

“People fall ill at all times, aunt dear,” said the girl, coldly. “Hush! don’t say any more please; Isabel will hear you.”

“But I can’t help it, my dear,” said the lady in a peevish whisper, every word of which reached the visitor’s ears. “Oh dear me, I wish Fred was not so good-looking. Well, it’s only another fortnight. I begin to think he ought to be married at once.”

Chapter Two. A Strange Case

Two gloveless hands caught Dr Chester's as he entered his consulting-room, and a strange thrill ran through him as a beautiful face, wild-eyed and agitated, was thrust close to his.

"Dr Chester? Oh, at last! Come – quickly! before it is too late."

"Pray be calm," he said, motioning his visitor to a seat, but she threw back her head.

"Come!" she cried imperiously. "The brougham is at the door. Quick! He is dying."

"Pray explain yourself, madam," said the doctor.

"Oh, how can you be so cold-blooded? Man, I tell you that Robert is dying. He must not – he shall not die. Come – come!"

"But, my dear madam!"

"I'll explain everything as we go," cried the visitor, passionately, as she drew him towards the door. "A terrible accident. Come and save his life."

At another time Fred Chester might have hesitated, but there was a strange magnetism in the eyes of his beautiful visitor – an appeal in the quivering lip. Every feature was drawn by the agitation from which she suffered. It was his profession to help in emergencies – evidently some terrible crisis had arisen, and he felt it impossible to resist.

He threw open the door, there was a faint gasp of satisfaction as he caught up his hat, and the next moment, with his visitor holding still tightly by his hand, he was descending the broad steps, perfectly ignorant of the fact that Aunt Grace was standing at the top of the first flight of stairs, watching intently.

By the light of the gas lamps Chester saw a handsomely-appointed brougham drawn up at the kerb. His companion said the one word "Home," then stepped quickly into the carriage, the doctor followed, and they were driven off at a rapid pace.

The night was dark, and it was by flashes of the lamps they passed that he had glimpses of the beautiful, quivering face leaning earnestly toward his. He was conscious of the delicate scent emanating from the dress; the warm perfumed breath reached his face, and there was, as it were, a magic in the contact with her rustling robe, as they sped along the streets. A wild intoxication seemed to have seized upon him in those moments, before he could master himself sufficiently to say —

"Will you explain the accident?"

"Yes, yes, as soon as I can speak," was panted out. "I – I – ah – h – ah!"

The speaker lurched toward him, and he caught her, fainting, in his arms. But her strong will mastered the weakness, and she struggled free.

"Better now," she panted. "Doctor, we had heard of you, I came myself. He is dying. Oh, faster – faster!" she cried, and leaning forward she beat upon the front window, there was a quick movement on the part of the driver, and the horses seemed to fly.

"It was like this. We were at dessert. Robert was examining a pistol. It went off, and he is horribly wounded. Dr Chester, oh, for Heaven's sake, save my poor boy's life!"

"With Heaven's help, madam, I will," said the doctor, earnestly, "if we are not too late."

"Too late – too late? Oh no, no, no, we cannot be too late! Quicker! Quicker! These horses seem to crawl. Oh, it is too horrible – too horrible! I cannot bear it!"

By a quick, impulsive movement the speaker threw herself forward, to sink upon her knees in the bottom of the brougham, pressing her hands to her mouth, and resting her face upon them against the padded cushion by the front window; while, feeling strangely moved, Chester leaned slightly over her with his hands half raised, in the desire he dared not gratify, to raise her to her seat and whisper gentle words of comfort. At that time it did not occur to him that it seemed strange for a gentleman

– he must be a gentleman; everything suggested it – to be handling a pistol at dessert. All he could think of was the terrible suffering of his companion, and his attention was centred upon her as he saw the agony she suffered, while as yet he could do nothing.

She sprang up as suddenly as she had thrown herself down, and her voice and look thrilled him again as she said sharply —

“I can’t pray: it is too horrible. Don’t notice me; don’t speak to me, please, doctor. I am half mad.”

She flung herself back in the corner and covered her face with her hands, while, totally oblivious of the direction taken by the driver, Chester sat back in his own place, gazing at his companion, and weaving a romance.

It was some story of love, he told himself – love and jealousy – for the woman at his side was beautiful enough to tempt a saint. That was it, he was sure, and the distracted husband had attempted to or had committed suicide.

“What is it to me?” he said to himself, fiercely, and he wondered now that he should have been so strangely moved. His professional instincts had the mastery again, and for the first time he looked out through the drawn-up glass to try and see what street they were in. But at that moment his companion started again.

“Shall we never be there?” she cried in her agony. “Ah! at last!”

For the horses were pulled up suddenly, there was a flash of light from an open hall, and a gentleman ran down and tore open the brougham door.

“Brought him?”

“Yes, yes!” cried the lady, springing out and turning to snatch at the doctor’s wrist and hurry him up the steps.

Once more the strange thrill ran through Fred Chester’s nerves and his heart throbbed heavily. Then they were inside a handsome entry, and he saw statuary, pictures, a cluster of electric lights, in rapid sequence, as he hurried over soft carpets to the back of the house, and into a handsome dining-room in which some eight or nine ladies and gentlemen in evening dress were clustered about a couch drawn up near a table covered with glass and plate, flowers, fruit, and the signs of the interrupted dessert, seen by a bouquet of soft incandescent lights.

The sight of the figure on the couch was enough, and Chester was fully himself as his companion ran to the sufferer, threw herself on her knees, and kissed the white face there.

“Be my own brave boy,” she whispered hoarsely. “The doctor is here.”

“Be kind enough to leave the room, all but two of you gentlemen,” said Chester, sternly.

“No; I shall stay,” cried the lady, firmly, as she threw off the thick mantilla and fur-lined cloak, to stand there bare-armed and palpitating. “I will not leave you, Rob,” she cooed over the wounded man. “Doctor, I will be nurse.”

The doctor bowed his head, and as all left the room but two of the gentlemen, he hurriedly made his examination, and probed in vain for the bullet, which had passed in under the left shoulder-blade, inflicting a dangerous wound, against which, at intervals, the lady pressed her handkerchief.

The patient bore all with remarkable fortitude, and in the moments of his greatest agony set his teeth and held on by his nurse’s hand, while she bent down from time to time from watching every movement of the doctor, and pressed her trembling lips to the sufferer’s hand.

At last the examination was over, and the wounded man lay very white and still; while Chester made use of a finger-glass and napkin to remove the ugly marks from the white hands.

“Drink this, doctor,” whispered one of the gentlemen who had waited upon him, no servant having been seen.

Chester, who had had eyes only for his patient, turned sharply, and took a tumbler of Burgundy from the well-bred man who offered it, drank a few mouthfuls, and set the glass down close by the weapon which had caused the wound, and which lay near a dish containing a large pine.

Chester raised his brows a little as he now saw the richness of the table appointments, and at the same time grasped the fact that he was in some wealthy home. Then this was endorsed as he turned and his eyes lit upon the lady kneeling on the other side of the couch, pale and beautiful, for he noted that she had magnificent diamonds in her hair, about her neck, and clasped upon her soft white wrists.

“Say something, doctor,” she whispered pleadingly.

“I cannot, madam, yet.”

“But he will live?” she wailed.

“Please God, madam. Gentlemen, the case is serious,” he said, turning to those who were watching him. “I should like someone else called in for consultation.”

“No,” said one of the gentlemen, decisively. “If you cannot save him, no one can.”

“Jem,” said the other, hoarsely, “it’s murder not to – ”

“Silence!” said the first speaker, sternly. “Dr Chester will save him if he is to be saved.”

“Oh, Jem, Jem!” moaned the lady.

“Be quiet, Marion. He is in the right hands. No, doctor, we will have no one else called in.”

A low moan from the wounded man took Chester’s attention, and he knelt down again to bathe his face and lips with brandy, while the two gentlemen went to a door at the other end, passed out, and a low, hurried dispute arose, all in whispers.

Chester heard a word or two – angry words – and grasped the fact that there must have been some desperate quarrel, ending in the unfortunate man before him being shot down. A chair was overturned, and glasses and decanters upset, as if from a struggle. But the patient was apparently slipping away, and for hour after hour through that night Chester fought the grim Spectre, striving to tear the victim from his hands, seeing nothing, nothing, nothing, forgetting everything – home, Isabel, the anxious woman at his side. His every nerve was strung to the fight, and at last he felt that he had won.

His face showed it as he rose, uttering a sigh of relief, and his fellow-watcher at the other side of the couch sprang from her knees, caught his hands in hers, and kissed them passionately, while the rest of the company came slowly back into the room.

“Then he’ll live, doctor?” whispered the gentleman the others had addressed as Jem.

“I hope so. He is sleeping easily now. I will come back about nine. There is not likely to be any change. If there is, of course I must be fetched.”

“Have some refreshment, doctor,” said the gentleman he addressed. “You must not leave him.” Wearied out as he was, this was enough to irritate Chester.

“I am the best judge of that, sir,” he said coldly. “Of course the patient must not be left.”

“That is what we all feel, doctor. Ask what fee you please, but you must stay.”

“Yes, yes; pray, pray stay, doctor,” cried the lady in a pleading voice which went to his heart.

“It is impossible, madam. I have others to think of as well as your – friend.”

He could not for the life of him say husband.

“I will be back about nine.”

“Sir, we beg of you to stay,” said the gentleman who took the lead, earnestly.

“I have told you, sir, that I cannot. I must leave you now.”

“No, no, doctor!” whispered the lady.

“Madam, it is not necessary for me to stay now. Silence, I beg. The patient must be kept quiet.”

“Yes – quiet,” said the chief speaker. “Doctor, we have asked you not to leave us; now we must insist.”

“What! Why?”

“Because we decline to let you go till your patient is quite out of danger.”

“What!” cried Chester, sharply, over-excited by what he had gone through. “Am I to be kept a prisoner?”

“If you like to call it so. Everything you desire you can have, but you cannot leave here yet.”

“Absurd!” said Chester, angrily, and as he spoke he saw that two of the gentlemen present moved to the door by which he had entered. “I insist upon going at once.”

“You cannot, sir.”

“Stand aside, sir, and let me pass!” cried Chester, sternly, as his opponent moved between him and the door.

“Jem, for pity’s sake” – whispered the lady. “Doctor, I beg, I pray you to stay.”

“It is impossible, madam, now. Let me pass, sir.” There was a fierce motion made towards the patient, but Chester did not heed it. He saw that the other occupants of the room were closing him in, in answer to a gesture made by the gentleman in front.

The spirit within him was roused now, and in his resentment he stepped fiercely forward with extended hand, when his opponent thrust his hand into his breast with a menacing gesture.

Quick as thought, Chester stepped back and caught up the revolver he had seen lying upon the table.

There was a faint cry, and two white hands were laid upon his breast.

“Stand aside, Marion!” and there was a click from the lock of another pistol.

“Doctor! for his sake! – pray!”

Chester turned from her sharply, as if to avoid her eyes. Then flashed his own upon the man who barred his way.

“Is this the rehearsal of some drama, sir?” he said scoffingly. “I refuse all part in it. Now have the goodness to let me pass, for pass I will.”

He threw the pistol he held upon the carpet, and once more advanced toward the door, braving the weapon pointed at his head.

“Bah!” he cried; “do you think to frighten me with that theatrical nonsense?”

“Keep back, sir, or I fire.”

At that moment a white hand pressed the electric button by the side of the heavy mantelpiece, the room was suddenly darkened, and a sharp crack and rattling sound announced the locking of the door and withdrawing of the key.

“Then there has been foul play,” muttered Chester. “Into what trap have I fallen here?”

Chapter Three.

Two Hundred Guineas

Chester took a couple of steps to his right, for there was a faint sound in the pitchy darkness which he interpreted to mean the advance of an enemy. Then in the perturbation of spirit and nervousness of the moment, he moved a step or two cautiously in what he believed to be the direction of the other door, and stopped short, half-dazed by the feeling of confusion which comes upon one in a dense fog.

"Who did that?" said the voice he recognised. "You, Marion, of course. Here, you go to your room."

There was no reply.

"Do you hear me? It is no time for fooling now."

"Yes, I hear you, but I will not leave his side. You cowards! do you want to kill me too?"

"Hold your tongue. Di – Paddy – all of you, get hold of the mad fool before worse comes of it."

There was a faint cry, a panting and scuffling, the word "Help!" blurred and stifled as if a hand had been suddenly clapped over the speaker's lips, and Chester mentally saw his beautiful companion of the brougham struggling violently as she was being half carried from the room.

Stirred by excitement to the deepest depths, Chester rushed to her help, and was brought up sharp by the dining table, while the scuffling continued upon the other side.

He felt his way along the edge, to pass round it in the darkness, but the noise he made betrayed his whereabouts, and his next step took him into the grasp of a pair of strong hands, which held him firmly, and before he could free himself, there was the sound of a door opening, a faint light showed for a moment, and before it was shut off he dimly saw the actors in the struggle; then the door was closed, and the voice of him addressed as Jem said sharply —

"Light up, Paddy."

A glass was knocked from the table; someone stumbled against a chair; an angry oath followed; and then came the rattle of massive fire-irons.

"Are you drunk, man?" came in the same voice.

"Drunk? no! but I'm not an owl," was growled. "Ah! that's it."

The cluster of incandescent lights glowed golden, and then brightened, showing the doctor that the dining table was between him and the couch where his patient lay, white and motionless; the tall, decisive man standing where he had last seen him, close to the door; a heavy-featured young fellow with a family likeness close by the mantelpiece; another, the one who had held him, close by.

"Well, doctor," said the chief spokesman, cynically, "the storm has passed over. All unexpected only a few hours ago, and we were seated happily after our coffee and cigarettes, when that idiot began to play the fool with his revolver, and shot himself. Troubles never come alone. Now, my dear sir, let me apologise for what has happened since we all lost our tempers and behaved so foolishly."

Chester looked at him sternly and remained silent.

"You will excuse my hastiness. I was excited in my anxiety about the poor fool there, and you see now how imperative it is that you should not leave him till he is safe."

"Will you be good enough to unlock that door, sir, and let me pass through?" said Chester, coldly.

"To be perfectly plain, doctor – no, I will not. Let us understand one another at once. You will have to stay and make the best of it."

"I shall not stay, sir, and as soon as I leave here I shall take what steps seem, after due thought, to be correct over what has been an outrage toward me; and without doubt a murderous attack upon that unfortunate man."

“Murderous attack? Absurd, doctor! An accident.”

“Do you take me for a child, sir? He could not have shot himself. Now, if you please, unlock that door.”

“When I unlock it, doctor, it will be to go out and lock you in,” said the other, grimly. “There, sir, it is of no use to struggle, so make the best of it. You are in for a week, but we’ll make it as comfortable for you as we can. Like to send home a telegram?”

“Will you have the goodness to understand me, sir!” said Chester, firmly.

“I do, my dear doctor, but you will not understand me. A week with your patient will not hurt you, and a fee of a couple of hundred guineas shall be paid – now, if you like. There, I will be plain with you, as a man of the world. It was a family quarrel, and two hot-headed fools drew their revolvers – Yankee fashion. Here, Paddy, see that we have some coffee and liqueurs. Cigar or cigarette, doctor? Sit down, and let’s chat it over like sensible men.”

“I do not wish to come to a struggle and blows again, sir,” said Chester, firmly. “Please understand that you are wasting words. I mean to leave this house at once.”

“We often mean to do things that are impossible, doctor. You cannot. So act sensibly. Take some refreshment, and attend to your patient. Will you have the goodness to look round this room?”

Chester made no reply.

“You will not smoke? I will. My nerves want soothing.”

The speaker lit a large cigar, and left the gold-mounted case open upon the table.

“Better take one,” he said as he exhaled the fragrant fumes; “they are rather fine. Now, doctor; that door communicates with the back the hall, and it is locked; that other one with a lobby from which the upper and lower parts of the house are reached; and it, too, is locked. You naturally intend to communicate with the outside. Well, you cannot. This dining-room has no windows, and is lit up night and day. You are a prisoner, my dear sir, and you will not communicate with the servants, for you will see none. These gentlemen will help me as your gaolers; an eminently respectable old housekeeper – lady-like I may say, eh, Paddy?”

The young man addressed nodded and grinned.

“A lady-like body will see that all your animal wants are provided for; a chair-bed will be brought in; and to make your stay more pleasant two or three of us will take you to the billiard-room overhead and have a game with you – by the way, that place has only skylights. Where we stand used to be a sooty cat-walk of a garden till we built these rooms over. A great improvement to the house.”

“Who are you? What house is this?” said Chester, sharply.

“Your host, sir; and the house is ours – at your service. Better have a cigar. ‘Needs must when the devil drives.’ That is your position now – I playing the devil.”

A low moan from the wounded man changed the current of the doctor’s thoughts; and with the others watching him curiously, he went straight to his patient’s side to place a cushion behind him and relieve the pressure upon his wound, after which the patient seemed to sink once more into a state of repose.

As Chester left him he received an approving nod.

“We fellows would not have thought of that. Ah, here’s the coffee. Come, doctor, accept your position. It is folly to beat against the bars of a prison when they are too strong.”

For at that moment the heavy-faced young man, who seemed to be a thorough athlete, came back into the room from the other end, bearing a silver tray with handsome fittings; and Chester started slightly, for he had not seen him go, and he realised now that he must have been occupied for some little time with his patient.

Just then he saw that the leader of the little party whispered something which he interpreted to mean, “Let him alone; he’ll come to his senses;” and he began to think out his position.

Everything seemed in accordance with what had been told him: he was alone, one man against four – gentlemen, evidently, but plainly enough strongly-built, athletic fellows, who looked to be lovers of out-door sports, and each of them in a struggle more than his match.

His rage had cooled down somewhat, and his common-sense began to prevail. It was hard to master his resentment, and he could not make out what was at the back of it all, more than what was evidently plain – a terrible family quarrel, the participators in which were anxious to keep out of the papers, and possibly from the police courts. He did not know who they were, nor, as he realised now, in what street he was; but that, he felt, he could soon make out. It was awkward. They would be anxious in Raybeck Square, but he would send a message and set them at rest.

“I wonder whether they kept Bel all night,” he said to himself; and at this thought others came, and among them a strange feeling of annoyance with himself as he recalled his feelings, during the little journey, towards his summoner.

Then he hurriedly cast these thoughts aside, and began once more to ponder on his position, walking slowly to and fro, close to the couch, while the little party, who had lit up cigars, now began to sip their coffee.

The next minute the heavy-faced young fellow known as “Paddy” approached him with a cup and the cigar-case.

“I put a liqueur of brandy in it, doctor,” he said in a low voice. “I say, do you think the poor chap will get over it?”

“I hope so,” replied Chester, shortly.

“Thank God!” said the young man, warmly. “I say, doctor, don’t cut up rough. You’re in a hole, but I’ll see you’re all right. You’ll take a cigar?”

He said the last words so reproachfully that Chester could hardly forbear to smile; and he took a cigar, lit it, and then, feeling utterly exhausted, tossed off the coffee and brandy, after which he resumed his walk up and down by the couch.

“Needs must when the devil drives,” he said to himself. “It’s of no use to fight. I must pull this poor fellow through, but I’ll make them pay for it. Seems like a dream. I suppose I am awake.”

The coffee and cigar were having their effect, and at the end of an hour, during which the party at the end of the table had been conversing in a low voice, a moan or two from the sufferer finished the tendency towards submission, and Chester busied himself for some time about the couch. Then, rising once more, “Pen and ink,” he said shortly, and the heavy-featured young fellow fetched him a blotting-case and inkstand.

“A telegraph form, too.”

“Plenty there, doctor.”

Chester wrote quickly for a few minutes, and then handed a couple of papers to the young fellow, who had stopped close at hand.

“I want this prescription made up at the chemist’s, and the telegram sent respecting a substitute to see my patients.”

“All right, doctor,” and the recipient took both to the end of the table, and gave them to the man who seemed to be his brother.

The latter took the papers and rose to cross to Chester.

“Thank you, doctor,” he said quietly. “You will do your best, I see. Please bear in mind that money is no object to us here. Our cousin’s life is.”

He went out of the room directly, returned soon after, and brought with him a quiet, sedate-looking old lady in black silk and white apron.

She was very pale, and her eyes looked wild and strange, as she went straight to the couch, leaned over and kissed the patient’s forehead, and then set to work and cleared the disordered table, almost without a sound, two of the young men joining her and helping to carry the dessert things out by the farther door.

Chester's face must have told tales, for he started round in surprise to find that he had been carefully watched by the leader of the little plot to detain him.

"You could not get out that way, doctor," he said quietly. "We are a very united family here, and the housekeeper is devoted to us."

Chester frowned with annoyance.

"I understand you," he said; "but mind this: every dog has his day, sir, and mine will come, unless revolvers are brought into play and an awkward witness silenced."

"My dear doctor, you are romantic," was the sarcastic reply. "Don't be alarmed; we shall not shoot and bury you on the premises, for sanitary reasons. It might affect the nerves of our ladies, too. There, all we want of you is your skill to set that poor fellow right, and then you can return home, better paid than seeing ordinary patients. How does he seem?"

An angry retort was at Chester's lips, but he did not utter it. He accepted his position, for the time being, and replied quietly —

"Going on well, but he will be the better for a sedative. Feverish, of course. Have you sent that prescription?"

"Yes, it has been taken, and the chemist will be rung up to dispense it. I say, doctor; no fear of a bad ending?"

"And no thanks to the man who fired at him from behind," said Chester, looking straight at his questioner as he spoke. "Fortunately the bullet passed diagonally by his ribs, an inch to the right —"

"Yes, yes, the old story, doctor; but I did not fire the shot."

"Pray don't excuse yourself, sir," said Chester, coldly. "I am not a magistrate; only a medical man with the customary knowledge of surgery."

"And a little more, too," was the reply, with a smile. "There, doctor, we will not quarrel this morning, and you will not introduce the matter to the police. It will pay you better to be silent; but if you preferred to talk about it I'm afraid you would not be believed."

The speaker smiled cynically as he saw the effect of his words, and walked away, leaving Chester thinking deeply, and, in spite of his anger and annoyance, beginning more and more to feel that he had better accept his position.

"It is a strange experience," he said to himself, as he sank back in an easy-chair by the couch; "but a fee of two hundred guineas! Bel shall have it in the shape of a present. She will not fidget when she has had my wire."

Chapter Four.

The Strange Attraction Proves Too Strong

"There, I promise I will be quiet and say nothing, if you let me stay. If you do not, I'll give the alarm in spite of you all."

"Pat! He's waking up."

With the tones of the sweet, rich voice thrilling his nerves, Fred Chester opened his eyes as he sat back in his chair, and gazed up at the cluster of soft lights glowing by the ceiling; but they did not take his attention. He was dwelling wonderingly upon the words he had heard as if in a dream.

His head was heavy and confused, and it was some moments before he could grasp his position. "Who's waking up?" he thought. Then his eyes fell, and he looked sharply down, and the blood rushed surging to his temples as he saw his beautiful visitor of the night before, then all came back in a moment.

She was kneeling beside the wounded man's couch, holding his hand, and she gazed at Chester with an appealing, wistful look in her eyes which again sent a thrill through him, and a feeling of misery and despair such as he had never before felt made his heart sink. He shivered slightly as he turned away, to glance round the room and note that four of those whom he had previously seen were still present.

"You've had a good nap, doctor," said a familiar voice.

"Have – have I been asleep?" said Chester, involuntarily.

"Beautifully. What a delightfully clear conscience you must have, doctor!" said the speaker, banteringly, "that is, if you did not take a chloral pill on the sly. Six hours right off."

"Impossible!" cried Chester, angrily.

"Then my watch is a most awful liar, and the clock on the chimney-piece there has joined in the conspiracy."

Chester hurriedly took out his watch, to find that the hands stood at two, as he bent down over his patient, who was sleeping calmly.

"We gave him a dose of the drops as soon as the bottle came, doctor, for we did not like to wake you after your hard night. He has slept like a lamb ever since."

Chester took no notice of the words, as he busied himself about his patient, the lady drawing back and going to a chair, waiting impatiently till he ceased.

"How is he?" she said then excitedly.

"He could not be doing better, madam," said Chester, trying to speak coldly, and avoiding for a moment the eyes which seemed to plunge searchingly into his; and at his words he saw that they suddenly grew dim, and that she clapped her hands to her lips to keep back a piteous sob or two.

"Hush, hush, my dearest," whispered the old housekeeper in a motherly way, and Chester saw that a strong effort was made, and the face from which he could not tear his eyes grew calm.

"Well, doctor, if ever I am in a bad fix, I shall know where to apply."

Chester turned sharply to the speaker, and read from the cynical smile that he had seen the impression made upon him by the agitated face which possessed so strange a fascination.

"You prove yourself quite worthy of your reputation, which has often reached us."

"Any surgeon could have done what I have, sir," replied Chester, shortly, and then mastering himself, he continued, as he thought of home and all he had at stake, "I presume that now you are at rest about your cousin's state, this sorry farce is at an end."

"Very nearly a tragedy, my dear sir," said the other, lightly.

"You mistake me, sir. I mean this enforced detention."

“Oh, tut, tut, doctor! I thought we had settled this. Surely after your telegram, taken to the chief office, madam, your wife, will not be uneasy.”

As he spoke he gave the lady by the couch a mocking look, and Chester saw her turn angrily away.

It was on the doctor's lips to say sharply, “I am not married, sir,” and he felt startled as he checked himself.

Why should he have been so eager to say that? he thought, and a peculiar feeling of resentment grew within, as a strange conscience-pricking began to startle him. Of what folly had he been guilty in thought?

“Come, doctor, we have been waiting till you woke before having some breakfast.”

The speaker rose and touched the electric bell-push, then led the way toward a small table at the far end of the room, the others waiting for the doctor to follow; but he stood irresolute.

“You will join us at breakfast, doctor?” said a low, sweet voice at his side, making him start slightly, and then follow to the table, to take the place pointed out by his companion on her right, as she took the head of the table.

“As his wife,” thought Chester; then trying hard to be perfectly cool, and assuming to be treating his position lightly, he partook of the meal placed before him, and joined in the general conversation, a great deal of which dealt with the popular out-door life of the day – Lord's, Ascot, the promises of sport in August and September, and the ordinary topics of the hour, all lightly traversed by a party of gentlemen who had ample incomes for their needs, and enjoyed life.

The ladies were increased to three when they took their seats at the table, and Chester soon found that two were the young wives of “Jem” and “Paddy,” the bluff, manly fellow; and all seemed so intent now upon ignoring the trouble and setting their prisoner guest at his ease, that Chester's manner softened, and before they rose from the table he found himself listening with increasing interest to his neighbour's remarks.

The excellent meal came at last to an end, and after a few words with Chester's companion, two of the ladies retired while the housekeeper quietly cleared the table; and as Marion, as they all called her, went to the side of the couch, Jem approached Chester.

“The papers,” he said in the most matter-of-fact way. “Cigars and cigarettes on that table. Spirits and soda or seltzer in the cellarette. Pray make yourself at home, my dear doctor, and name anything you want. It shall be obtained directly – everything, that is, but liberty. Won't you light up now? My cousin there will not mind; we all smoke. Eh, Marion?”

“I beg that Dr Chester will not hesitate,” said the lady addressed, and Chester drew a deep breath as he saw her cross to the table and fetch a cigarette-box and matches.

“It would be ungracious to refuse,” he said coldly, as he took one, and then the lighted match from the white fingers which offered it, their eyes meeting as he lit his cigarette, and as a slight flush mantled the lady's cheeks, Chester's heart gave one heavy throb.

The rest of that night-like day passed in a dream, or a time in which Chester felt as if he were suffering from some form of enchantment. He fought hard against the strange, new, mystic influence, and strove to raise like a shield to protect him, his honour, his word; and again and again as he busied himself with his patient he told himself that he dearly loved Isabel, his betrothed, but this feeling was all as new as it was masterful, and often when he met the eyes of her who never left the couch in her assiduous attentions as nurse, he felt that he was drifting fast into a state of slavery, and that this woman was his fate.

“She is another's wife,” he kept telling himself; “and I am an utter scoundrel to give way to such thoughts. Heaven help me! I must go before it is too late. Have I been drugged, and has the potent medicament sapped me to the very core?”

But he felt that he could not go as yet, for though it was unnoticed by the others, he saw that a change for the worse had taken place toward evening, at a time when all had left the room but the big, athletic fellow and Marion, they being evidently left on guard while a short rest was taken.

Paddy was sitting back smoking, with his eyes half-closed; but he suddenly roused himself up and came across to the couch.

"How is he getting on?" he whispered.

Chester was silent, and after glancing at him, Marion spoke —

"He is better; sleeping well, and in less pain."

"Don't look better," grunted the young man, and he glanced at his watch. "Dinner at eight. Like to go and lie down, Marion?"

"No," was the quiet reply.

"All right," said the young man, and he walked back to his seat, while Marion waited for a few moments, and then, gazing wistfully at Chester, said in a low whisper —

"You did not speak. He is better, is he not?"

The young doctor made no reply, but sat there breathing hard, as if fascinated.

"I cannot tell you how grateful I feel to you," she continued. "Your coming here has saved poor dear Robert's life. I know how strange it all must seem to you, but I — we dare not let you go. It is such a terrible emergency."

"Yes," he said softly, "and I have done my best."

"But I cannot help reading it in your eyes, doctor — you are thinking of leaving."

He started slightly, and then turned his eyes to his patient so as to avoid the gaze which held him in spite of the mental struggle against what seemed to be fate.

"Well," he said, as he laid his hand upon the sufferer's brow, "I am. Is it not natural? Yes," he whispered hoarsely, "by some means I must and will leave this house to-night."

Her face grew convulsed, and for a few moments she was silent. Then in a low, impassioned whisper, she reached across the couch to lay her hand upon his arm, the contact seeming to send a hot flush through every nerve, and he turned to gaze at her with a look half horror, half delight.

"And you hold his life in your hands," she murmured piteously. "What can I say? — what can I do to move you? Doctor, he is everything to me in this world. If he — died, I could not live."

"For Heaven's sake, don't look at me — don't speak to me like that!" he whispered back, and he took her hand to remove it from his arm, shivering as if it were some venomous thing; but it turned and clung to his fast, and was joined by the other. "Madam, I have done, and am doing, everything I can to save your husband's life, and —"

He ceased speaking, for he saw her lips part in a smile, and her wild eyes grew soft and humid, as, with a little laugh, she said —

"Dearest Rob! My husband!" Then she loosed the hand she held, laid hers upon the head of the couch, and bending down she softly pressed her lips against the patient's brow, while a feeling of bitter jealousy sent the blood surging through Chester's brain, till the eyes were turned again to his, and, with a look that sent every forming manly intention flying to the winds, she said softly —

"Why did you think that? Doctor, for a poor, pleading woman's sake, give up all thought of going. I could not bear it. There — look — his face is growing convulsed," she whispered in a quick, agitated tone, "And you talk of going! He is dying. Robert! Robert! Oh, doctor, do you not see?"

Chapter Five.

Aunt Grace Sows the Seed of Discontent

Laura Chester possessed what her aunt termed a bad habit.

"You are so restless, my dear," said that lady. "Why can't you stay in your bed of a morning, and then come down at a Christian-like hour?"

"Nine o'clock, aunt dear," said the girl, smiling.

"Well, say a quarter to, my dear, because that gives ample time to ring for the urn and make the tea, though nine is really a very nice hour. It is not right for a young lady to be racing downstairs before seven o'clock and dusting; and I do not really like for you to be going out for walks at such early hours."

"London is at its best before breakfast, aunt; everything looks so fresh and bright."

"What nonsense, my dear! Nothing of the kind. The steps are not cleaned, and there is nobody about but sweeps and dustmen, and milk carts."

"Oh yes, aunt dear," cried Laura, merrily. "London is very busy then, and I wish I could get you to come. Covent Garden is lovely quite early with the flowers and fruit."

"My dear Laura, to hear you talk anyone would think your poor dear papa had been a greengrocer. Pray, do, my dear, try and give up the bad habit. I really don't know what Isabel must think."

But the habit only grew stronger, and on the morning after her brother's sudden call, Laura slipped out while cook was cleaning the steps and went off to Covent Garden to return with a bunch of roses and a basket of strawberries which had been picked that morning nine miles down the western road.

The breakfast was ready, and she was giving the last touches to her arrangement of flowers and fruit upon the table when Isabel joined her, looking as fresh as the flowers in the little shallow bowl.

"Oh, Laury, I am so ashamed at being so late," she cried, after an affectionate kiss had been exchanged. "I was afraid I was last."

"Oh no, dear; auntie is not down," said Laura, glancing at the clock. "She'll be ten minutes yet."

"Is she always so punctual?"

"Yes. She does not leave her room till the church clock begins to strike. She is very proud of being so exact."

"Is – is –"

"Fred down? No, dear. There! don't blush, goosey. I expect he was kept late last night, and he loses so much rest, that we never disturb him. He has his breakfast at all sorts of times, but it will be at nine this morning."

This was accompanied by an arch look.

"Oh, how sweet the flowers are!" cried Isabel, turning away to hide the heightened colour in her cheeks.

"Yes, dear," said Laura, banteringly, "and life now is all roses and sweets, and the sky was never so blue, and the London sparrows' 'chiswick, chiswick' sounds like the song of nightingales, doesn't it? Heigho! I wish I were in love, and someone loved me, and put his arm round my waist and took me for walks along the primrose path of dalliance."

There was a light step behind her, two arms were passed about her waist, a soft, white chin rested upon her shoulder, and a rounded cheek was pressed to hers.

"Don't tease me, Laury darling," was whispered. "I can't help feeling all you say, and looking very weak and stupid now."

“Tease you, my own sweet!” cried Laura, swinging round to embrace in turn. “No, of course I won’t. It’s only my nasty envy, hatred and malice, because I can’t be as happy as you. There – and there – and there!”

Three kisses, and Isabel started away.

“Fred’s coming!” she whispered.

“No. That’s auntie’s soft, pudgy step. Fred comes down thump, thump, like a wooden-legged man.”

“Laury!”

“Oh, well, he doesn’t notice where he’s going. He’s always thinking of operations and that sort of thing. Good-morning, aunt dear.”

“Good-morning, Isabel, my child – morning, Laura.”

“Aren’t you well, dear? You look so serious.”

“Yes, Laura, I look serious. It’s a sad world.”

The girls exchanged glances, and with melancholy mien the old lady rang the bell for breakfast, and then dropped into her seat with a weary sigh.

“No letters, Laura?”

“No, aunt dear. There’s a lovely rose instead.”

“Thank you, Laura. Dear, dear! no one writes to me now. I don’t know why one should go on living when one grows old.”

“Because Fred and I want you, dear,” cried Laura, merrily, “and Bel too. Put two more spoonfuls in the pot, aunt dear. A hot cup of tea will do you good.”

“Nothing will ever do me good again,” sighed the old lady, shaking her head mournfully.

“Oh yes, it will, dear; and Fred likes his tea strong.”

“Yes, yes, very strong, my dear; and always preaches at me if I take it only just coloured. I sometimes think it’s because he thinks I cost too much.”

“Now, auntie, how can you?” cried Laura. “Don’t you believe her, Bel.”

“I do not,” said the girl, smiling. “Poor aunt is not well this morning.”

“How can I be, my child, knowing as I do that my little bit of property is slowly wasting away, and – ”

“Here’s the urn, aunt,” cried Laura. “Shall I make the tea?”

“Certainly not, my dear. Let me, pray, enjoy the last few privileges of my age while I am here. I do not mean in this house, Isabel, my child, but living out my last weary span.”

“Auntie darling,” said Laura, tenderly, getting up as soon as the maid had placed tea-urn and covered dishes upon the table, “don’t be so miserable this morning now that dear Bel is here,” and she kissed the old lady lovingly.

“How can I help it, my child? It is her being here makes me feel so bad.”

“Oh, my dear Mrs Crane!” cried Isabel.

“Worse and worse!” sobbed the old lady, melting into tears. “I did think you were softening to me, and would end by loving me and always calling me aunt – Mrs Crane!”

“Aunt – auntie! There!” cried Isabel, running to her and kissing her. “But I think it is I who ought to complain.”

“Yes, my dear, you ought.”

“You shouldn’t say I make you bad.”

“But you do, my dear. It’s all on your account. It’s dreadful, and I lay awake nearly all the night pitying you.”

“Pitying me when I am so happy, auntie?” cried Isabel.

“Ah, my child! you don’t know. All men are full of evil, but doctors are the worst of all.”

“There, Bel; you are going to marry a horrid wretch,” cried Laura.

“Don’t scoff, my dear,” continued the old lady. “It is too serious. They are always away from home – called at the most unearthly hours.”

“Yes, to do good, auntie,” said Isabel, smiling.

“And auntie won’t do good when she might Aunt, Isabel and I are dying for some tea.”

“Yes, yes, my dear; I’ll pour it out directly.”

“Wait a moment, aunt,” cried Laura. “I’ll go and ask Fred if he is coming down.”

“Go and ask Fred, my dear? He is not at home.”

“What!” cried the two girls in a breath.

“He has not come back yet. I lay awake hour after hour listening, with my door a little way open – I can hear the latch-key then – but – he did not come.”

Laura glanced at her visitor, and saw trouble coming in her face like a cloud. “Oh, well, aunt, dear, it is not the first time.”

“No, my dear,” said the old lady, tightening her lips as she dropped a lump of sugar outside a cup; “it is not the first time by a long way, and I don’t like it.”

“Neither does Fred, I’m sure, poor fellow!” cried Laura, helping the ham and eggs. “It is some serious case, Bel dear, and he’ll come back tired out for you to comfort him up. You’ll often have it to do, for, poor boy, he is called out a great deal.”

At that moment Aunt Grace let the sugar-tongs fell with a clatter among the cups, and burst into a fit of sobbing.

“Aunt dear!” cried Laura, jumping up to go to her side again; “what is the matter?”

“I don’t like it, my dear. His being out like that.”

“Well, Fred doesn’t either.”

“Ah, but that’s it. He does, and it’s horrible; and I will not sit still and see him deceive this poor, dear lamb.”

“Mrs Crane!” cried Isabel, sitting up flushed with indignation.

“I can’t help it, my dear. I should be a wicked woman if I did not speak. I watched last night, and I saw her. One of those horridly handsome, fashionable-looking ladies, and she carried him off just as if she were leading him by a chain. I can’t help it! I had a presentiment then, and I’m obliged to speak. He hasn’t come back, and I felt he would not, and as sure as I’m alive he’ll never come back again.”

“Aunt!” cried Laura, passionately. “Shame – Bel dear, don’t take any notice of her.”

But her words had no effect. Isabel had risen with her face scarlet, then turning white as her lips parted to utter an indignant rebuke.

No words came, and covering her face with her hand she hurried out of the room.

“Auntie!” cried Laura, passionately. “See what you’ve done. You’re right. It’s quite time you made up your mind to die.”

Chapter Six. In Danger

As Chester turned and gazed in his patient's face, he felt that all was over: and at that moment Paddy, startled by Marion's excited words, rushed across and caught his arm.

"Is he going?"

"Yes," cried Marion, passionately, "and he has been murdered. Rob, Rob, my own darling, don't, don't leave me here to this! Rob! I cannot bear it! Dr Chester! for pity's sake! Oh, do something! Help!"

"Hush! You are hindering me," said Chester, sternly – himself once more. "The brandy! You – you – madam, use your fan rapidly. Is there no air to be got into this wretched prison? That's right. Raise his head a little more. That's better. Be calm, both of you. Everything depends upon that."

"But he is dying – he is dying!" wailed Marion.

"Be silent, madam, and obey my orders," whispered Chester, angrily, and the desperate fight went on. Desperate indeed it seemed to the doctor, and he fought as he had never fought before. But for some time every breath the poor fellow drew, feebly and painfully, seemed to her who watched him, with staring eyes, his very last.

They were alone with him for quite an hour, before the old housekeeper came in, to grasp at once what was wrong, and hurry to the couch.

"Oh, my child, why did you not ring for me?" she cried.

"Hush! Silence!" said the doctor, sternly. "The paroxysm has exhausted itself. With perfect quiet he may yet live."

His hand was caught by Marion and passionately kissed, before she sank, half-fainting, in the old housekeeper's arms.

Paddy went in and out on tip-toe, his action suggesting always that he was doing something in silence for a wager; and twice over his brother came in as the hours slipped past, but only to be sternly ordered to go by the doctor, who was then alone with Marion and the wounded man.

"But hang it all, sir!" he protested, "am I not to do what I like in my own house?"

"No, not while I am in charge of my patient."

"But –"

"Look here, sir, I will not be answerable for his life if you stay," whispered Chester, sharply.

The intruder bit his lips and glanced at Marion, then at the doctor and back. There was a world of meaning in his eyes, but Chester was too dreamy then to interpret it, and the man went away, but only for the far door to be re-opened and Paddy to make his appearance.

Marion uttered a sign of annoyance, and hurried to meet him.

"You must not stay, Paddy," she whispered. "It is so important that Robert should be kept quiet."

"All right," he said. "I didn't want to come, but Jem sent me. He doesn't like your being alone with the doctor."

An angry frown darkened Marion's face.

"Go," she said firmly. "Paddy, I think he will live now."

"Thank God!" cried the young fellow, fervently. "But, I say, if I go I'm pretty sure that Jem will come himself. He as good as said so."

"Stop him, then, and tell him to go to his wife."

Paddy shrugged his shoulders.

"You know what he is."

"Yes," said Marion, bitterly, "I know what he is," and she pointed towards the couch. "We know what he is. Now go."

“All right; but you want something. They’ve got some dinner or supper yonder; come and have a bit.”

“No.”

“Then I’ll have some sent in.”

“I don’t want anything. Tell them to send something for the doctor.”

But almost as she spoke the door was softly opened, and the old housekeeper appeared with a tray.

One long dream, in a strangely protracted night, as it appeared to Chester – a night in which the world seemed to be halting during a singular delirium. Time stood still apparently for both nurse and doctor, who hardly left the room, but were waited on by the housekeeper and the two ladies, who came in and out softly, each offering to take Marion’s place; but she invariably refused.

Nature grew stern at times towards the watchers at the wounded man’s side, and sometimes one, sometimes the other, sank suddenly into a deep sleep, during which, whether it were one hour or many, the other remained perfectly awake and watchful.

And day after day, night after night, the dual fight went on – the fight with death and that with honour. There were times when Fred Chester seemed to be winning in both encounters, but as often he felt that his patient was slowly slipping away from him, as he himself was lapsing from all that he ought to have held dear.

Everything was, in the latter case, against him. Forced into close contact with the woman who had so strangely influenced him from the first moment of their meeting, with her eyes constantly seeking his appealingly as the sufferer’s life rose and fell – flickering like the flame of an expiring candle, he felt that his position was too hard for man to bear. He owned himself weak, pitiful and contemptible, but as he struggled on he felt himself drifting hopelessly away, and that, come what might, he was to become this woman’s slave.

One day was like that which followed, in its wild delirium and strangeness. Chester had almost lost count of the time which had elapsed, and grew startled at last as the feeling was impressed upon him that the precautions taken by those around had grown unnecessary and that if the door had stood open he would not now have attempted to escape. A strange thrall held him more than locks and bars, and he was ready to sacrifice everything to stay there by Marion’s side and fight the grim Shade till it was defeated and he had won her gratitude and love.

The great trouble Chester had to fight was the succession of strange convulsive fits which attacked his patient, each of which seemed to have snapped the frail thread which held the wounded man to life; but as they passed off the flame flickered up again, and the struggle recommenced.

At last came the day when, hopeless and despondent, Chester bent over to dress the wound, feeling that the struggle had been all in vain, and that his skill was far less than he had believed.

The old housekeeper was waiting upon him, and Marion had, at his request, gone to the other end of the room.

“You unnerve me,” he whispered.

She looked at him reproachfully, and went away without a word, to seat herself with her arm on the side of a chair, her hand supporting her brow.

As a rule, the sufferer had made no sign during the opening and rebandaging, but this time he winced sharply at every touch, and the old housekeeper looked up questioningly.

“Is that a bad sign?” she whispered, with her face all drawn and ghastly with fear.

“No; a sign of greater vitality,” said Chester, quickly, and the next minute he uttered a curious sibilation, for in removing the inner bandage, his fingers came in contact with something angular and hard, which he held up to the light and examined carefully.

A quick, sharp breathing at his ear made him start round, to find that his every movement had been watched between the fingers of the hand which covered the watcher’s face, and she had hurried to his side.

“Worse?” she whispered faintly, too much exhausted now to display the intense agony and excitement of the earlier days of their intercourse.

“No,” he cried triumphantly. “Here is the cause – the enemy which has been fighting against us so long, and produced, I believe, those terrible convulsive attacks.”

Marion looked at him wonderingly, and her lips parted, but no words came. He read the question, though, in her eyes.

“I ought to have known, and found it out sooner,” Chester said bitterly, “and I feel that I am only a miserable pretender, after all. This piece of jagged lead, broken from the conical bullet by the explosion; it has remained behind causing all the trouble.”

“Ah! Then he will recover now?”

“Yes,” he said, as his eyes met hers; and it was some moments before they were withdrawn, both, in the pre-eminence of self at that moment, having taken no thought of the old housekeeper, who involuntarily made her presence known by uttering a deep sigh; and as Marion started and met her gaze, the old woman shook her head at her reproachfully.

“Oh, my dear! my dear!” she said softly; “pray, pray think.”

Marion’s brow contracted, and she walked slowly away, to take up her former position; while Chester winced and gave the old woman an angry look, as she now shook her head sadly at him.

“No, doctor, no,” she said softly; “that could never be. Please think only of your patient and your position of trust.”

“How dare you, woman!” he whispered angrily; for her words had gone home, and stung him more deeply than she could have realised.

“Because I am not like an ordinary servant, doctor,” she said, meeting his eyes unflinchingly. “I nursed her when she was a little child, and I have watched over her ever since. Yes, she is very beautiful, but that could never be.”

Chester bent over his patient with knitted brow and tightly-compressed lips, feeling the truth of the old woman’s words, and ready to repeat them again mentally – that could never be.

His hands were busy with his task, and his brain was more active than ever, as he felt now that he had won this victory, and that the effort to bring the poor fellow back to life and strength would now be an easy one; little more than good nursing would suffice. Why, then, could he not win in that other fight? She was right; that could never be; and he seemed now to be suffering a rude awakening from the strange, dreamy time through which he had passed – awakening to the fact that he had lapsed into a faithless scoundrel, he who had believed himself all that was manly and true.

An hour before, he had felt that nothing could drag him from Marion’s side. He loved her more than he could have believed possible, but it could never be. He was awake once more, and now that the peril was past he must go.

“Hah!” he said softly, as he finished his task and the old housekeeper rose to bear away sponge, basin and towel, “head cooler, more susceptible of touch. A hard fight, but I win. An error of judgment? No; I did all possible. The probe revealed nothing. I saw no bullet, or I might have known.”

Everything else had passed away for the moment in the pride of his satisfaction – the triumph of life over death – and he stood with one hand resting on the back of the couch, the other upon his left hip, as he bent over his patient, whose breath came softly, and there was a restful look in the thin white face.

Then he started round, for there was a light touch upon his arm, and he was face to face with Marion once more, her head bent forward, her wild eyes searching his.

“Is – is it true?” she whispered excitedly. “She told me as she went out – you did not speak.”

“Yes; quite true,” cried Chester. “No wonder, poor fellow, that he made no advance. But there, we have won, and a day or two’s nursing will be all he wants. Now you can feel at rest.”

“Feel – at rest?”

“Of course; there is no disease. Weakness is the only trouble now.”

“Weakness the only trouble now! Rob – Rob – my own dear boy!”

She sank upon her knees, and as he saw her action, Chester tried to check her. But she gave him a reproachful glance, and passed her soft white arms about the patient’s head, but without touching him; and the loving kiss she breathed, as it were, upon his lips. Then she rose, sobbing gently, with all the strength of her mind and force of action seeming to have passed away, as with outstretched hands she caught at the nearest object to save herself from falling.

That nearest object was Chester; and the next moment she was weeping in his arms.

“You have given him back to me,” she sobbed, her voice little above a whisper. “You have saved him. How can I ever repay you for what you have done?”

The minute before he had been strong; now as he felt the sobs rising from the labouring breast, and clasped her throbbing, palpitating form closer and – closer, – “Marion!”

Her name – nothing more; but he felt her tremble in his arms and hang more heavily as her head sank slowly back, bringing her lips nearer his; and the next moment she uttered a low sigh, breathed in their lengthened kiss.

“Out of what comedy is this, doctor?” said a harsh, familiar voice; and as they started angrily apart, Jem, as they called him, advanced quickly from the silently opened door, straight towards Marion, upon whom he fixed his fierce eyes, as he spoke to her companion. “French, I suppose – a translation. I congratulate you, doctor – both of you. It was so real – so passionately grand. And you,” he literally hissed now, “most loving sister! *Pour passer le temps*, of course. The *ennui* of long nursing. Curse you!” he whispered savagely, as he stopped before her, and with a quick movement caught her by the wrist.

The next moment he uttered a hoarse cry of rage, for, stung to madness by the brutal act, Chester sprang at him, forcing him back over the table before which he stood, while Marion was flung aside.

Chapter Seven.

A Black Cloud Behind

“Where am I?”

Head throbbing horribly, a nauseous taste in the mouth, throat constricted and painful upon an attempt to swallow, and a strange mental confusion which provoked the above question.

The answer came at once.

In a miserable, musty-smelling, four-wheeled cab, whose windows were drawn up, and so spattered with mud and the heavy rain which fell upon the roof that the gleam from the street lamps only produced a dim, hazy light within, as the vehicle jangled slowly along, with wheels and some loose piece of iron rattling loudly in concert with the beat of the horse’s feet.

“Whatever am I doing here?” was Fred Chester’s next question.

Lying back in the corner, in an awkward position, as if in a state of collapse, and only saved from subsiding into the bottom of the cab by his feet being propped up on the front cushion, the doctor kept perfectly still trying to think, but every retrogressive attempt gave the idea that he was gazing at a vast black cloud which completely shut out the past.

He uttered a faint groan, for he felt startled; but after lying back listening to the beating rain and the jarring of the ill-fitting glasses, he recovered somewhat.

“How absurd!” he muttered. “Where am I going? Ask the driver.”

He drew up his legs and let his feet drop into the cab, as he tried to sit up, but the effort gave him the sensation of molten lead running from one of his temples to the other, and he lay perfectly still while the agonising pain passed slowly away, trying hard to think what had happened, but in vain. There was the black cloud before him mentally, though he could see the gleaming of a lamp he passed through the blurred panes of glass.

At last, feeling more and more startled by his condition, he made a brave effort, raised himself upright, and reached out for the strap, so as to lower the front window; but at the first movement he was seized with a sickening giddiness, lurched forward, and thrust himself back to recline in the corner again till the molten lead had ceased to flow from side to side of his head.

At last, very slowly and cautiously, bit by bit, he edged himself forward till his knees rested against the front cushion, and then, thrusting one hand into the left corner, he reached out for the strap, raised the window, and let it glide sharply and loudly down.

“Hi! Cabby!” he cried hoarsely.

“Right, sir!” came back, and the cab was drawn up by the kerb beneath the next street lamp.

Then the driver got down and opened the door, to stand with the rain streaming off his waterproof hat and cape.

“Mornin’, sir,” he said in a husky voice, closely following a chuckle. “Feel better now?”

“No, I am horribly ill. Where am I?”

“Why, here, sir,” said the man, chuckling. “My word, it’s a wet ’un outside.”

“But what street’s this?”

“Halkin Street, Belgrave Square, sir.”

“What? But how came I in your cab? – I can’t remember.”

“S’pose not, sir,” said the man, good-humouredly. “Does make yer feel a bit muzzy till yer’ve had another snooze. Shall I try and find one o’ the early purlers where the market-garden chaps goes?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Drop o’ somethin’ to clear your head, sir – and keep some o’ the wet out o’ me.”

“But – but I don’t understand you,” cried Chester, whose head still throbbed so that he dreaded losing his senses again.

“Oh, it’s all right, sir. Have a drop o’ something; you’ll be better then.”

“But how came I in your cab?”

“Your friend and me put you there, sir.”

“My friend?”

“Yes, him as you’d been dining with, sir; on’y you don’t seem to ha’ heat much.”

“My friend?”

“Yes, sir; that’s right.”

“Where was it?”

“Pickydilly Circus; ’bout three hours ago.”

“Yes – yes. Well?”

“And he says, ‘Take care of him, kebbly,’ he says, ‘and drive him home. Bad cham,’ he says, ‘and he ain’t used to it.’”

“Then why didn’t you drive me home?” cried Chester, angrily.

“S’elp me! I like that! – I did; and no one was sittin’ up for yer; I knocked and rung for ’bout arf an hour before the old chap shoved up the winder and began a-cussin’ and a-swearin’ at me awful.”

“What old chap?” faltered Chester in his amaze.

“Your old guv’nor, I s’pose; and he wouldn’t come down, and told me to drive you to the ‘oh no, we never mentions him!’ for you warn’t coming in there. Then he bangs down the winder, and I waited ten minutes for him to get cool, and then knocks and rings again. This time he shoves up the winder and swears he’d shoot at me if I warn’t off; and as I got set agen ’orspittles ever since I was there for two months, I got up on the box again and drove off, for there was a bobby coming up; and I’ve been driving you about ever since.”

“Driving me about ever since?”

“That’s so, sir. We’ve been round Belgrave Square about a dozen times, and I was just going to drive you back to our stables, where it ain’t quite so wet, when you downed the window.”

“I can’t grasp it,” said Chester, hoarsely.

“Oh, never you mind about that, sir; you’ll be all right soon. You see, beggin’ your pardon, you was precious tight, and your friend had all he could do to hold you up. ‘Just like a jelly, kebbly,’ he says; and you was, sir. Your legs doubled up like a two-foot rule with a weak jynte.”

“My friend!” cried Chester, snatching at that as something to cling to. “Who was that?”

“That’s what I’m a-telling you, sir. Your friend – ”

“But what sort of a person was it?”

“Big, stout young fellow, like a Lifeguardsman, but a real gent. Very jovial sort. ‘Take great keer of him, kebbly,’ he says, and he tipped me a quid. ‘Help him up the steps when you get him home.’ ‘Right you are, sir,’ I says, as soon as I’d shut you up. ‘But wheer to?’ ‘Thirty-three Chrissal Square, Chelsea,’ he says, and there I drove you, and there you’d be, only your guv’nor cut up so rough.”

“Chrissal Square, Chelsea?” cried Chester, eagerly.

“That’s it, sir.”

“Why didn’t he tell you Raybeck Square?”

“Dunno, I’m sure, sir. That’s where all the doctors is.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Didn’t think you was bad enough, I s’pose, sir. And you ain’t. You on’y want a drop to clear your head a bit.”

“Drive me to Raybeck Square, thirty-four, at once.”

“Won’t you have a drop of something first, sir? Do you more good than going to a doctor’s, and me, too.”

“No, no, absurd. But one moment. You said Piccadilly Circus?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“And my friend helped me into the cab, and paid you to drive me home?”

"That's it, sir. You're getting it now – all by heart."

"A tall, stout gentleman?"

"Well, not exactly that, sir. I don't mean a fat 'un with a big weskit. A reg'lar strong-built un."

"I can't grasp it," muttered Chester. Then aloud, – "But why did he tell you to drive me to the wrong house?"

"Bit on too, sir. Arter dinner. Did it for a lark, p'ra'ps."

"Drive me home," said Chester, sinking back. "I can't recollect a bit."

"Course you can't, sir. Better have a hair o' the dog as bit you."

"No, no. There, I'll give you a glass of brandy when we get back."

"Suppose your guv'nor won't let you in, sir?"

"Nonsense, man. I have a latch-key."

"Wish I'd ha' knowed it," muttered the man, as he tried to close the door; "blessed if I wouldn't ha' picked your pocket of it and risked it I'd ha' carried you into the passage, and chanced it. Blister the door, how it sticks!" he growled, as he banged it to, the jerk raising the glass, and it dropped down. "Chrissal Square, sir?"

"No, no, Raybeck Square; and make haste out of the rain."

"Oh, I'm as wet as I can be, sir, and it don't matter now," grumbled the man, as he ascended to the box, and once more the maddening rattle and jangle began.

Chester's head was as blank as ever with regard to the past when the cab drew up at his home, but it was perfectly clear as to the present, and he was still hard at work trying to make out where he had been dining, with whom, and how it was possible for him to have so far forgotten himself as to have drunk till he was absolutely imbecile, when the man opened the door.

"One moment; my latch-key. Yes; all right, I said I'd give you a glass of brandy."

"You did, sir, and welkum it'll be as the flowers o' May. Jump out quick, sir, and run up the steps, for it's all one big shower bath."

"Can you leave your horse?"

"Leave him, sir?" said the man, with a chuckle; "for a month. He's got hoofs like hanchors. But I will hitch his nose-bag on, and let him see if he can find that there oat he was a-'untin' for in the chaff last time he had it on."

The next minute Chester was inside, with his head throbbing; but he was not so giddy, and his first glance was at the hall clock, illumined by the half turned down gas.

"Four o'clock," he muttered. "How strange!"

"May I come inside, sir? Horse'll be all right if there don't come a bobby prowling round. If he ain't a fool he'll be under someone's doorway, for there ain't likely to be no burgling a time like this."

"Shut the door, and come in here," said Chester, shortly; and he led the way into his consulting-room, turned up the gas, and from a closet took a decanter and glass, filled the latter for the cabman, who was making a pool on the thick carpet, and then poured himself out a few drops from a small-stoppered bottle, added some water from a table filter, and tossed off the mixture.

"Thank you, sir, and hope that there'll do you as much good as this here's done me a'ready. Didn't know you was a doctor."

"Here's a crown for you," said Chester, taking the money from a little drawer.

"Five bob! Oh, thank ye, sir," said the man, with a grin. "Makes a fellow feel quite dry. Sorry for your carpet, sir. Good-mornin'. I don't think I want another fare."

As the door was closed after the man, the potent drops Chester had taken began to have some effect, and it seemed as if the dawn was coming through the black cloud which separated him mentally from what had taken place overnight.

"The man's right," he muttered. "I must sleep. Good heavens! What a state my brain is in!"

"Is that you, Fred?"

He started as if he had been stung, and the dawn brightened as he replied sharply —

“Yes, aunt; all right. Go to bed. Why are you up?”

There was no reply, and he turned the hall light nearly out again, and went into his consulting-room to serve the gas jet there the same, and sank into an easy-chair instead; but he had hardly allowed himself to sink back when he sprang up again, for there, in the open doorway, stood the grotesque figure of Aunt Grace, in broad-frilled, old-fashioned night-cap and dressing-gown, a flat candlestick in her hand, and a portentous frown upon her brow, as she walked straight to him, wincing sharply as one slippered foot was planted in the pool left by the cabman, but continuing her slow, important march till she was about a yard away from her nephew, when she stopped.

“Why, aunt,” he cried, “what’s the matter? Surely you are not walking in your sleep!”

“Matter?” she cried in a low, deep voice, full of the emotion which nearly choked her. “Oh, you vile, wicked, degraded boy! How dare you treat your poor sister and me like this?”

“Pooh! Hush! Nonsense, old lady. It’s all right. I’ve been dining with a friend.”

“With a friend!” she said, with cutting sarcasm.

“Yes, at his club. There, I must have been unwell. I was a little overdone. What a terrible night.”

“Terrible indeed, sir, when my nephew stoops to lie to me like that. A friend – at his club! Do you think me such a baby that I do not know you have been with that abandoned woman?”

“Hush! Silence!” he whispered angrily. “For your dear, dead father’s and mother’s sake, sir, I will not be silenced.”

“But you will arouse Laura.”

“She wants no arousing. She is lying ill in bed, sleepless in her misery, sir, with her wretched brother staying out like this.”

“Confound you for a silly old woman!” he cried angrily. “Is a man to live the life of a hermit? If I had been away to a patient till breakfast-time nobody would have said a word. Poor little Laury! But how absurd!”

“Absurd, sir!” cried the old lady, who was scarlet with indignation. “Then I suppose it was absurd for poor Isabel Lee to have gone home broken-hearted because of your conduct.”

“What!” he cried, springing up, with a glimmer of memory coming back. “Why, surely you two did not canvass my being out one night till the poor girl was so upset that she – that she – went back – yes, she was stopping here. Oh, aunt, your foolish, suspicious ways are disgraceful. What have you done?”

“I done, you wretched boy? It’s what have you done? She was with us for a whole week after you had gone, fighting against me, and insisting that there was a reason for your being away, or that you had had an accident.”

“Here, aunt, are you going to be ill?” he cried, catching at her wrist; but she snatched it away.

“Don’t touch me, sir!” she cried. “Oh, Fred, Fred! I’d have given the world not to know that you were so wicked. And just when you were about to marry her, poor girl, to go away as you did.”

“Go away – as I did?” he faltered, gazing at her blankly.

“Yes, I knew something was wrong when I saw that wretched woman’s face. I felt it; but I could not have believed you would be so base. A whole fortnight too; and to think that this was to have been your wedding-day!”

He caught her by the shoulders, and she uttered a faint cry and dropped the candlestick, as he stood swaying to and fro, staring at the doorway, through which his sister hesitatingly passed, and came slowly toward him.

“A fortnight!” he stammered – “Isabel gone!”

“Yes, gone – gone for ever,” said Laura, sadly. “Oh, Fred, how could you?”

“Stop! Don’t touch me,” he cried angrily. “Don’t speak to me. Let me try to think.”

He threw his head back and shook it violently in his effort to clear it, but the confusion and mental darkness began to close in once more, while the throbbing in his brain grew agonising. It was

as if his head were opening and shutting – letting the light in a little and then blotting it out; till he felt his senses reeling – the present mingling with the darkness of the past he strove so vainly to grasp.

“I can’t think. Am I going mad?” he groaned, as he staggered to a chair.

“Mad, indeed,” said his aunt, bitterly. “Come away, Laura, and leave him to his conscience. Better if it had been as you and poor Isabel thought – that he had met with some accident, and was dead.”

She caught her niece by the arm, but Laura shook herself free and took a step or two towards where, in his utter despair, Chester sat bent down with his head resting in his hands. But he made no movement, and with a bitter sob she turned and followed her aunt from the room.

Chapter Eight. “Whither?”

It was a good forty-eight hours before Chester could think clearly. His aunt had sternly avoided his room, and he had been dependent upon Laura, who attended him as he lay quite prostrated by the agonising pains in his head. She hardly spoke, but saw to his wants as a sisterly duty, and felt that silent reproach was better than words to one who had proved himself such a profligate.

“I can’t understand it,” she said to herself again and again. “It is so unlike him. If he would only repent, poor Bel might forgive him – in time. No; I cannot speak to him yet.”

She little thought how her brother blessed her for her silence, as he lay struggling to get behind that black curtain; but all in vain.

He was sleeping heavily on the third night, when he suddenly woke up with the mental congestion gone. The pain had passed away, and his brain felt clear and bright once more.

He remembered perfectly now. The scene with Marion after his triumphant declaration of all danger being past. Their embrace. The interruption by the coming of the saturnine head of the house, and the struggle, all came back vividly clear, and with photographic minuteness. He recalled, too, how in the encounter when he had forced his adversary back over the edge of the table, he felt that an effort was being made to get at some weapon.

Then the great athletic brother came and separated them, remonstrating on the folly of the encounter at such a time.

“How strange that I can remember it all so clearly now,” muttered Chester. “Yes, he said that it was over a dispute. He would not acknowledge the real cause, and she did not speak. The scoundrel; he had been persecuting her with his addresses. I see now; that must have been the cause of the first trouble. Her brother was defending her from him.”

Then he recalled how the pair went away, and that the old housekeeper stayed, while Marion sat by the patient’s side, avoiding his gaze, and as if repenting that she had given way to her feelings.

A tray was brought in by Paddy, so that the housekeeper should not leave the room; and he stopped, talking good-temperedly enough, for some little time, and almost playing the part of servant to them, till they had all partaken scantily of the excellent meal; but he did not have another opportunity of speaking to Marion alone.

Chester lay for some minutes trembling then, for he had been growing excited by the recollections, and a strange dread had come over him that he was about to lose his memory again; but the adventures of that night came back, and he recalled the coming of Paddy once more. This time he brought in a tray with coffee and four cups, which he filled and handed to each of those present. Yes, Chester remembered how the housekeeper refused, and Paddy spoke —

“Nonsense, old lady! take it; we can’t stand on ceremony now, you may have to be up for hours.”

Then the old housekeeper took the cup, and the young man sugared his own coffee very liberally, and added plenty of cream.

“Bad taste, doctor,” he said good-humouredly, “but I like it sweet. So you feel now that poor Bob will be all right?”

“Yes, I have no doubt of it.”

“Thanks to you,” said the young man, and he advanced and took Chester’s emptied cup, and then Marion’s, soon after leaving the room with the tray.

Chester recalled feeling a little drowsy after this, and then in a dreamy way seeing Marion with her brow resting upon the patient’s pillow.

No more – try how he would, Chester could recollect nothing else, but consideration filled up the gap. The elder brother, satisfied that the patient’s life was saved, was desirous of ridding the house

of the doctor's presence, the more so now that he had discovered the relations which had sprung up between him and Marion.

"The scoundrel!" thought Chester. "That must have been it: he was pursuing her, and the brother was shot down in defending his sister."

Chester shivered now, and his brain grew hot, as he saw clearly enough all that remained. The cups had been prepared, two of them containing a drug, and Paddy had taken care that they should go to those for whom they were intended. It was all plain enough. Paddy was working in his brother's interest, and he was the big friend who had taken him first to the Circus, and then placed him in another cab, with instructions to the man.

"Well," muttered Chester, "I see my way now, and I am not going to sit down calmly over the matter. I must – I will see her again."

Then he trembled, and the hot burning sensation came once more. But it passed off, and he felt that he must be calm and wait till he had another long sleep, when he hoped to be quite restored.

He lay trying now to forget all that had passed, so as to rest for a while; but sleep would not come, and he could do nothing but dwell upon his adventures at that mysterious house. It was so strange. The servants had evidently been sent away, so that they might know nothing of what threatened for long enough to prove a murder. He wanted to know of none other cause for the quarrel. His patient must have been shot down while defending his sister from some insult offered by the clever, overbearing, unprincipled scoundrel who seemed to lord it over all.

And as Chester lay thinking, an intense desire came over him to learn more of the family who had literally imprisoned him, and kept him there all those days. When there, it had seemed for the most part like some romantic dream; and as he lay now at home thinking, the vague intangibility of those nights and days appeared to him more fanciful and strange than ever; so much so, that there were moments when he was ready to ask himself whether, after all, it was not the result of imagination.

He recalled all the actors in the little social drama – the men whom he had seen on the first night, and who dropped out of sight afterwards; the two ladies – the wives of the brothers – both quiet, startled-looking women, of the type that would be seen exhibiting the latest fashions at some race, at Lord's, or at a meeting of the Four-in-Hand Club, and evidently slaves of their husbands – and he recalled now how the wife of the elder brother seemed to hold her lord in dread.

"There's something more about that place than one knows," Chester thought to himself as he turned from side to side, "and I cannot – I will not, sit down and patiently bear such treatment. To-morrow I'll go and demand an explanation. I have a good excuse," he said half aloud and with a bitter laugh; "there is my promised fee, and – Pish!" he exclaimed savagely. "If I am to prove a scoundrel, I will be an honest one. I will ferret out who and what they are. I behaved like a child in not having some explanation earlier – in yielding passively as I did without reason – no, not without reason. I could not help it. Heaven help me! I will – I must see her again. It is fate!"

He jumped up in bed, for a sudden thought now sent a chill of horror through him, as for the first time the drugging which had taken place showed itself in another light.

"To get rid of me," he muttered, as the great drops of sweat gathered on his face, "and – the last thing I remember – Marion – her head fallen upon the couch beside her brother, helpless now to protect her – drugged, insensible, at the mercy of that villain; and I here without stirring or raising a hand."

Some little time later, feeling weak and faint, he was standing in the hall reaching down his hat, and for a moment he had a feeling of compunction. Isabel – his sister – what would they think of his strange, base infatuation?

"What they will," he said between his teeth. "Placed in such circumstances, no man could be master of himself. I must save her, even if we never meet again;" and the door closed after him loudly, as, half mad now with excitement, Marion's eyes seeming to lure him on, he stepped out into the darkness of the night.

“Whither?” he muttered, as he hurried across the Square. “Heaven help me! it is my fate.”

Chapter Nine.

A Blacker Cloud In Front

The nearest church clock was striking three as Chester passed into the great west-end artery, which was almost deserted, and he had been walking rapidly, under the influence of his strange excitement, for some minutes before, clear as his head was now, he found himself brought up short by a mental cloud as black and dense as that from which he had suffered when he began to recover from the influence of the drug he had taken.

But there was this difference: the dense obscurity then was relating to the past – this was connected with the future.

“Good heavens!” he muttered. “Whatever he gave me must be acting still; I am half delirious. I am no longer master of my actions. Why am I here? What am I going to do? – To try to save her, for she is at his mercy. But how?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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