Joseph Shearing

An hypnotic story of terror, surpassing Daphne du Maurier's REBECCA

THE CRIME OF LAURA SARELLE
GABRIELLE MARGARET LONG,

*alias*

"JOSEPH SHEARING"

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—Will Cuppy, *Books*
"They are not to be spoken of; they dwell in darkness!"
Laura answered swiftly:
"They dwell in this house!"
Her brother looked at her with gloomy rebuke.
"Why must you go over these old stories? I told you before you came here that such things were not to be discussed."
"Remember," retorted the girl, rising nervously and with rebellion in her narrowed eyes, "that I did not wish to come here at all. I told you that. I wrote down my protests in a letter. Mrs. Sylk knows——"

Her brother interrupted:
"There is no need to call witnesses or to make a scene, my dear Laura. I know quite well the objections you made to coming to Leppard Hall, and I recall with equal clarity my answer. Pray let us have no more of this discussion. As to the portraits, it is my wish that they should remain."

Laura hesitated. She moved from her brother and looked out from the tall window across the landscape that she found so distasteful. At the bottom of the gentle slope on which the house stood the grey waters of the Avon, gleaming from between the dull leaves of the willows, flowed smoothly by with, to her, an air of sad monotony.

She tried to control herself, for the young brother to whom she had spoken was her master and might easily be, she knew, her tyrant. She had to play the game that women have learned during the ages to be so skilful at, to watch her opportunity, to cajole; if need be, to deceive. She was not yet very clever at any of these slavish arts and she had to bite her lip now and to clench her hands in her palms before she had sufficient control to reply in the soft tone she wished to assume.

Before she spoke she looked over her shoulder at Theodosius. He had returned to his manuscripts with an air of absorption as if he had forgotten her presence or was contemptuous of it. His fine, pale profile was clearly outlined
against the dark panelling of the room. His dress, correct and severe, was too old for his years, which were not above five and twenty. Everything about him was grave and stately, and to Laura disagreeable and pedantic; but she bent her pride, and turning towards the desk humiliated herself to thrust her problems upon her brother's attention.

"Theo, pray listen to me. You never give me a chance of talking to you, you know."

"There are the evenings, my dear girl," he replied, raising his tired, dark eyes with a cold and impatient glance. "I have my work now. Pray excuse me, I am much occupied."

Laura longed to reply that this absorption in his translations from the Encheiridion Epictète of Arrian was not work but a pastime, and a sickly, unwholesome pastime at that for a young man. But she smiled and said:

"In the evenings you are closeted here, or you expect me to go and sit with Mrs. Sylk in my own apartment; or you are going over the accounts with Lucius."

"My dear sister," said Sir Theo firmly, with a slight sigh of resignation as he leant back in his chair, "all this is wasting my time and yours. I can guess what you want to say to me. You wish to put in a plea for leaving Leppard Hall. You want to spend the money that I can ill afford in going abroad. You want to enjoy the season, as they term it, in some gay capital—London or Paris, or even Rome."

"I have no such absurd ideas," put in Laura quickly. "I am quite content to live modestly, as long as it be in a town, with some company of my own age."

"My dear child," replied Theo, with exasperating calm, "you are nineteen years of age only. It will be time enough for you to go out into the world when you have learnt in my home some of the feminine arts that you seem at present to lack. You have much wasted, I fear, the two years that you have been at Leppard Hall."

"All that I have wasted here has been myself," replied Laura in a low tone, glancing down at the shining floor.

"You have wasted the opportunity of learning how to run a fairly large establishment," remarked her brother severely. "You have not made yourself familiar either with my servants, my tenants, or with the neighbours. There are a hundred and one things that you should have learnt but have taken no notice of."

"I was bred in the town," protested Laura with a convulsive
sigh. "I do not like rustic surroundings. Pray, Theo, give me my portion and let me go."

She made the request so suddenly that it seemed crude and violent, like a blow interrupting polite conversation.

Sir Theo raised his heavy eyebrows, which were like slender black wings.

"You speak as if you were out of your senses," he replied sternly. "Our parents being dead and we having no relations, where would you go from my house?"

"I don't know," replied Laura hurriedly. She felt that she had startled him and therefore gained some small advantage and she was anxious to follow this up. "Mrs. Sylk and I could go somewhere; I suppose we could take rooms or hire a house with servants. I have a few friends in London—Aunt Mary's friends," she added anxiously; "something could be contrived."

"And why, pray, should there be all this contrivance?" asked Sir Theo with rising anger.

She had often complained and protested before, but never put the matter so plainly, and his authority rose to meet her rebellion. His personality was impressive and forceful far beyond his years and Laura had an ado to stand her ground. The contempt in his voice brought the colour to her face, but she did not dare to allow this opportunity to slip. She had at least got him roused, interested, if in a hostile manner, in what she was saying; that was better than the long cold silences, the dull self-absorption that she could never penetrate.

"I suppose I want a few companions of my own age," she hastened on; "I should like a few entertainments, an opportunity of going to the opera, to concerts and theatres, of getting books, of seeing pictures, of giving parties of my own."

"And the end of this, I suppose," he interrupted sarcastically, "is to be your marriage to some adventurer whom I shall be supposed to pension for life."

"I have no thought of marriage with an adventurer," said Laura. The colour came again to her face and faded. "But I suppose that some day you will permit me to marry?"

"Only when I approve your choice, some long years hence. I do not consider you fit for marriage," he replied impatiently. "You want a good deal of schooling and training first."

"Well," said she desperately, "maybe I could obtain that out in the world. In London! I tell you I am used to London.
I knew Aunt Mary and I lived in Hampstead only very modestly, but we did see people. We went about. I have lost the few friends I had there, for you never would allow them to come and stay here, or me to visit them.”

“You lead the life that is fitting to your station and disposition,” replied Sir Theo, rising at last and speaking with a weight uncommon in one of his youth; cold and formidable, he stared her down. “I never agreed with the designs of your staying with your Aunt Mary Tollis. She was a frivolous woman, I dislike the fashion in which she brought you up. I always intended to exert my authority as soon as I came of age to take you from under her charge. Remember that you were always reported as wild and wilful, even when you were at school.”

Laura drew a short breath, then said in a whisper:

“Our parents did not disapprove of me, at least they did not say so. It is only you, Theo, who are always so censorious.”

“Call me censorious if you will, I am acting for your own good,” replied the young man dryly. “I do not intend to allow you to go to town, I do not intend to allow you to have the friends you made when you were under Aunt Mary Tollis’s charge down at Hampstead, and I have no sympathy with your petulant impatience with the life you lead here. There are neighbours whom you can visit.”

“They are all elderly people and they live miles away,” broke out Laura. “I tell you I detest this place! I always did from the moment I came into it. I can’t understand—it certainly seems unreasonable, I know. . . .”

“Your feelings are running away with you, Laura,” replied Theo with a contumacious air of finality.

She was glad that he had stopped her, much as she hated him for his continued exercise of authority. She knew that she had said too much, had tried to express the intangible. Not to him, so unfriendly, so hostile, could she unfold these fearful and delicate feelings.

“Well, then,” she said, “that is my fate. I must stay at Leppard Hall. One other thing, while you are listening to me, Theo, even in so cruel a spirit—if I were to come to you and say I wished to be married, that I wanted to escape that way, what would you do?”

He looked at her keenly, suspecting that she was fooling him, trying to entrap him into some admission that she might twist to her own use, for he was perfectly sure that she had
not the acquaintance of any man whom she could desire to marry.

"Your husband," he replied immediately, "would have to meet with my complete approval. Remember the terms of our father's will. I think at the end he was alarmed himself about your frivolous disposition. He left your future entirely in my hands. If you marry without my consent, I need not pay a penny of dowry."

"Well," said Laura, still holding her head high, "I might find a man who had enough money to keep me."

"Such talk is unbecoming," replied the baronet. He began to show signs of impatience; the interview had been long and exhausting. He really disliked his sister, who in everything was different from himself. He intended to do his duty by her, and that exasperated his ill-feeling towards her. For she was a burden, a responsibility, a constant vexation.

"Pray," said he, "let us have no more of this. I am not to be moved."

She believed him, and being too well-bred and too proud to break out into reproaches, she merely said:

"Can I once more ask you to have the two portraits moved?"

"I shall refuse," he replied. He in his turn was flushed, his well-shaped lips quivered slightly; he had not much reserve of physical strength, and these disputes with Laura, in whom he sensed a hidden spirit as strong as his own, always in the end slightly unnerved him. "If I begin to give way to your follies, I should strip the Hall from attic to cellar and still not please you. The portraits remain where they are."

Laura turned away. From the door she said in a low voice, looking over her shoulder:

"I wish you would strip the whole place, I wish it would be burnt down. It ought to have been destroyed years ago."

He gave her a startled look at that, but controlled himself quickly and turned again to his thick piles of papers.

Laura closed the door and stood in the dark corridor, agitated and desperately angry, surprised too. Why had she said those last words? She knew no good reason why Leppard Hall should have been destroyed. It was a fine building that had been in the possession of the Sarelles for many hundreds of years. No legend of horror, no ghostly fable attached to it so far as she knew. She had spoken, she supposed, out of mere spite because she disliked the place so much, because she had been so unhappy there for two years—two long, dragging
years of her youth that should have been so bright and happy.

Not only did she detest Leppard Hall and the park, the
gloomy mill and the stone farmhouse, the winding river with
the Georgian bridge; she detested also the flat, dull pastoral
landscape with the alders and the willows and the continually
browsing black cattle, the thorn-trees and the water mead-
ows. She disliked the church, which half a mile or so along
the river rose clear grey into the grey skies, with the clus-
tered lichenved graves rising above the sloping banks where
the black, ragged cedar cast a shade into the water. Gloomy
to her was the small grey village and the small, dark inn, the
Sarelle Arms; dull and stupid seemed the rustic inhabitants;
fiercely she regretted the day that her parents had come into
an inheritance that had meant to her a life so melancholy and,
as she thought, unnatural.

She and her brother had both been born in Jamaica, where
her father had owned considerable property. As his elder
brother was childless he had long known that he was likely to
come into the English castle-estate, and for that reason Theo
had been sent as a child to England and educated at Eton and
Magdalen College, Oxford, while her mother's sister, Mrs.
Mary Tollis, had taken her, when she had left the boardings-
school for gentlewomen at Clapham, and brought her up as
her own daughter at Hampstead, when Laura's mother had
died of the fever at Kingston.

Her husband had not long survived Elizabeth Sarelle, and
Theo had been educated well, as became the heir-presump-
tive, but with a sparing hand, by his uncle, a quiet, eccentric
man fond of travelling, who had not often resided himself at
Leppard Hall.

The estate, however, had been well maintained by a suc-
cession of well-chosen stewards, and on the death of Sir John
Sarelle, when Theo was nineteen years of age, the estate and
the fortune had been administered with scrupulous efficiency
and honesty by the two guardians whom he had appointed for
his young nephew.

At first this change of fortune had made no difference to
Laura. Her life with good-natured and charming Mary Tollis
was as pleasant as that of a nervous, introspective and sensi-
tive girl, bereaved of both her parents and without a home of
her own, could be.

When Sir Theo had attained his majority he had decided to
take up his residence at Leppard Hall, and, Mary Tollis be-
ing then recently dead, he had brought his sister to live with
him, after some delays, when he was twenty-three and she
seventeen years of age.

They had now no near relations, but a distant cousin of
Mary Tollis, a Mrs. Hetty Sylk, the childless widow of an
Army officer, who had left her in “straitened circumstances”,
as the genteel phrase went, was engaged as companion for
Laura.

This was her life, all that had happened to her in her nine-
teen years. An early childhood in Jamaica that she could
remember merely as a flash of brilliant, strange colour, the
quiet, unsatisfying, but tolerable life in the boarding-school
at Clapham, the pleasant days with Mrs. Tollis in the flat-
fronted brick house at Hampstead, and the two hateful years
at Leppard Hall.

The girl could not have told why she disliked her ancestral
home. She supposed it was merely because it was lonely and
she was cut off from her usual friends and interests. There
was no railway station nearer than Rugby and no carriage
ever at her disposal to drive her so far, even if she had been
able to obtain her brother’s consent to a visit to London.

It was true that a few miles farther along the river there
was a handsome Palladian mansion inhabited by a noble
family that was disposed to be friendly. But they were usually
in town or abroad, and there was none of them of the age of
Laura.

When she had first taken up her residence at Leppard Hall,
people had called, leaving their visiting-cards. And she, set-
ting out in the brougham with the Sarelle arms on the panels,
had returned these calls in the respectable company of Mrs.
Sylk. But no friendships, no acquaintances, no intimacies had
grown out of these formalities. Laura believed that Sir Theo
had let it be plainly understood that he did not wish to have
the routine that he had laid down for himself disturbed by
any social activities. Besides, the neighbours all lived far
away and seemed entirely absorbed in their own interests
and only too ready to respect Sir Theo’s wishes for solitude.
He did not hunt now or join in any of the local activities of
Sarelle.

The Vicar was a dull man with a sickly wife who seemed,
to Laura’s young vitality, scarcely alive. Dr. Selby came
from Warwick and made his rounds in a smart gig twice a
week. There was no other company whatsoever of her own
station or class, and Laura, who had the timid reserve of the townswoman, was never able to get on friendly terms either with the servants, some of whom had been in the service of Sir John Sarelle, her uncle, or with the tenantry.

The people at the stone mill and the home farm had no more character and individuality of their own in the eyes of the lonely girl than had the sheep and cattle that browsed on the lush water-meadows. They were to Laura merely part of the landscape.

Her brother's reproach that she had taken no interest in the running of his large and precise establishment had been just. Trained in a small though genteel household, she had no taste for the management of a large mansion. Besides, it was all done very efficiently without her interference. There was a housekeeper, there was a cook, there were maids, there were other servants, gardeners and stablemen, a household of twenty-five and sometimes thirty people.

Proud and shy about her own intimate affairs, she had refused a personal maid, but Mrs. Sylk, who had advanced as far in her friendship as anyone had been able to do, contrived to wait on her while preserving the relationship of a friend.

Once during one of the scenes in which she had tried to force her brother to allow her to alter her way of life, Laura had extracted from him the promise that when she was twenty-one years old she should be allowed a season in town and that he would then use his influence to procure her introductions to people who might present her at Court, allow her some reasonable pleasure, and finally choose for her a husband suitable to her pretensions.

But Laura was only nineteen years of age, and to be told to endure two more years of this life at Leppard Hall seemed to her like a death sentence.

Besides, she had already settled for ever, as she knew, the question of where she should dispose her heart, and, when opportunity arose, her person and her fortune.

She went slowly up the stairs to the apartments that she occupied with Mrs. Sylk. She had chosen them carefully because she believed that they were the least gloomy in the house. Yet she had never liked them, the more especially as she had not been allowed to alter the furnishings. Even the very curtains of the bed and at the windows were those that came out of the closet at Leppard Hall. They were well-preserved, beautiful in texture and design, but had to Laura
an old-fashioned air that was, she could not tell why, repellent.

Mrs. Sylk was by the window, employed in the eternal occupation of well-bred, idle women: she was embroidering on a tambour frame a bell-ropo of lilac silk, quickly working a lily with chalk-white leaves.

"Oh, Mrs. Sylk," said Laura in a flat voice, "I had no success again. He will not listen to me. He will not even have the two portraits removed."

"Sir Theodosius is certainly a very determined young man," remarked Mrs. Sylk.

She put down her frame with a little sigh of boredom, quickly restrained and turned into a smile; she never allowed herself to forget that she was in a dependent position. She, too, found Leppard Hall galling in its gloom and loneliness, but she was a woman who had known what it was to be very uncomfortable, in every sense of the word, through poverty, who had often been humiliated and frightened by sheer lack of money. She had had a glimpse, though a glimpse only, of what the world might look like to a useless gentlewoman. At Leppard Hall she was at least comfortable and respected. She had, even, a slight sense of importance, of power. Laura was fond of her and she believed she had a certain influence over the girl. Perhaps one day Laura Sarelle would make a good, even a splendid, marriage, and she, Mrs. Sylk, might enjoy a more exciting kind of life. But for the moment she might have been very much worse off, therefore she was careful never to complain and always to make herself as pleasant as possible to her young employer, though behind his back sometimes, cautiously, she encouraged Laura in rebellion.

"I shouldn't concern myself so much about the portraits, dear," she said mildly. "That is really very fanciful on your part. You know your Aunt Mary Tollis was always concerned over that——"

"Over my fancies?" said Laura quickly. "But I never told her any of them."

"Didn't you?" queried Mrs. Sylk, still very quietly. "But she used to talk to me about them sometimes; I think perhaps you revealed more than you knew, Laura."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl. "Did she say that I used to talk in my sleep, or have fits, or something of that kind?"
"Why, no, dear, of course not. But I suppose your aunt was very fond of you and studied you very carefully. And—well, really, Laura, I don't know what we're talking about."

She broke off, smiled, and began to pick up the small chalk-white beads one by one and thread them on to her fine needle.

"We're talking about those two portraits in the dining-room," persisted Laura. "Let everything else go. I suppose it's hopeless to try to get away from here. I can't even make out a good case for myself, but he might remove the portraits, since he knows how much I dislike them."

Mrs. Sylk mentally agreed, but tried to compromise by pointing out that the paintings were quite pleasing and that no sinister kind of tale was attached to them.

"But there is," cried Laura, "to one at least—that of my namesake. Theo himself said just now, 'They dwell in darkness'. And what did I answer? I answered, 'They dwell in this house!'"

"Oh, that old tale," smiled Mrs. Sylk comfortably. "I should not take any notice of it, probably it's not even true."

"But I'm quite sure it's true," cried Laura impatiently. "Theo doesn't even deny it. She had my name, you know; it makes it so strange—Laura Sarelle."

"But she was hardly a relation, you know," said Mrs. Sylk. "She died unmarried and the estate went to a distant cousin. You might say that with her that line of the Sarelles ended. Yours was another branch, it came from Yorkshire, I think."

"I don't know," said Laura sullenly; "I've never seen the family tree or any papers. You see, I was very young when I left Jamaica and nobody talked to me about these things. Theo's always most reserved, and seems so angry when I want to know. Not that I do much," she added idly; "what does it matter? It's only our having the same name—that dead woman and myself."

"Well, that's usual in families. People are often very proud of those things. It's always been Laura and Theodosius and John, I think, and Anne, with the Sarelles."

"She was very unhappy. She died young, and I don't care to have her portrait hanging on the wall."

"My dear child," said Mrs. Sylk, "in those days so many people died young. They didn't know how to look after themselves and the science of medicine wasn't even in existence then."

"But you know there was a scandal. Someone in the house,
either someone who was staying there, or the cousin—I don't know, I can't get the story straight—died of an overdose of a sleeping-draught and there was an inquest. And even”—Laura lowered her voice—“some suspicion that she, this girl, had given it to him—by carelessness. I don't know the reason or the motive—whatever you would call it.”

Mrs. Sylk stopped her at once.

“It's all nonsense, just some foolish gossip, as there always is in a place like this. I heard the same tale. I can assure you there's nothing in it. Of course there was an inquest. I tell you in those days they knew so little—”

Laura interrupted.

“Those days! You know when it was, then—the date?”

“Well, it's on the picture, isn't it?” said Mrs. Sylk with a touch of impatience.

“Yes, it is. It was painted in 1780, and that's the date of the inquest, and I suppose with the least trouble in the world one could find out all about it. But you know Theo keeps his books locked up, and as for his papers—one may never have a glimpse of them.”

“My dear Laura, you're allowing your imagination to run away with you. You really should be a writer of fiction, you want to make a story out of everything. I tell you that Sir Theo himself doesn't know any more than I do. Seventeen-eighty, and this is the year eighteen-forty. Why, you must admit that it's a good long while ago.”

“Only sixty years,” said Laura. “She might have been alive now, and not such a very old woman either.”

“But she isn't alive,” urged Mrs. Sylk. “She died young, of a consumption in the lungs, as I suppose, and she's buried in the church and there's no need for anyone to think any more about her. And as for the stupid story of the young man who died of the sleeping-draught, by accident, I think it's all quite commonplace. Such things happened very often, as I told you, when so little was known about medicine.”

“Do you think the other portrait is the young man?”

“Why, no, I shouldn't suppose so.”

Mrs. Sylk was trying to change the subject but did not know how to do it. She wished that Sir Theo would not be so inconsiderate; why not move the two pictures that exasperated his fanciful sister?

“No one knows who it is, do they? I suppose from the costume it's about the same period,” she added nervously.
"Well, it's not so long ago, only sixty years," repeated Laura impatiently, "and it's strange the name should have been lost. And I don't know who placed the picture there." She then went on to say hurriedly that the servants who had been with Sir John had told her that they had not noticed it during his lifetime. They thought that one of the stewards must have found it there, because it was such a fine piece of work.

"And a very splendid painting it is," said Mrs. Sylk critically, "and if I were you, my dear Laura, I shouldn't think any more of it. I believe that Laura Sarelle had a brother who died young."

"Died!" said Laura, on a rising note. "You see, they all died. No one at Leppard Hall seems to have lived very long."

"What perfect foolishness!" exclaimed Mrs. Sylk with upraised hands. Why, Sir John was a good age."

"He didn't live here," Laura put in quickly. "Nor did his father. They were always abroad or in London. Yes, that's strange when you come to think of it. My father, my uncle and my grandfather hardly lived at Leppard Hall at all. Perhaps that's why I think it has such a melancholy air. It's never been lived in since Laura Sarelle died here sixty years ago."

"The stewards lived here, I suppose," countered Mrs. Sylk suddenly, weary of the whole argument but aware that it was her duty and her interest to humour her charge.

"No, they didn't, they lived at the Dower House."

Laura moved to the window and looked across the flat water-meadows over which dusk was falling.

"Well, the place was very well kept up, anyhow," said Mrs. Sylk feebly. "But, Laura, my child, pray don't talk of it any more, you only exasperate yourself. You will work yourself into one of your difficult fits and have a fever, or bad dreams, or something. Now pray, my dear girl," she added earnestly, "be sensible. The portraits are the most ordinary things in the world, and if you affect to regard them so they will cease to irritate you."

"The portraits—oh, well, I suppose they are nothing. But when I said 'they dwell in darkness' Theo did not contradict me. There was some ugly story there. The young man died, and the young woman was——"

Mrs. Sylk interrupted:

"Was questioned at the inquest as to the sleeping-draught he had taken. Now, my dear Laura, forget all about it. Don't
you see, my dear child, it would be very wise of you to try to please your brother, then perhaps he might be induced to take a more reasonable view of your situation?"

"Then you admit," cried Laura, "that he is not reasonable?"

"I think," said Mrs. Sylk, with a non-committal air, "he is rather a remarkable young man. He is a great scholar, you know, and that is very uncommon in one of his age. Then he takes his duties as squire very seriously. He looks after the estate in an excellent manner."

"No," said Laura with a queer look, "it's Lucius who does that."

"Well, Sir Theodosius directs him. I don't think Mr. Delaunay could do anything himself. It is a large estate, you know, and then there is the property in Warwick and in Rugby as well."

She glanced at the young girl's charming face and thought she saw a softer expression on the lovely features. So she hastily took the opportunity of saying:

"You know, you are a remarkable young woman, too, Laura. If your brother is not very reasonable, neither are you. It is not so very extraordinary for him to expect you to live here and learn to be the mistress of a great establishment. No doubt he hopes for a fine match for you and wishes to see you well trained. Why not be more patient and take the trouble to cultivate acquaintanceship of some of the neighbouring gentry? You know that when people have called you have very often been abrupt and aloof. You might mingle, too, more with the tenantry, hold a little singing class or sewing class for the children."

Laura did not listen as Mrs. Sylk rambled on, stitching her white beads on to her strip of stiff lilac silk. She startled the good lady by breaking suddenly into her pious discourse by saying:

"Why do you think I so dislike this place? You know, I have the sensation that I have been here before and under most evil circumstances."

"That is very common," replied Mrs. Sylk, slightly nettled at the interruption which showed that all her good counsel had been wasted. "Nobody knows quite what it means," she added vaguely. "Then, as I told you just now, Laura, you were always very fanciful and even fantastic."

"The moment I saw the place I hated it," mused Laura,
with her chin in her hands and her elbow on her knees as she sat in the cushioned window-seat gazing out on the meadows and the river, now drowsing into grey mist. "When I saw the gates at the bottom of the park I said to myself: 'So I have to come back here again after all these years.' I didn't want to come, Mrs. Sylk, I detested the place. You know, I always resisted visiting it when Theo used to come on those rare occasions when Uncle John invited him. And I managed to get out of that because they said there was no suitable accommodation for a lady—"

She paused sharply. "I wonder why I'm talking like this! I'm not usually so foolish, am I, Mrs. Sylk? But that interview with Theo upset me. I feel like a prisoner."

"You should conquer these feelings," said Mrs. Sylk. "And as for the place, it is a very fine mansion and very well kept, and you lack for nothing. And I cannot think," she added untruthfully, "that it is particularly gloomy, or particularly isolated."

Laura laughed in her face.

"It is the most melancholy, most solitary house in the world," she replied.

Mrs. Sylk murmured a protest, but privately she held that opinion also. There was no good reason why Leppard Hall should be more dreary than any other country house set in its own grounds, and Hetty Sylk had never tried to argue out with herself why this particular building gave an impression of gloom.

She did not know the age of it, but it had certainly been refronted in the eighteenth century, for the façade was of grey stone in a severe Palladian style with a porch and pillars. At the back was a gabled wing and the irregular buildings of the stables, which were furnished with a cupola and a clock-tower. Not far away was the stone mill on the quay river with a huge waterwheel and the date 1605 over the door. The door was also of dun-coloured stone and even older than the mill. The parkland stretched to the river's edge with a fringe of willows, alders and waterflags at one side and to the village the other. A broad treeless avenue led across this parkland to the front of the Hall.

What was there, Mrs. Sylk wondered, in all this to impart that sensation of intense melancholy even on a fine summer day? She certainly had felt it herself from the first moment that she had come to stay at Leppard Hall, and she could not
wonder that Laura, quick, sensitive, and, as she had said her-
self, fanciful and even fantastical, was much oppressed by
the atmosphere of her home.

She herself was not imaginative and often could shake off
the gloomy impression given her by her surroundings; both
by training and by necessity she was a practical woman.

"Laura, love," she said, "don't sit there brooding in the
window. It is time to change for dinner. I shall ring to have
some candles brought up and then perhaps you might, when
the curtains are drawn, tell me how my embroidery looks by
artificial light."

But Laura said sullenly:
"I'm not going down to dinner to-night. I have a headache,
I feel sick."

*

That evening at dinner Mrs. Sylk scrutinized with a height-
ened interest the two portraits that Laura so much disliked.
She had, of course, observed the pictures before, but never
keenly, even though she had heard the girl frequently exclaim
against them. But there had been a vehemence and a persis-
tence in Laura's talk to-night that had pierced Mrs. Sylk's
commonplace mind. She had been impressed, too, with the
fact that the girl really did seem ill and that her refusal to
come down to dinner was not a mere formal excuse.

At the same time the discreet woman had no wish to offend
her employer, so it was only now and then, and furtively,
that she glanced at the two pictures.

They hung side by side at the end of the long dining-room,
each fitting exactly into one of the large polished panels. The
picture that represented, without doubt, Laura Sarelle (the
name was written in the top left-hand corner of the canvas)
was not, Mrs. Sylk thought, of any particular artistic merit.
Indeed, the painting was rather flat and drab, as if it had been
varnished and then cleaned.

It showed a young woman, primly dressed in a long tight-
waisted gown of the palest primrose colour with a bow of
pale-blue-and-cream-striped ribbon tucked into her narrow
bosom. Her hair was either very pale or powdered and
gathered straight off her face. Her features were scarcely to
be discerned, so lightly had the painter indicated them, but
they appeared to be regular; the eyes, which had been put
in with a firmer touch, were large and of a clean, clear brown
colour. A fleeting harmony was given to this indifferent painting by the fact that the background was formed of a dark-green curtain looped away from a landscape bathed in a faint hazy light and that the lady held in her hand a branch of laurel. These dark-green hues, harmoniously chosen, set off pleasantly the pale hues of rose, primrose and blue that composed the lady’s dress and complexion.

Nothing, Mrs. Sylk thought, could have been more inoffensive than this portrait, and she was really puzzled to know why Laura should regard it, as she undoubtedly did, with feelings of aversion and even horror.

‘Really,’ she thought, ‘the child is extraordinarily fanciful, sometimes almost unbalanced.’

The portrait of Laura Sarelle was handsomely framed in carved oak, touched here and there with gold leaf, and the design of this frame was also of laurel leaves, boldly interlacing one another, making, therefore, a setting more fitting for the portrait of a warrior than of a gentle lady.

The other portrait was a very superior performance, and Mrs. Sylk, who affected to be something of a connoisseur, had always admired it. It was believed to be, she knew, by Thomas Gainsborough, and she was surprised that a picture by so famous an artist had neither a history nor a name.

It represented a young man in a blue coat, also against a background of green, this time thickly interlaced with trees, who had his hand on his hip lifting the skirts of his coat so that the light shone on the thick glossy azure satin and looking directly at the spectator. His hair was slightly powdered and negligently dressed; small ringlets broke loose from the ribbon and hung down either side his alert, handsome and impressive face. The portrait, which was most vital and arresting both in pose and impression, was lightly put in with a few masterly strokes and appeared to be unfinished. Mrs. Sylk was not so fortunate as to be able to conceal her curious interest in the pictures. Sir Theodosius suddenly remarked with more than his accustomed dryness:

“I see, Mrs. Sylk, that you are infected by poor Laura’s passion for those two pictures. Do you also object to them and wish them removed?”

This remark was made in so dry and cutting a manner that a faint flush came into the cheeks of the poor dependant. She was a gentlewoman, and as an officer’s wife had been used to some authority in her time. She knew how she would have
answered such a remark had she been at her own table. She risked a slight coldness in her reply, allowing her pride for once to override her interest.

"Indeed, Sir Theodosius, Laura seemed very upset to-night. I think that's the reason of the headache that she made the excuse for not coming down."

Sir Theodosius interrupted:

"Ill-temper is always behind Laura's headaches."

"I believe," persisted Mrs. Sylk with a courage that surprised herself, "that it's not quite ill-temper to-night, sir. She was really distressed. I think that if you could oblige her by removing the portraits she would be much more at ease."

Theodosius smiled unpleasantly and leant back in the high chair with arms, the master's chair that he always occupied at the head of the table.

"I told Laura this afternoon, Mrs. Sylk, that she was talking a great deal of nonsense, and if I were to begin to remove the pictures in this house at her wish I should soon have nothing else to do. Surely you, madam, with your experience, must know how foolish it would be to give in to the whim of an undisciplined girl."

Mrs. Sylk felt rebuked. She pressed her lips together and sat silent. The meal was always slightly disagreeable; she never could feel entirely comfortable in the presence of Theodosius, though the room was so handsome, the food so expensive and well-served, the service so efficient.

She looked with a glance of unconscious appeal at the third person present, and he good-naturedly came to the rescue with:

"Yes, I heard Laura speak about the portraits. What's the matter with them? They look ordinary enough to me, though one's a fine piece of work—by Thomas Gainsborough, is it not? Do you know whom it represents, Theo?"

"No one knows," replied the master of the house, shortly. "Mr. Hewett, the steward before your time, Lucius, told me it had been found in the garret; there's no name or date on it and it's not a signed canvas. But it was shown to several cognoscenti in London and they thought it was a Thomas Gainsborough. So it was hung here, and very fine it looks. It happened to be the same size as the portrait of the former Laura Sarelle, and so it was placed there. They make, I think, a fine pair and a handsome ornament to the dining-room."

"Yes, except that one picture," said Mr. Delaunay good-
humouredly, “is so superior to the other that the eyes are rather vexed in making the comparison. Why not take them down, Theo, and put them somewhere else, or even put them away altogether if they vex Laura? After all,” he added lightly, “some people might object to seeing a portrait of a namesake who died years ago. And wasn’t there some story about her—something rather questionable or unpleasant?”

Mrs. Sylk was very grateful that Lucius Delaunay had thus come to her help and given the conversation both a lighter and more pleasant turn. But she was dismayed by the effect of these remarks on Sir Theodosius Sarelle.

They had come to the end of the elaborate dinner, always too long and too elaborate, Hetty Sylk thought, for people who lived so quietly in such a solitary mansion, and the young baronet was leaning back in the high chair that rose above his head in foliated scrolls. Hothouse fruit, peaches, grapes, and nectarines had been placed on the table in a high epergne of silver-gilt, the candles in their massive silver sticks had just been snuffed by the footman. In front of Sir Theodosius was his plate of fine china painted with plums, the tall rosy golden Venetian wine-glass, which he had not used, for he was very abstemious, and the agate-handled dessert knife and fork.

Mrs. Sylk wondered why she noticed these details. There come moments, even in the lives of the most ordinary people, when they see their surroundings with a sudden clarity as if they were presented before them like a picture, something that has nothing to do with their lives, something that they are permitted to view as a disinterested spectator.

Such a moment had come to Mrs. Sylk. She sat erect in her chair, one hand raised to the bosom of her grey silk dress. No one spoke or moved for a moment and the illusion to her was perfect—that she had returned from another world and was looking in on this scene, wondering at it.

A scene that was commonplace enough, in which there was nothing to be amazed at, yet Mrs. Sylk knew that she was more than amazed, she was filled with a certain inner horror.

The room had been for two years most familiar to her, for there, save on the rare occasions when Sir Theodosius had been in town and the ladies had dined or lunched alone, she had taken all her meals. She knew it so well, the long handsome apartment with the windows curtained in maroon velvet,
which gave on to the sloping parkland stretched in gentle undulations to the river, the panelled walls, the wide hearth with the handsome overmantel, the ceiling older than the façade of the house with its plaster design of Jacobean workmanship, the two winged chairs of needlework that flanked the gleaming andirons, the other chairs placed along the straight carved dining-table, each with its embroidered cushions and polished leather seat, the sconces of deep silver on the walls not often used, for Theodosius preferred a table-light.

Yes, there was that thrice-familiar background and those two familiar figures seated at the table with the wine and the fruit, the sweets, the napkins, the silver and agate service before them; there was Theodosius in his black evening clothes, his black silk stock high up under his chin, the white point of his collar showing either side his pale face, one hand to his breast just as she held her own, the other on the arm of his chair, his attitude indolent but his expression alert.

And facing her, to the left of the young baronet, was the Irish steward, Lucius Delaunay, a man who frequently partook of these stately meals.

Mrs. Sylk did not know him very well, since his province never impinged on hers. All she saw of him was on formal occasions, or an odd glimpse when she might meet him riding across the park or the home fields, or staying his horse to talk to the miller or the man at the home farm. All she knew of him was that he had met Sir Theodosius at Oxford and that they shared a common love for ancient languages. And that Lucius Delaunay was 'the penniless cadet of a noble house', as the phrase shaped in her conventional mind, and she supposed that he had little or no fortune and had been glad to accept the post that his friend had offered him when he had come into his estate. Mrs. Sylk supposed, too, that Mr. Delaunay had friends and interests of his own, for not infrequently he left Leppard Hall for visits to Warwick, Rugby, or London; once he had gone to Ireland. But on the whole he seemed content to share the lonely and solitary life of the young baronet.

He must be, Mrs. Sylk imagined, a good scholar, since he spent a great deal of his leisure in the cabinet where Sir Theodosius kept his learned books piled. But he was not of the same type as the man who employed him, but an athlete, a good horseman, genial, serene, liked by all who knew him, and loved by any towards whom he unbent.
In her ordinary way, for she was usually far too preoccupied with her own affairs to give much attention to those of other people, Mrs. Sylko had wondered at Lucius Delaunay. He was extremely good-looking and had a quality of magnificence and splendour, yet these graces and gifts he seemed to keep concealed, as if he were purposely keeping himself down and might be in everything more emphatic than he was. She supposed, vaguely, knowing how it felt to be in a subservient position, that this was because, though of as good birth as Sir Theodosius himself, he was yet in the position of a paid servant.

She was conscious, though not very sensitive, of great reserves in the young man, though his manners were always easy and genial. She found him very pleasant to look at, not only because of his handsome features but because of his vital air and spirited glance.

Mrs. Sylko, whose own hair and eyes were of no particular colour at all, but hazel, also faintly disliked dark people, and both Sir Theodosius and Laura were very dark, with what Mrs. Sylko called vaguely to herself 'a foreign blackness' in hair and eyes. But Lucius Delaunay was blond, with a bright reddish lustre in his strongly growing hair that contrasted pleasantly with eyes of a greenish-blue, flecked, Mrs. Sylko thought in her sentimental mood, with gold.

She had often wondered, 'Why does Lucius Delaunay remain at Leppard Hall? I should have thought a young man like that could have done better for himself—the Army, for instance.' And then she remembered what her own husband's life had been in the Army without any money, and she checked the vague and wandering surmisings. No doubt a young man of a noble house, with expensive tastes and no money, could hardly do better for himself than Lucius Delaunay was doing, any more than she, Mrs. Sylko, could do better for herself.

Now she looked at him across the table, and from him to Sir Theodosius, who remained motionless, and the scene was imprinted with an odd grimness on her mind, and she thought, like somebody beginning to go into a hypnotic trance: 'Why am I here, what are we all doing? And who are these two people?'

The fair young man and the dark young man looking at each other without speaking and changing, or so she thought,
while she looked at them. Not in their faces so much as in their costumes, which seemed to slip and blur into the fashion of another day, into the fashion of the man in the portrait at the end of the room. The candlelight was playing tricks, she was beginning to be infected with poor Laura’s fancies. She moved abruptly and the scene seemed to shift into reality again, and Sir Theodosius said coldly:

“I don’t know anything about any unpleasant story, Lucius. My father and my uncle were both set against all supersti-
tions. I thought I told you that I inherited my admiration of
the stoics.”

“What’s he talking about?” thought Mrs. Sylk. Then she re-
membered the former conversation. Of course, it must have been only a minute, perhaps a second, ago that Lucius De-
launay had made his casual and pleasant remark, but it
seemed to her as if a long time had passed.

She tried to regain her composure and cried at random and
tactlessly:

“Oh, but there was something, wasn’t there, Sir Theodo-
sius? Some trouble with an inquest and that Laura Sarelle was
supposed to have given an overdose of a sleeping-draught?”

Sir Theodosius’ dark eyes were turned on her in angry
amazement and the wretched woman wondered how she could
have been so rash and foolish, she who had been so careful
and knew that her very bread depended upon her prudence.

“I’m sure I don’t know what I’m saying,” she stammered,
with an apology that emphasized her mistake; “it’s only
gossip. Of course, there are stories like these in all old fami-
lies.”

“Indeed, there are, madam,” agreed the young baronet
dryly. “This is nothing at all, I assure you. I think, also, I
told you, when you first came into my employment, that I was
entirely against the repetition of any nonsensical stories of
this kind. This Laura Sarelle”—he glanced down the long room
at the faint portrait in its pale harmonies against the dark
background—“was, I believe, a very foolish young woman, ill-
educated and eccentric as so many people were in those
days.”

They were all looking at the portrait now, and Mrs. Sylk
thought that the thin smile on the narrow painted lips had an
air of mockery, as if that Laura knew that she was being dis-
cussed and despised them for their ill manners.

“Was she foolish?” asked Lucius Delaunay frankly. “I think
she looks charming. What did she do? I suppose I, too, am forbidden to pry into your family secrets, Theo?"

He spoke lightly and pleasantly, and the other young man made an effort to reply in the same tone, but there was a sombre undercurrent to his voice as he said:

"I can't think how Laura got hold of the tale. It was my father's and my uncle's wish that it should be kept from her. You see, that woman, that Laura Sarelle, was the last of the main line of the family. My grandfather was the first of the cadet branch from Yorkshire, she was the sole heiress of all the property, she died young. There certainly was"—he spoke with what seemed a doubt, a hesitation—"some stupid story, an inquest, yes, some mistake with a sleeping-draught—I suppose you've heard it, Mrs. Sylk?"

The question was like a challenge and the poor dependant was glad that she could reply truthfully:

"Indeed, no, I've heard nothing. Laura said something, but it was quite vague."

"Yes, I suppose my Aunt Mary Tollis may have told her. She wouldn't know much either. It's all a long time ago and, as I had hoped, forgotten."

"But surely it's the most trifling incident," remarked Lucius Delaunay. "An inquest! And who was it died from the overdose of the sleeping-draught?"

He interrupted himself to ask this abruptly, and again that silence of a second fell and again Mrs. Sylk had the impression that everyone in the room was fixed, immobile, with blurred outlines as if they were wavering into other personalities. Yes, even Jeffries, the servant, who had entered the room with fresh candles, seemed to take on another look, another habit.

"It was a cousin who was staying in the house at the time. He was extremely sickly, like Laura Sarelle herself," said the young baronet deliberately. "They did not know much about medicine in those days. I think they sent into Rugby to get some mixture of jalap for his cough. He either had the wrong mixture or took an overdose and died. This unfortunate girl had been the one who had administered it to him. She was questioned, I believe, rather sharply at the inquest. She was not strong herself, and the whole affair probably so impressed her that it hastened her own death. That is all the story."

"A piteous one," said Lucius Delaunay. "I can understand that it would irritate and sadden Laura, who bears the same
name. I think, Theo—forgive me—but it is a curious thing, to
name her Laura also. Your parents must have known that one
day she, too, would come to Leppard Hall."

"I have told you, I think, Lucius, that my grandfather, my
father, uncle and myself have set our faces against all super-
stitions. We have very little connection with the main branch
of the family." He paused and said, as if angry with himself,
"I really don’t know why I’m giving these explanations or
why we’re talking on this subject. It’s all Laura’s nonsense.
The name was given her," he added, and it seemed to Mrs.
Sylk as though he were trying to justify himself, "merely be-
cause we don’t believe in any foolish ideas or ill-omens, or
family curses, or any nonsense of that kind."

"Why, no, of course not. And as you say, you have no very
intimate connection with this other Laura Sarelle. But at the
same time, one can understand on a sensitive girl——"

"Sensitive girl!" interrupted the baronet. "Say rather an
idle and capricious one. There have been other Laura Sa-
relles, you will see their names in the mausoleum."

"Well, I don’t know that that’s very encouraging," smiled
Lucius Delaunay, "for they must have all died young or un-
wed or they would have changed their names. Who," he added
abruptly, "is the other portrait? It is a very fine picture. Not,
I suppose, the sickly cousin who took the overdraught," he
added with a smile.

"Not that, certainly," replied Sir Theodosius. "We don’t
know. I think it has no connection with the family at all, for it
has no likeness to any of the other portraits. It is probably
that of some friend of the family, presented to them years
ago."

"It is strange that there should be no record of the name,
no label on the frame."

"Something has been written behind," replied the other
young man, "but blacked out. It is impossible to decipher
what is behind the frame." He shrugged his shoulders.
"What does it matter?—it is a very fine painting, and I con-
sider that it suits the room. Pray let us talk of something
else."

But the conversation was not so easily changed. Mrs. Sylk
felt still a heavy mood, almost like an enchantment, over her.
She wanted to leave the table, she wanted to go upstairs and
see how Laura was, she felt uneasy about the girl, she wanted
to stand between her and her brother, try to make him realize
how dull life was for the young creature at Leppard Hall. She did not know how to set about this task. She hardly, indeed, seemed able to command her wits. She heard the two men talking and knew it was time for her to rise and leave them to their port; yet somehow she did not, as usual, go, but remained sitting at a table playing with a peach on her plate, stupid, at a loss for once, all her pretty social manners gone.

It was Sir Theodosius who left the room first. He asked his steward to come to his cabinet and help him with his translation, over which he was taking pedantic care. Mr. Delaunay replied that he had more commercial labours to attend to. The accountant was coming over from Rugby on the morrow and the steward had to get his books in order. He excused himself pleasantly enough and Mrs. Sylk knew that the two men were very good friends and that the elder (Mr. Delaunay was that by two years) had some domination over the younger. But she thought that Sir Theodosius seemed ruffled, even angry, as he left the room.

To her surprise, Mr. Delaunay rose and came and stood beside her chair, which was placed near the hearth. A wood fire was burning; though it was late in May, the evenings were chilly in the great hall. She was glad of the young man's company, glad to have him standing near her; there was something gay, gallant and pleasant about his presence. If she had had a son she would have wished him to be like Lucius Delaunay.

She looked rather wistfully up at his face that combined the firm lines of manhood with the bloom of youth. He said, suddenly and, as she thought, wistfully:

"I wish I could get those pictures moved for Laura, Mrs. Sylk. I'll try again, but you know what Sir Theo is, obstinate, and in so many small things that do not really matter."

The spell was broken. Mrs. Sylk spoke more naturally than she had spoken for months.

"Mr. Delaunay, do you really like Leppard Hall? Do you care about the life here? Isn't it in some way unnatural?"

"I think it is unnatural for Laura," he replied, without looking at her. "I can quite see her point of view. She's a sensitive, high-mettled creature, and the place must be dull and melancholy. As for me, of course I've my work to do. I go abroad the countryside a good deal."

"You're evading me," said Mrs. Sylk. She suddenly rose, her grey dress suddenly took on colour in the folds from the
flames, for it was shot with blue and pink. "I mean, do you like the house? Laura, you know, detests it, so passionately, and speaks of it so openly that I am beginning to be affected too."

"Yes," he replied quietly, still not looking at her but down at the flames, the glow of which flushed his face with gold, "one can be infected by other people's likes and terrors."

Mrs. Sylk seized upon the last word.

"Terrors! Yes, that's it! Laura's terrified. You know these caprices and fancies that people will have, but these are not, what Sir Theo thinks, ordinary girlish nonsense. She's convinced that she's been here before, not in body but in spirit. And, of course, it is, from her point of view, an unpleasant coincidence that there should be that portrait of a woman of the same name who died young and so long ago, and, as I understand, in some trouble or scandal."

"Yes, I can't understand that. They're hard people, the Sarelles. They shouldn't have used that name again. I don't know the story myself. One doesn't care either to question Sir Theo or to try to find out things behind his back. But perhaps it's a little worse than we realize."

He lifted his vivid eyes and his handsome face was grave.

"Well, it's all over and done with," said Mrs. Sylk nervously, "and shouldn't be remembered. But it's of the effect on Laura that I'm thinking. And why should she dislike the other portrait?—it's that of a very fine young man. He appears amiable too."

"Does he?" Mr. Delaunay looked through the shadows at the portrait over which the candlelight flickered faintly. "I don't know. One can imagine almost anything into a portrait. The eyes will seem to follow one, the lips change, the expression, too. It's a matter of light and shade. One ought to be able to find out who he is, it's not so long ago."

"Who he was, you mean," corrected Mrs. Sylk hastily. "Pray don't speak of him in the present tense."

"Oh, you're not afraid of ghosts, are you? I never heard of any hauntings in Leppard Hall."

"Well, you've said quite a good deal to me," insisted Hetty Sylk, "but you've not answered my question. Do you like the place? Do you find life here, as Laura does, unpleasant, sinister?"

"Do you?" asked Mr. Delaunay.

They had spoken in lowered voices out of deference to the
fact that they were in their employer's house. They would not be found, even discreetly, discussing him should he chance to return or should a servant suddenly enter.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Sylk, "I'm too busy—well, I dare say you think I lead an idle life, but there's a great deal to do keeping that poor girl company."

"Poor girl, you say! Is she really unhappy?"

"Yes, she's unhappy, Mr. Delaunay. She dislikes the place. You said the Sarelles are a hard race; well, Sir Theo's hard. He's the most extraordinary young man."

"He considers himself," said Mr. Delaunay with a smile, "a stoic philosopher. He is very much concerned to despise all manner of superstition, as you heard him say just now. But he has many excellent qualities. I owe him a good deal, I admire him, but I have told him, as I tell you now, Mrs. Sylk, that I do not think he's a fit guardian for his sister."

"Well," said Mrs. Sylk rather wearily, "try to persuade him, if you have any influence over him at all, Mr. Delaunay, to allow us at least to go to London, or to Rugby or Warwick for a day or so now and then. We are never allowed the brougham, we are never permitted to take a railway journey. People have given up calling and it is, indeed, dull for the child."

"When is she supposed to have her liberty—some measure of it at least?" asked the steward in a low tone.

"When she is twenty-one, Sir Theo says, but that's two years more. She's been here two years already as it is, but to her it's like two centuries. Think what it means to look forward to another measure of time so long, so hideous."

"I certainly wondered," said the steward, lifting his head again and looking round the room with narrowed eyes, "why she dislikes the place. And, for that matter, why you dislike it, and why I do."

This was frank speech, and Mrs. Sylk acquiesced in it by her silence. She wished that Mr. Delaunay had not expressed the feeling she dared not voice herself. It was true, but a truth she would rather have kept hidden. How dreadful to have it admitted that they all disliked Leppard Hall! . . .

"Laura said this afternoon," she whispered with a little shudder, "it ought to have been all pulled down, destroyed years ago."

"And so it should," said Mr. Delaunay, "and so it should. And the strange part of it is that I can't tell you why. It's no
gloomier or more solitary than many another old house. My own home in Ireland, for instance, is far more isolated, and I suppose more sombre and melancholy too, but no one feels sad there. The landscape here, what could be more charming?—the pastures, the water-meadows. I don't know.” He put his hand over his forehead. “Sometimes I think I must be a very fanciful fellow, yet I do practical work all day and sleep soundly at night and was never given, I think, to dreaming.”

“Why do you stay, Mr. Delaunay?” asked Mrs. Sylk cautiously and curiously. “Is it out of friendship for Sir Theo?”

“I suppose it is,” answered the steward slowly. “It's to my own interest, of course; I mustn’t minimize that part of it. But I'm fairly experienced now and I dare say there's work I could get elsewhere of the same kind. I might get financial help from my relatives, though I've always been independent. But Theo in a way looks to me, leans on me. Such a solitary fellow, one is sorry for him.”

“It's a pity,” said Mrs. Sylk, “that they have no relatives, none. That's what is unfortunate.”

“There is only yourself, and you are a very distant connection, I believe, Mrs. Sylk.”

“Very distant,” said that lady. “She was happy with her aunt, Mary Tollis, you know, at Hampstead. They lived a very modest though genteel kind of life. I used to go and see them sometimes and Laura was like a bird, always moving and gay, in the company of some friend or doing some useful work in the neighbourhood. Why, you know, sir, that here she will not stir a step, yet in London she was always going abroad among her children and her old people, taking her singing lessons and trips up the river—why, anything that comes the way of a well-educated young girl.” Mrs. Sylk finished rather lamely with a prim sentence as if she felt that she had been too loquacious to this young man to whom she had never spoken so freely before.

But Mr. Delaunay seemed to understand perfectly. He would not answer, but said:

“Theo wants me to come and live here, but I'm quite comfortable in the Dower House with the Pettigrews to look after me. I've got my own possessions there and I prefer the place.”

“I wish you would come here,” urged Mrs. Sylk. “I think Laura would feel easier. You know that now I have to share her room at night, she'll not sleep alone.”

“There's nothing she need be afraid of,” replied Delaunay,
with a quick emphasis that was almost like a subdued vio-
ence. "There are at least ten menservants in the house and
the place is well guarded by the dogs."

"Why, who would think of anything of the kind," protested
Mrs. Sylk in genuine astonishment; "I mean, about anyone
breaking in, or burglars? Of course it's perfectly safe, and
she in the middle of her own lands and her own tenantry. It's
not that, it's just her dislike of the place. Don't you see, it's
almost crystallizing into something tangible, as if she could
put out her hand, as she says herself, and touch it."

"A ghost, you mean?" asked the steward slowly.

"It's not a ghost, just her own fancy. I'm stupid at express-
ing myself."

"I understand. I don't see very much of Laura, but I think
I understand her, too. I'll do what I can with Sir Theo to let
her go to London."

"And now I must go upstairs," said Mrs. Sylk, "I've left her
alone too long." She was embarrassed, she had lost a little of
her usual poise, she had dropped her usual smooth, meaning-
less, rather hypocritical manners and so became confused
and wished to escape.

The young man looked at her steadily and earnestly, and,
she thought, with understanding and pity.

"I'll do what I can," he said, "rely on me for that. My posi-
tion is difficult, too."

She murmured some agreement and left him standing by
the hearth and looking up at the two portraits.

Mrs. Sylk found Laura Sarelle in bed but not asleep. In-
deed, she had made Patty, the chambermaid, who had
brought up her supper, keep her company. The maid,
pleased at this concession, was chattering about the doings,
gossipings and customs of the servants' hall folk when Mrs.
Sylk entered the room. Blushing and curtsying, the girl made
her escape and Mrs. Sylk began to rebuke Laura.

"That is what you must never do here. You should not en-
courage the servants to come up and talk to you. You al-
ways do it when I am away from you. You make me feel that
I must be on duty night and day."

To this Laura, tossing on her pillows, replied sullenly:

"You were away a long time and I had to have somebody
to talk to. I tell you I won't be left alone in this house, not for one single moment."

. . .

It was a chilly month of damp winds, of low-flying loose clouds, of misty evenings and slowly opening flowers; even the white thorn blossoms came tardily that year and a deeper cloud of melancholy even than was usual seemed to settle over Leppard Hall.

After a few days of acquiescence in her fate, Laura, who had been most dutiful and quiet, asked her brother in the presence of the steward and Mrs. Sylk if she might go for a day to town. She declared meekly that her wardrobe needed much replenishing, and Mrs. Sylk, although she had not been warned before of the news, ably seconded her, saying that the girl needed indeed, say, a visit to her dressmaker and to order some more materials for her summer gowns, adding quickly that there was nothing to be had in either Rugby or Warwick that was fit for Miss Laura Sarelle.

With his usual reserve and yet exquisite good humour, Lucius Delaunay put in that he might escort the two ladies to town and look at the first editions offered at Messrs. Dawkins that Sir Theodosius desired him to value.

The young baronet was, for him, in an amiable mood. He admitted that it was reasonable that Laura should now and then go to town, especially when so well escorted and chaperoned, and he was further inclined to agree with the request when Laura said quietly that Mrs. Spryte had asked her to spend the night at her quiet Highgate home.

Mrs. Sylk was slightly surprised that Laura should seem not only willing but even keen to accept this dull invitation. Mrs. Spryte was the wife of Nathaniel Spryte, the lawyer and trustee of Laura's father; the man, too, who had handled the very small fortune that poor Mary Tollis left behind, most of which had gone to Laura, but that was, after all, only a pittance.

To so unexceptional a programme Sir Theodosius could offer no objection. He arranged that the little party should leave Rugby by a train early in the morning of the Monday and return on the Tuesday evening. He took occasion to tell Mrs. Sylk that he did not wish his sister to attend any con-
versaziones, parties, or concerts, considering her too young for such diversions.

But Mrs. Sylk, with some hidden sarcasm, replied that there would be no fear of any such temptations in the house of Mrs. Spryce, she being a childless lady who led a most austere life.

It was with an almost unaccountable rise in her spirits that Laura Sarelle left Leppard Hall for this short period of escape. She looked out of the brougham window back at the flat façade of the grey stone mansion, she looked at the sloping parkland, the grey willows, the grey-green alders and the slowly moving river.

“How good to go away, even for so short a time!” she said, and she pressed Mrs. Sylk’s hand nervously.

Mr. Delaunay shared the carriage. He was in town attire and he looked quickly and curiously at the girl who had spoken with such deep and sincere passion. He made no comment on this, but pressed his lips together and then remarked lightly how strange it seemed to be travelling in a carriage after being for two years and more so constantly on horseback.

With such commonplaces they passed the time until they arrived at Rugby station.

There Laura Sarelle seemed to turn faint and had to lean on Mrs. Sylk’s arm. She looked round eagerly, however, at the faces of the strangers about her, people bustling to and fro on their business. Even the darkness and the grime, the ugliness of the station, were to her refreshing and grateful after being shut so long in the place she detested.

Mr. Delaunay found a first-class carriage and escorted the ladies into it. It was lined with red plush finished with yellow fringe and only slightly soiled by the constant smoke of the engine.

Laura Sarelle sank at once into a corner, spreading her skirts about her. Despite her complaints as to the state of her wardrobe, she was handsomely dressed in a dark-and-light-blue-striped taffeta and a little velvet jacket of prune colour with a fringe of the same hue, and a hat with many ribbons floating at the back poised sideways on her smooth brow; her black curls, carefully arranged by the skilled fingers of Mrs. Sylk, hung down her back, her gloves and her reticule were on her knees. All these feminine appointments were rich and dainty. Her slender feet were crossed one over the other. She
was a picture of luxury and idleness, but she sat there, still
with a look of exhaustion, as if she were slightly faint, and her
eyes were closed, her long lashes made dark semicircles on
her cheeks.

She was pale and had a frail air; she reminded Mrs. Sylk
of a lily-of-the-valley; there was something graceful, refined
—what, Mrs. Sylk thought rather foolishly, is sometimes
termed “hothouse”—about her. Yet her air of vitality was im-
pressive and astonishing.

Mrs. Sylk herself was well dressed, looking forward with
pathetic and childish expectancy to the two days of relief
from the monotony of Leppard Hall.

Mr. Delaunay had brought a dispatch-case of papers with
him and sat in his far corner appearing to be occupied with
them, though very different thoughts from those that might
have been inspired by the dry figures he contemplated were
passing through his mind.

Laura Sarelle was regarding him from beneath that hand-
some fringe of dark lashes. She loved him deeply with, she
firmly believed, an enduring passion. It was the great ob-
ject of her life to keep this concealed. Not only did she know
that it would meet with the sternest, most horrified opposition
from her brother, she believed that Mrs. Sylk would be
shocked, and Lucius himself would be probably surprised and
alarmed into leaving his employment at Leppard Hall. There-
fore she employed all her native feminine duplicity in con-
cealing the passion that was the mainspring of her life, for with
it was bound her desire to escape from Leppard Hall, from all
the plans of living that her brother had woven round her. It
was her scarcely formulated design to escape from Leppard
Hall and begin a new life somewhere else, in a different part
of the world, as far away as possible from Warwickshire, with
Lucius Delaunay.

But she knew that to gain this end she would have to wait
and be patient, subtle and strong. She hoped that she could
call all these qualities to her aid; she did not yet understand
the depths of her own character, but she believed she had
considerable resources. Subterfuge came naturally to her,
and young love can be most sharp and shrewd. She was quite
sure that she had concealed from everyone that she had the
least liking for Lucius Delaunay.

She was better able to keep her secret as the steward was
regarded by her brother, friend and equal by birth as he
might be, as a dependant, part of the furniture and trappings of his household. The narrow pride of Sir Theodosius’ cold nature did not allow him to suppose for a moment that Laura, for whom a brilliant match had been intended since she was in her cradle, would take any notice of the steward, who was so quiet, too, and reserved, and seemed so absorbed in his duties or in the classical studies that he shared with his employer.

Mrs. Sylk had not suspected it either. She had once or twice thought: ‘Well, there’s a handsome young man and a pretty young girl. And the only handsome young man and only pretty young girl for miles around, as far as I can see, and as good as living under one roof.’ Then she had decided that this very fact barred any romantic feeling between the two. Since she was seventeen Laura had been used to Lucius as if he had been a brother or a cousin with whom she had been brought up, and this familiarity, Mrs. Sylk supposed, had destroyed the possibility of any attachment between them. She knew that it was often so and that those who were in constant contact would take one another for granted, whereas any moment some chance meeting would set Laura’s heart beating and send her head over heels in love.

Laura contrived a perfectly natural manner towards Lucius, whom, on account of his long friendship with her brother—a college friendship at that—she addressed by his christian name, sometimes foolishly but prettily terming him Luce. She was able to refer to him without embarrassment or hesitation before the servants and before Mrs. Sylk. She was clever enough to despise him lightly before her brother, not overdoing this attitude but treating him as a rather ordinary, poor-spirited fellow who might have done better for himself than plod along at Leppard Hall.

Now that she was shut up in the railway carriage with him and they were moving through space separated from the rest of the world she allowed her thoughts to flow out towards him with such intensity that it surprised her he did not raise his eyes and look at her. But no, he was intent upon his dull papers.

She marked every detail of his person, his attire, his stock, his linen, the links at his wrist, the well-shaped hands, the curl of his hair over his ears, the outline of his features, the bloom of youth and health upon his cheeks, the deeply indented upper lip, the full line of the lower.
She was able to assure herself with a certain tranquillity that she loved this man, and always would, and that somehow or other she would win him.

'He does not love me now,' she thought, 'and if he were to suspect what I feel for him he would be alarmed and perhaps disgusted. I must never speak first, but somehow I shall bring him to care for me as much as I care for him, and we shall go away together and be happy.'

Laura had tested her brother rather crudely the other day when she asked what he would say if she came to him with the suggestion of a marriage. Of course, he had rebuked her as she might have expected. He intended that she should marry to please him. She remembered that she had been trained for that, both when she had been at the boarding-school and when she had lived with Mary Tollis; that had always been the suggestion in the air, that she must lack no accomplishment, no grace, for as a Sarelle of Leppard Hall she would surely be able to command this brilliant marriage.

What did people mean by a brilliant marriage?—wealth, a title? These material benefits did attract Laura, she was not indifferent to worldly glitter. She would have liked the money and position to take her away from her odious life. She would have liked to marry a nobleman who would take her to Court, the great cities of the world, and give her every luxury. Yet, even to her who so valued these things, they were as nothing beside the possibility of a union with Lucius Delaunay.

"You still look faint, my dear," consoled Mrs. Sylk. "It is the motion and smell of this hideous train. How it rocks! And though we keep the window closed I swear one can hardly breathe for the stench and the soot."

She offered a handkerchief drenched in eau-de-Cologne to Laura, who took it, smiling softly to herself. How little any of them understood her! It was true that she was faint, giddy—but it was with the pleasure of being shut up in the railway carriage with Lucius Delaunay.

All kinds of daydreams and schemes went through her mind, that was both busy and fantastical, both fanciful and practical, as a woman's thoughts so often are. She could almost at the same time make some concrete and even sordid schemes and indulge in gold-tipped visions.

She faced facts coolly. Sir Theodosius would never give his consent to her marriage with Lucius. Even to suggest such a union would mean that the young man, stung in his pride and
for all she knew still indifferent to her, would throw up his
position and go away, perhaps, to farm in Ireland, where she
would never see him again. Therefore she must move care-
fully, slowly, cautiously.

Laura believed that the best thing for her to do would be
to move away from Leppard Hall herself and outside the in-
fluence of that place make her plans to catch Lucius. For she
saw very little of him; often for days together he did not come
to the Hall, or only came at hours when she could not see him.
And in her walks abroad it was only by chance that she would
meet him on his sorrel horse, "Pilgrim", going his rounds of
the estate.

No, her instinct told her to get away from her brother, from
his household, and somehow push out into the world for her-
self, see what it was composed of—she had so little experience
—and what chance there might be for herself and for Lucius.

'It seems to me,' she thought, 'as if he were bewitched.
Why should he stay there so long? He is a man, with every-
thing before him.'

And then her heart began to ache dreadfully with yearning.
Why did he not feel for her what she felt for him? She wished
she might tell him of these feelings so that they might plan
and scheme together to outwit her odious brother.

Mr. Delaunay suddenly raised his brilliant eyes and looked
at her across the carriage.

"Do you really feel the motion of the train, Miss Sarelle?
You are sitting with your back to the engine, you know. Per-
haps if you were to change places with me . . ."

"I am very well," said Laura, smiling happily. "Indeed, I
am so glad to be away from Leppard Hall that nothing would
inconvenience me. And why," she asked, "do you call me
Miss Sarelle? It's been Laura for a long time."

She convinced herself that she spoke naturally, but a look
that she could not quite interpret, but that she thought meant
she had said something imprudent, crossed the young man's
face as he replied lightly:

"Oh, I thought it was a formal occasion. There is something
about a railway journey that puts one on one's most cere-
monious manners."
When they arrived at the large, dreary, dirty London terminus Mr. Delaunay found and hired a hansom carriage for them and then took leave of them. Laura Sarelle's pleasure had been short after all. But he was to come to Highgate on the morrow and take them back to Leppard Hall.

She did not say anything as she sat in the corner of the hired hackney in reply to Mrs. Sylk's comment that the Spryces might have sent a chaise for them, the hired vehicle was so dirty and jolted so much, almost as badly as the train.

"I rather wonder, Laura," she added, "that you chose to accept this invitation. Surely there are other friends in London? Why, I thought of one or two myself who would have been glad to entertain you and for a longer time than one night."

"Theo would not have allowed me to stay away longer than a night," replied Laura. "Besides, I wanted to see Mr. Spryce."

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The lawyer lived in a handsome but gloomy house at Highgate that was well run by elderly servants. Mrs. Sylk found the atmosphere almost as depressing as Leppard Hall, and she was disappointed when the formal luncheon was over that the girl was not eager to go to town and begin to make her purchases. They had, indeed, an appointment with the dressmaker for early that afternoon.

But Laura said surprisingly that Mrs. Sylk must go alone and choose the patterns and the materials.

"It is a matter of indifference to me," she added, looking across at her host. "I want to speak to Mr. Spryce, now I have the occasion."

And the lawyer, a stout affable man, but dull, and having the air of being out of touch with the world, had returned, too, to his mansion for luncheon on purpose to do honour to Laura Sarelle. He seemed astonished, and a little flattered, Mrs. Sylk thought, to hear Laura's request and asked her at once to step into his study, which was on the ground floor.

"Business, my dear?" said Mrs. Spryce, a placid and insignificant person who seemed to take no interest in anything beyond the confines of her own well-run home.

And Laura, holding her delicate head high with a sly little smile, said:
"Yes, I think it is business. You know Mr. Spryce has some affairs of mine in hand."

The library was even gloomier than the other apartments in the sombre house. It was in a way a replica of Mr. Spryce's office in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The walls were lined with dispatch-cases and books on dark shelves, a heavy desk stood in the window-place against a background of dark-red curtains.

In London the spring had been chilly also and it was cold on these heights, therefore a coal-fire burnt in the polished steel grate.

Laura seated herself near to this, shivering a little: the fire had not been long lit and the air of the room was musty.

The old lawyer looked at her with a certain quickening of interest. How pretty, dainty and bright she was! He had always thought of her until now as a child, but there she was, a young woman, with her destiny before her, and perhaps her troubles too. Strange that she should want to speak to him on business and preferred an interview with a lawyer to a visit to a dressmaker. Strange that she should allow Mrs. Sylk to depart alone on what, surely, after a country life must be an exciting expedition.

"Well, my dear," said he, taking what he believed to be the most correct as well as the most kindly tone, "I was the friend of your uncle and your father—I hope you'll regard me as your friend also."

"I do, indeed, Mr. Spryce," returned Laura in her swift, eager way. "I want to ask you a few things about myself, about the estate."

Mr. Spryce's manner almost imperceptibly hardened, became slightly legal as he answered cautiously:

"Has not your brother, Sir Theodosius, told you all you wish to know about these matters?"

"No," replied Laura quickly. "He tells me nothing. He and I are not on the best of terms, Mr. Spryce. You may as well know it now as later. You know I don't wish to live at Leppard Hall. I don't like the place, I can't tell you why. . . ."

She checked herself, instinctively knowing that to go into anything fanciful in the presence of this man would be a mere waste of time. Besides, it was for practical purposes that she had asked for this interview.

"I want to know," she said directly, "how my uncle's and my father's wills go."
"If you mean which is the most important of the wills, it is your uncle's, who outlived your father by several years," said Mr. Spryce gravely. "Your father's property was in Jamaica, and sold, you may remember. The capital thus acquired went to swell the Sarelle fortune, all of which was left to Sir Theodosius."

"All of it," said Laura swiftly. "Yes, I know. Nothing for me."

Mr. Spryce raised and let fall a fat, pale hand.

"There's no fear for you, my dear young lady," he replied with a certain professional pomposity. "Sir Theodosius is bound to maintain you according to your station so long as you remain unmarried, and to allow you—as I believe he does allow you—two hundred and fifty pounds a year for pin- or pocket-money, as the saying goes. And on your marriage he is to give you a dowry of a hundred thousand pounds. While, in the unlikely event of his death without heirs, you are to be the sole beneficiary of his estate."

"A hundred thousand pounds," repeated Laura eagerly, as if this were the only point of the information that impressed her. "I did not know we had so much money."

"There is a good deal of money in the Sarelle family," replied Mr. Spryce, smiling, "more perhaps than you would guess from the fashion in which your brother lives, though that is very handsome. I think he rather exaggerates the loss at which your father sold the Jamaica estate. Your mother was a well-dowered lady, too."

"Isn't it usual for a woman's dowry to go to her daughter?" asked Laura. "Mrs. Sylk told me so, so did my aunt, Mary Tollis."

"It may be usual, but it is not inevitable," said Mr. Spryce, "and in this case your mother, predeceasing your father, left him all her fortune, and that too goes to swell your brother's estate. Most of this money is safely invested in Consols. There are some plumbago mines in the north and the coal mines at Newcastle. You will recall that your branch of the family came from Yorkshire. They were prudent people who made good investments."

"Why, then, with all this money," exclaimed Laura impatiently, "must we live at Leppard Hall?"

"You must ask your brother that, my dear young lady. Everything is in his hands."

"It is not fair," said Laura with sudden vehemence. "He
is not much older than I, only six years, and is he thus to be entirely my master!” Then without pausing for breath she hurried on: “What happens if I marry without his consent?”

“In that case he has the right to withhold your dowry, to cease to give you the maintenance that he is obliged to do while you remain single, and may content himself by paying you the two hundred and fifty pounds a year pin-money. But surely, Miss Sarelle, you knew all this before?”

“Theodosius has told me something of the kind, but I wanted to know it from you, I wanted to be quite sure about it. You see, Theo thinks I’m a fool, or pretends to think so. He never discusses the matter with me. He puts it off; he says, ‘When you’re twenty-one it’s time enough.’”

“And so I should think it would be,” said Mr. Spryce in leisurely fashion. He could not understand and did not altogether approve of the girl’s manifest impatience, which rather, to him, confirmed what he had heard of her during her childhood. Therefore as Laura still complained that her brother had thus been left guardian over her he added shrewdly:

“Well, my dear Miss Laura, you see you had the reputation as a child and a girl of being wilful. You did not have your mother’s care when you were very young, I think the school you were sent to was rather lax—the reports from it were not altogether satisfactory—while Mrs. Tollis tended to pamper you. Your father was what we call a long-headed, rather stern man. There, there, my dear, don’t look at me with those big, frightened eyes. I’m not saying anything dreadful. I can see for myself that you’re a very charming, modest, and docile young lady. I’m merely trying to explain to you why Sir Theo, who was always precocious, was given this charge.”

Laura paled during this long speech and sat staring at Mr. Spryce. Then she bit her lower lip and turned her head sideways, staring into the flames as if afraid what the lawyer might read in her eyes.

“There’s nothing unusual in it, I assure you,” said Mr. Spryce, leaning forward and patting her slender shoulder. “You really must not quarrel with your brother or think ill of him. He is a young man about whom nothing but good has been said, a really remarkable person, you know, my dear girl, who will probably be famous one of these days. He is a most extraordinary scholar——”

“What do I care about that?” interrupted Laura. “I’m not
interested in his books, Greek and Latin, or in his studies in Persian and Hebrew. I'm not interested in Leppard Hall or the estate, I never wanted to live there."

She checked herself again. She knew that it was useless to talk to Mr. Spryce in this strain.

"I want to be free, I want to have my share of the money to do what I like with it."

"My dear lady, it's quite impossible, it could not be even discussed until you were twenty-one years of age. Besides, what's the need?" added the good lawyer easily. "There's no reason to suppose that Sir Theodosius will object to any reasonable match that you wish to make."

"I wish to make!" said Laura. "He will find a husband for me, and it will be that and none other that I must choose. How am I to endure it! Supposing I wish to marry a poor man?"

"It would be very unfortunate," said Mr. Spryce. "I do not think that Sir Theodosius would agree. Family pride is very strong in him. No doubt it is in yourself."

Laura controlled the hot speech that rose to her lips. 'There's no use,' she thought, 'of making an enemy of this man, who might yet be of some service to me.'

With a self-control that he admired and that showed him the sister shared something of the notable qualities of the brother, she replied after a brief pause:

"Very well, we will speak of it again in two years' time when I am twenty-one. Perhaps I shall be different then, perhaps Theo will have softened towards me."

"Softened towards you, Miss Laura! You have, I hope, nothing to complain of, no harshness, no severity?"

"Oh, none, none at all!" said Laura with a smile, rising swiftly and resting her elbow on the mantelpiece. "Why, indeed, I have everything, every luxury, a maid, a companion, horses, a carriage, a life of idleness . . ."

She paused a moment, while the lawyer looked at her out of narrowed eyes, and then added:

"But I cannot get as much as two portraits removed from the dining-room wall if I wish."

"I don't understand," said Mr. Spryce, a little coldly. "It is a great pity that you quarrel with your brother. There are only the two of you left in the world, you are the last of the cadet branch of the Sarelle family."
“And to whom will all this money go after we are dead?” asked Laura.

“That is your brother’s affair, to leave it to whom he wishes. But why suppose that the Sarelle family will be extinct with you? No doubt Sir Theodosius will marry.”

“I don’t think it’s likely. I don’t believe you do yourself, Mr. Spryce.”

“Well, it may be that he is the type of the scholarly recluse, prefers a bachelor existence,” replied the lawyer easily. “In that case you will be a very fortunate lady, Miss Laura, for to you and your husband and children will devolve all the Sarelle estates in due course. Now why,” he added with a heavy attempt at humour, “confuse your pretty head about these dull affairs? Why not go and enjoy yourself choosing dresses and laces and fal-lals? You say that life is gloomy at Leppard Hall; well, here is a chance for a diversion. You might even go to a concert.”

“I want no diversions of any kind,” replied Laura, looking full at the lawyer. “I want to know what my life means, how I stand. I realize now that I am entirely in my brother’s power. There is only that two hundred and fifty pounds a year that he can never take from me. Well, I suppose there is no means of altering this will, no appeal from it? Sir Thomas Wakeley could do nothing?” She mentioned the man who had been her guardian until her brother came of age.

The lawyer assured her that Sir Thomas had now nothing whatever to do with the matter, for since Sir Theodosius attained his majority he was his own master.

“And mine,” added Laura.

She stood silent for a moment, trembling. The lawyer looked at her with a sharp curiosity under his natural placidity and professional dryness.

He remembered his late client, the Jamaican merchant, and the elder brother, Sir John of Leppard Hall, how they had spoken of the girl whom they had watched, tenderly and keenly, though she never knew much of that, both when she was at school and when she had lived with Mary Tollis. They had been rather afraid of her character, that was full, they declared, of vagaries, fancies, and sudden caprices and staunch and constant passions. In everything she had been a contrast to that model of self-control and rectitude, Sir Theodosius, who had passed through school and college amid a
chorus of commendation, winning scholarships and prizes as easily as other youths picked apples off trees.

Laura Sarelle is wild, Laura Sarelle is difficult, Laura Sarelle requires watching! Mr. Spryce remembered all these warnings and he was glad that the girl's fortune was carefully tied up.

'She's the type,' he thought, looking at her beauty, which even to his dull, unappreciative eyes was fresh as a rose-leaf blown into his dreary room, 'to fall into the hands of some adventurer, romantic, impulsive. It's a good thing that Sir Theodosius has got such a level head and his hands on the money.'

He was rather afraid that Laura might make some kind of a scene, pleading with him to use his influence with her brother to enable her to escape from Leppard Hall. Instead, she changed the subject entirely with bewildering swiftness and asked him:

"Can you tell me something of the history of my ancestors? I want particularly to know about Laura Sarelle. It was her portrait I wished to have moved. It hangs in the dining-room; she's holding a bough of laurel."

The lawyer's face remained impassive. Laura thought that it had a locked look, but perhaps that was her fancy.

"Oh, the laurel! Why, that would be a play upon her name. They were fond of those conceits, were they not, in those days? You know, of course, my dear, what your name means—the breeze in the bushes, L'aura," he continued fatuously, "a pun used by Petrarch in his sonnet to his Laura."

"Yes, I know," replied the girl indifferently. "The sound of the wind in the bushes makes my name—the laurel bushes. There is a large one beneath my window."

"Well, she was a very pretty young woman, I believe," continued the lawyer with forced geniality. "I don't know very much about her, do you?"

"No," said Laura, frowning. "She died young. I've seen a tablet to her in the church, of course. She's buried in the church, not in the mausoleum with the others. There's only her name and the date, and two sprigs of laurel. That's unusual, isn't it? Not even a line of Scripture, no epitaph. In those days they had such long Latin epitaphs."

The lawyer sat silent, she sensed that he was watchful, on the alert, and could not understand why. Was something being concealed from her?
“Do you know anything else about her?” she asked quickly.
“My dear young lady, you must remember I have the affairs of a great many families besides yours to attend to, and I can’t remember all the details of all their histories.”
“But our business must be very important,” remarked Laura shrewdly. “As you say yourself, Mr. Spryce, a great deal of money was handled by your firm for us, and it was rather unusual that the main branch should die out with a young unmarried woman and for the cadet branch from another county to inherit. All these things, I should have thought, would have fixed the details in someone’s mind, yet no one seems to remember. I have seen,” she added irrelevantly, “her funeral hatchment in the church, lozenge-shaped, you know.” Then, seeing that he was not to be drawn, she put her own cards on the table. “There was some question of an overdose of a sleeping-draught, an inquest, some scandal.”
“I believe there was,” said Mr. Spryce smoothly. “It was nothing of any consequence. Laura Sarelle died suddenly.”
“How?” asked the girl. “She was very young. Not more, I think, than two- or three-and-twenty.”
“I think from a fever, a low fever. They were prevalent then, you know, in the marshes.”
Laura said quickly:
“My brother said from a consumption in the lungs.”
“Well,” agreed Mr. Spryce, “so it was, a consumption in the lungs, I had forgotten.”
“Do you know who it was died of the overdose?” asked the girl again, still keenly.
“My dear child, I’m afraid I don’t. As I told you, all these are family details. A friend, I think, staying in the house.”
“Do you know who was the original of that other portrait? You remember it, you must have seen it when you’ve come to Leppard Hall, hanging there in the dining-room.”
“I don’t recall it. I have no knowledge of art.”
Laura turned on him impatiently.
“Indeed, sir, you are trying to deceive and confuse me. You must recall it, it is a very handsome painting. It is supposed to be by the great Gainsborough. A young man in a blue coat that he holds up on his hip, thus,” she thrust her own small hand in her waist and let the folds of her velvet jacket fall over it.
Mr. Spryce’s professional calm was a little ruffled.
"Yes, indeed, I recall it now," he allowed himself to be forced into saying. "No, I don't know who it is. A handsome and a pleasant face, as I thought. I suppose," and Laura thought he had the air of a man feeling his way, "it would be some distant relation, or perhaps merely a friend."

"Then why is it hanging there, nameless, menacing, staring down at me when I have my meals? And why won't Sir Theodosius move it?"

"My dear girl, you shouldn't allow these fancies to run away with you. Sir Theodosius is quite right in refusing to give in to your whims."

Checked by this, Laura withdrew into her usual reserve. Nothing more was to be gained from this man on this subject. She tried another, though with a more indifferent air.

"You think I am fanciful. Is it my fancy that we are rather avoided in the neighbourhood? I know the house is very isolated, but there are people living not so far away who might call. They did, as a matter of duty, once or twice, but they don't come again. And when I go among them there seems an air of reserve. And yet you say yourself I'm a great heiress, greater than I knew. I'm not ill-looking, not boorish, I have had a town education."

"My dear girl, you must certainly not allow these ideas to get into your head," said the lawyer with feeling. "Of course you are not avoided. If people do not come often to Leppard Hall it's because Sir Theodosius does not encourage them. I can see that that, perhaps, is wrong. You should have more company of your own age. I shall speak to Sir Theodosius and see if it cannot be arranged for you to come to London to stay with a friend, or he might even take a town house for you."

"You don't know him!" Laura laughed shortly. "He would not permit anything of the kind. But that's not the point that I'm trying to bring before you now, sir. I'm saying that we seem isolated there, as if people avoided us, as if the house wasn't liked. Do you like the house yourself?" she asked suddenly.

"It always seemed to me a very handsome mansion," replied the lawyer.

But Laura laughed in his face.

"I don't think you're so very clever after all, Mr. Spryce. I don't mean that discourteously. But you can't conceal from me that you do hate the place, that you do think there's some-
thing strange about it. I ought never to have been taken there.”

Mr. Spryce was silent for a moment—seemed, she thought, moved, disturbed, perhaps to a considerable degree, though he tried hard to preserve his usual equanimity. It was quite a while before he seemed to have made up his mind what to say, and the girl waited patiently. When Mr. Spryce spoke it was in impressive accents.

“I warmly recommend you, Miss Laura, to pay no attention to stories, gossip, or superstition. You were given the name you bear by your father because it is a name that has always been honoured in your family. You will see it on many of the tablets in the mausoleum.”

“Yes, on graves,” said Laura quickly, “in the mausoleum, women of my family who died unmarried.”

Mr. Spryce waved this aside.

“If you ever do hear any tales or gossip, and there’s no old family without them, you must disregard them all. You must understand it was your father’s wish that you and your brother should live at Leppard Hall and live down, as it were, and disperse any”—he hesitated—“any rumours or unpleasant tales, shall we say, that may have gathered round the mansion that has stood empty so long.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I never said anything about unpleasant tales or rumours. I haven’t heard anything about a ghost. I asked you about a portrait, about my namesake, and why it was that the neighbours seemed to stay away willingly from Leppard Hall.”

But she could get nothing more out of Mr. Spryce except:

“It is really all fancy, my dear young lady. I think this lonely country life is not good for your nervousness. I shall write to Sir Theodosius about it.”

“It will do no good,” said Laura, with a curling of the lip.

She had no more to say, she was suddenly silent as she had suddenly been talkative. She went to the grim bedroom that Mrs. Spryce had prepared for her, where everything was heavy, clean and old-fashioned.

And when Mrs. Sylk returned, flushed with the pleasure of her expedition among the shops, Laura was lying on the bed, her head pressed into the pillow, her hands clasped behind her dark curls.

As Mrs. Sylk entered, the girl said, with an air of triumph and in a low voice:
“They are concealing something from me, Mrs. Sylk. We must find out what it is, you and I.”

She said no more on this subject, but her words alarmed Mrs. Sylk considerably. She took it upon herself to give the girl a sleeping-draught that she always carried with her in case of necessity. These tablets had been prescribed for Laura some months ago when she had had a sharp attack of illness at Leppard Hall followed by insomnia. Dr. Selby of Warwick had given these pills in charge of Mrs. Sylk, telling her not to use them until they were absolutely needed.

She gave them to Laura now in a glass of milk, but did not say she had mixed them with the drink because a sleeping-draught was one of the ingredients of Laura’s fanciful tale, the overdose of a sleeping-draught given by her namesake to some young cousin.

‘Dear me, sixty or seventy years ago, what does it matter now,’ thought poor Mrs. Sylk, whose little pleasure had been spoiled by Laura’s difficult mood.

She went to her own room when the girl was finally in her unnatural sleep, much depressed, dreading the return to Leppard Hall, and wishing she could find another employment.

On the return journey to Rugby Laura was very talkative in a fashion that startled and rather shocked Mrs. Sylk. The girl seemed anxious to tell her own affairs to Mr. Delaunay, who, Mrs. Sylk considered, was hardly, although an old friend of the family, a fit recipient for the girl’s confidence. Indeed, the anxious lady pondered, was Lucius Delaunay an old friend of the family? Nay, he was but a college friend of Sir Theodosius, and though she thought it was quite proper that Laura should be friendly and even familiar with him, she did not understand why the girl was leaning forward in this excited way from her corner in the carriage reciting her conversation with Mr. Spryce.

But Laura had been strange during the whole of the London visit; even when Mrs. Sylk had at last succeeded in getting her to the dressmaker’s and the large shops where she had chosen patterns and materials and been fitted with muslins and silk gowns for summer wear she had seemed indifferent to her surroundings, she who was usually so attracted by all manner of finery, and had talked vaguely of the future,
and yet with what Mrs. Sylk called to herself a hectic look
and accent, as if she were slightly touched with fever.

Was it possible, Mrs. Sylk wondered anxiously, that the
girl was going to have one of her difficult fits or attacks and
that when she reached Leppard Hall she would at once have
to be put to bed while Dr. Selby would have to be fetched from
Warwick?

But now Laura seemed in good enough health. It was her
mind and her spirit only that were affected. She told Lucius
Delaunay, in what affected to be a light tone, how she had
been rebuked by Mr. Spryce.

"There is no hope for me, Lucius, none at all. I am to re-
main at Leppard Hall until I am one-and-twenty. And even
then—why, I am entirely in the power of Theodosius. Did you
know that?"

Forced to answer this abrupt and almost imperative ques-
tion, the young man replied, with his usual serene good-na-
ture:

"Miss Laura, I have never discussed your affairs with Theo.
Why should I? I suppose it is quite a natural thing for him to
be your guardian."

"Do you think it natural, Lucius? I am entirely in his power.
If I disobey him, if, for instance, I marry somebody of whom
he does not approve, I am to have but the two hundred and
fifty a year that is now my pocket-money."

Mr. Delaunay evaded a direct answer to this complaint.
He remarked that two hundred and fifty pounds a year was
handsome pocket money for any young lady.

"But I don't get it," said Laura, frankly. "Theodosius keeps
it to pay for my clothes. That will make you think," she added
quickly, "that I must be very well dressed, too well dressed
for Leppard Hall. But there are other expenses that are taken
out of it also," she added, with sudden reticence, for she did
not, in front of Mrs. Sylk, want to say that her chaperon's
salary was paid out of her allowance.

What she did say was:

"My brother is extremely mean, Lucius; have you noticed
that? He lives magnificently, but is very close with every
halfpenny that is spent."

"That is more good management than meanness," parried
Mr. Delaunay.

He looked out of the window at the landscape that was
streaming past in lines of grey, green and blue, slightly fretted by this feminine, querulous complaint.

Mrs. Sylko felt uneasy, she did not know how to turn the conversation or how to check Laura. She felt that the whole thing was very improper. So she put in, rather feebly:

"I don’t think Sir Theodosius will be pleased that you spoke so intimately to Mr. Spryce. He probably intended to tell you all these matters when you were twenty-one years of age, my dear."

"I had every right to know," replied Laura in a brooding tone, "and I am glad I do know. But think, Lucius, two more years of imprisonment!"

"I think you talk extravagantly, Miss Laura," said the young man with an effort, turning in his place; "you can hardly call a residence in your brother’s Hall imprisonment."

"It is to me. My spirit’s imprisoned. Don’t you understand, or do you, too, think that I am fanciful, perhaps halfwitted? But I’m sure you don’t, Lucius. I am sure you understand really but you won’t commit yourself." Then going off again at random, as was her custom when excited, she asked: "Could you ask Theodosius about those portraits? Perhaps for you he will have them moved."

"Indeed, I have no influence with Theo, Laura," replied Mr. Delaunay with a faint smile. "Though I am fond of him, of course, and I think he’s fond of me."

"He values your services," remarked Laura shrewdly. "He knows that he wouldn’t get anyone else very easily to undertake your double duties of secretary and steward. But you are a man and you have, I suppose, some sort of character. Can’t you persuade him to take those two pictures away?"

"I’ll ask him, Miss Laura."

"Well, pray do, for my sake. And there’s another thing that you might do for me. You might find out the history of that woman, Laura Sarelle."

This direct appeal was too much for Mrs. Sylko’s sense of decorum. She put her grey-gloved hand on Laura’s arm and said:

"My dear, you should not make those direct appeals. You put a gentleman in a most embarrassing position when a lady thus openly asks a favour."

Laura laughed. She, too, looked out of the window, turning away from Lucius Delaunay. How foolish they all were,
even her beloved; he was stupid, or reserved, to a maddening degree. How was it possible they could not read her, that they could not understand she wanted her freedom and her money that she might go away with him far from this hateful countryside, far from the loathsome house? She changed her tactics once again after a pause, during which all three sat in uncomfortable silence, and looking around said:

“No doubt you think I am very indiscreet. You feel it is the duty of women to suffer in silence. That is what we are bred and trained for, is it not, Mrs. Sylk? But I thought I had a right at least to know about my destiny. It is strange to think, is it not, how one’s parents can dispose of one, of one’s whole life, just by writing directions down on a scroll of paper? You see, I have discovered Theo is richer than we thought he was. There was a good deal of money made from the sale of that Jamaica estate, though Theo always told me that we had heavy losses there.

“There was my mother’s dowry, too, that should have been reserved for me. But no, I am to have nothing. And all because while I was a schoolgirl I was supposed to be wild and fanciful.”

At the end of this long speech she moved with the rustle of her stiff puce-coloured silk skirt and seated herself opposite Mr. Delaunay in the further corner of the carriage.

“Don’t you think it’s unfair? I appeal direct to you, whether Mrs. Sylk thinks it decorous or not.”

He looked at her with a smile both in his eyes and on his lips. She was very finely dressed for her position. It was a strange caprice of the otherwise stern and straightforward Sir Theodosius that he liked to surround himself with so much splendour, and that Laura, who was denied even the most common diversions of her age, was always expected to go most richly dressed. She wore now a hat with dark purple feathers and a little jacket of dark green velvet laced with golden ribbons, a dress that was not only magnificent but had its touch of fantasy even as the girl who wore it. Indeed, Laura Sarelle could not put anything on without twisting or turning it to suit her own individuality.

“I'll speak to Theo, Laura,” was all he said, but in his mind he was revolving several problems, coming abruptly to a decision about the future that he had long debated with himself.
Being a young man of tolerable determination and having that strength which those of a solitary and reserved character often possess in secret, Lucius Delaunay put this resolve into practice soon after the journey from London, and coming upon Sir Theodosius one evening in his library, where the baronet had called him to help him with a difficult passage in his Greek translation, he said:

"Theo, I am resolved to leave Leppard Hall. Not so soon as to inconvenience you, but as soon as may be."

He spoke pleasantly, almost affectionately, and put his fine hand on the thin shoulder of the friend whom he addressed. But Sir Theodosius turned on him a look that was not only startled but full of anger and even, the other young man thought, of hatred.

"You would leave me! But you have never hinted at such a thing! Lucius, it is impossible!"

The words were harshly and even tyrannically spoken, but the other answered mildly:

"We never had more than a business agreement, did we, Theo? I am of no more use to you here than any other would be. Indeed, the work should be divided, you should have a secretary and a steward."

"I am quite satisfied," replied Sir Théodosius, with a touch of violence, "I have arranged my time very pleasantly to myself. You look after the estate excellently, with my supervision," he added haughtily. "I have the kind of life that I most desire. Such time as you can give to our studies here is sufficient for me."

"I don't think that I shall be able to give so much time in future," replied the other, still gently but firmly and with his clear bright eyes slightly narrowed as he gazed at his friend. "When we were at college together I was able to be of some help to you. We had the same tastes and I suppose that made us friends, but there is a good deal that we have not got in common, Theo."

"Why are you bringing all this up now?" replied the baronet, who seemed much moved.

He rose from the smoothly padded leather chair after making an angry gesture with his hands, which pushed the manuscripts on his desk aside.

"You know that I am deeply engaged in this work. It will
be another year before I’ve finished it. Cannot you,” he added eagerly and impulsively, “remain until then?”

“I don’t think I can, Theo. A relative of mine has offered me work in Ireland. Not so well paid as this, nor, I dare say, so interesting, but I think I should go.”

“Why?” demanded Sir Theodosius. “I never thought that you were a capricious man, Lucius. I insist on a good reason for this sudden, this unaccountable resolution.”

“It is not sudden. I have been debating it for some time. The days slip by very easily in a place like this. I have been here as long as you have—two years. During that time I have accomplished nothing—in the forwarding of my own life, I mean. You are too inclined to be solitary; this is rather an unnatural sort of existence.”

“You mean it’s dull?” asked the baronet; then answered himself immediately: “It will be more dull in Ireland.”

“I don’t know. My relative’s estate is near Dublin. I have many friends there. I might not stay there long, either. I told you, if you remember, Theodosius, when I came first to Leppard Hall that I accepted the appointment only while I was considering what the future would be. You see,” he added with a pleasant smile, “our positions were much the same, save that you had inherited a large fortune. We were both cadets of noble houses, we were both orphans. I felt drawn to you, and you, I think, to me.”

“Well, what has come between us?” demanded Sir Theodosius. “Have I ever expressed displeasure? Do you wish your salary raised? I thought it was sufficient for your expenses. You live here more as my friend than my steward.”

A faint colour touched the other young man’s face.

“I have complained about nothing,” he said. “What I do is on my own initiative. I shall leave in a month’s time, I think. Nothing you say or do, Theo, will alter my resolution. I believe that I have been here too long.”

Theodosius paced up and down the room; he was obviously exasperated, baffled and angry. Lucius Delaunay was sorry for him, but not moved to alter his determination. At last Sir Theodosius said:

“You’ve not been infected by any of this nonsense that Laura talks, about disliking the place? The girl’s hysterical; what she says is enough to unnerve anyone. I think Mrs. Sylko encourages her too. I have spoken most sternly to the servants. This kind of feminine excitement spreads like wildfire.”
"I have seen very little of either Miss Laura or Mrs. Sylk," replied the young steward with a tranquil look, "nor are they likely to affect me. But since you have brought up your sister's name, I shall venture to give you some advice, though I am quite sure it will be taken ill."

"Then why give it?" demanded the baronet sternly.

"Because sometimes even though advice is resented it lingers in the mind. Sometimes even the most obstinate will be impressed, and I want to impress you with the fact that it is not fair to keep Laura here. You may call her hysterical, excitable, fantastic, what you will, but remember that this girl is entirely in your power and that it may have a very ill effect on her to remain in a place she detests."

"She would detest any place," replied Sir Theodosius grimly, "where she was not allowed to have her own will. She is incurably frivolous, she wishes for nothing but excitement and pleasure."

"Well, that's natural enough," put in Lucius Delaunay. "Give her a little of it and she will cease to yearn so much after it. Let her stay in London; you must have friends, even connections, there."

"I think it's presumptuous in you to give me this advice," interrupted the baronet, "especially after you have told me in such an unkind manner that you are leaving me. I know how to deal with Laura."

"I do not think you do," replied Lucius coolly. "I think that you are laying up trouble for yourself there. As I told you, I have seen very little of the girl, and I am certainly not in her confidence, but I'm older than you, Theo, and have had more experience, and I do warn you that you should get other advice than mine about her. Whenever Dr. Selby comes to see you he advises you that she should have a change."

"And I say," replied Sir Theodosius violently, passing by the handsome desk, "that she shall remain here, in my house, the house of my fathers, in her rightful place."

"Close to the graves of the other women who bear her name," said Lucius, his eyes still further narrowed, "constantly near that portrait which she so much dislikes? There's one thing I should like to ask you also, Theo: there's some mystery about that other Laura Sarelle. You make it worse by trying to keep it secret."

"Have you been trying to find out about it?" demanded the baronet, whose face now had an ugly, livid tinge.
"You know me better than that. Your intention is to insult, provoke me, not to discover the truth," replied Lucius Delaunay, still coolly. "I have made no inquiries about your family or the history of Leppard Hall in the neighbourhood. I think, too, Theo, that you hold your tenants down with so stern a hand that they would all be dumb if anyone did question them. But I think there was, or is, some mystery about that girl, and I think it's cruel to bring Laura, her namesake, here, to live, as it were, in the shadow of it. And though you cannot accuse me of being a fanciful, sick-tempered girl, I too think that the Hall is—well, gloomy. And sometimes, when I hear Miss Laura say that it ought to be destroyed, I am inclined to echo her opinion."

Sir Theodosius seemed violently struck by these words. He sat down in the chair, put his elbow on the table and dropped his face in his hands. But there was no sign of relenting in his pose or his face. He mumbled to himself and the words seemed vindictive.

The steward was somewhat surprised at this emotion on the part of his employer. He knew that what he had said himself was reasonable, and Sir Theodosius had always been towards him, if neither affectionate nor kind, at least equable and just. He therefore approached him and said with a note of regret:

"I am sorry to have vexed you, indeed I am. You'll easily find someone else to take my place. If you don't like my advice about Laura, well, forget it. It will be given you before long by someone else. It is true that the girl may grow out of her fancies——"

The sentence was broken off, for the door was opened abruptly and for a second both men, for Sir Theodosius had raised his head quickly at the interruption, thought that they beheld a ghost. For a tall, pale young woman stood in the doorway dressed in a gown of rubbed primrose silk with the palest of blue ribbons at the bosom, her hair powdered, her dark eyes shining with excitement and in her hand a spray of dark laurel.

She was the exact likeness of the portrait in the dining-room, save that the faint tint of the oil-painting here glowed with life in the warm though pale colourings of the girl, and the costume was bright and real in the stiff sparkle of the silk, in the glint of the bows of cracked ribbon.
“Laura!” cried Sir Theodosius at length. He set his lips and seemed unable to rise from the chair.

Lucius Delaunay had been startled too; though not a superstitious man, he had for more than a second believed that he saw a supernatural vision.

“Why, Laura, dressed up like the portrait! What a strange masquerade!” he remarked slowly, thoughtfully.

“I found the dress in the attic,” smiled Laura, coming softly into the room and closing the door. “It fits me to perfection. She must have been like me after all. You see, I have powdered my hair, that is what she has on in the picture—powder—her hair, I expect, was as dark as mine, don’t you see? It took me a long time to put it on. Mrs. Sylk found some old pomade, and then some fine sifted flour.”

“You shouldn’t have done this,” exclaimed Sir Theodosius violently, rising. “What prank will you be up to next, Laura! You pretend to dislike the portrait, and then you dress yourself up in a likeness of it. Where did you find those clothes?”

“I told you, in the great bedchamber.” Laura moved across the study floor, and the full dress that was arranged on hoops billowed about her. “There are several others there, too. And old writings, but they’re so faded and cramped I can’t decipher them. All manner of things in a haircord trunk.”

“You had no business to be in that room,” cried Sir Theodosius. “Who gave you the key?”

“I shan’t tell you. I suppose I am the mistress of the house if there is one, and I shall get the keys if I wish. What harm is there in it? See, I picked this spray of laurel. That symbolizes my name and hers, doesn’t it?”

Seeing that Theodosius was still not master of himself, Lucius Delaunay easily took the situation in hand.

“Well, Laura,” he said, “now that you have found that charming gown and made yourself such a beautiful replica of the picture you will cease, perhaps, to dislike it?”

“Yes, I think I shall,” smiled the girl. “I think I’m glad that, after all, I didn’t have it taken away. There are other things of hers up there too, and I dare say that after a while I shall feel that I am in the past again and that I am the other Laura Sarelle. But I hope that I shan’t die when she did, for that means that I should have no more than five years or so to live.”

Theodosius, who seemed to have gathered his strength and
courage but with difficulty, as if he had received a great shock, now rose and addressed his sister in the sternest tones:

"Laura, you will go upstairs immediately and you will take off all that mummer try. You will bid one of the maids take it upstairs and lock it away in the trunks. You will return the keys, if they are still in your possession, to the housekeeper. You will never go in for this kind of masquerade again, you will never indulge your foolishness so wantonly again. It is the present and the future that you have to live in, not the past."

Laura seemed intimidated by her brother's harshness. She shrank away with a movement that brought her nearer to the side of Lucius Delaunay.

"You never will allow that anything I do is right, will you!" she protested, in a low tone. "I'm not to have any diversion at all——"

"This is an old subject," answered Sir Theodosius nervously, controlling himself with difficulty. "You know that there are manifold diversions to your hand if you would but use them. You are ill-educated, you have not many accomplishments——"

"I am out of the schoolroom," retorted Laura, "and don't intend to pore over schoolbooks."

Sir Theodosius made a gesture with his hand as if he gave up the subject as hopeless.

"There was an invitation from the Frobishers in Warwick the other day to a ball. You refused it——"

"They're stiff, rustical people. I don't like them," said Laura. She twirled the sprig of half-opened laurel leaves in her hand. "I gave you a shock when I came in just now, didn't I!" she added maliciously. "You really thought I was a ghost. And you, too, Lucius."

"Why, for a moment," he agreed good-naturedly, "so I did. I think you look charming in the costume, Miss Laura. Theo, do not be angry with her, it is but a natural play for a young lady to think of."

"For an idle girl to think of!" replied Theodosius vehemently. "It vexes me to the heart, Laura, that you should go in for these tricks when, as I say, there is so much that you could do. There are the villagers, and there are small children and the aged who would be glad of your help. The vicar's wife, too——"

Laura interrupted him with a wave of her hand.

"This is very dull for Lucius and I am sure he doesn't wish
to hear us disputing. I don’t intend to take the frock off,” she added mischievously. “I feel that I am the other Laura Sarelle. I shall close my eyes and imagine what she was like and what she did. Perhaps her whole history will come back to me in a kind of trance, or dream.”

Theodosius seized her wrist sternly, drew her close to him with a force that surprised both the girl and Lucius Delaunay, who stood alert with lips close together, as if ready to protect the sister from the brother. Sir Theodosius spoke quietly, though with intense force.

“You heard what I said just now, Laura! Go upstairs at once, take off all that mummerly and try to live a sane and sober life. If you do not do so I shall have you confined to your room.”

Lucius, considering this painful scene, saw that the girl was overawed but not frightened. Physically she submitted, spiritually she defied her master. Her eyes, that looked unnaturally dark beneath the powdered hair, flashed with a secret fury.

She said, with a thin smile:

“Very well, very well. I will do as you tell me, dear Theo, of course. You shall not be plagued with my nonsense again.”

With that he let go of her wrist, and glanced down at the marks his fingers had made on her pale flesh. She looked lovely in the costume of the last century, no question about that. Her slender figure was well suited by the long-pointed tight bodice, by the low corsage that showed more of her delicate bosom than Lucius Delaunay had ever beheld before; the dressing of the hair away from the face was becoming too and set off in all their strong purity her fine features. She had put some rouge on her cheeks and lips that accentuated her naturally brilliant complexion, that had the colour and purity of a blush rose. The billowing skirts were charming too, so were the little bands of velvet she had fastened at her wrists . . .

Lucius thought that he had never seen her look so fair. He wondered if Theo recognized that his sister was beautiful and that in her youth was an appeal and a power that men would do well to recognize. Yet, looking at the girl, who seemed indeed so much the disputed portrait come to life, Mr. Delaunay felt a certain spiritual nausea, a sickness that after a while became almost physical. Something was wrong, he did not know what, in that exquisite and frail femininity, holding the
laurel bough; he seemed to see the symbol of something that was doomed and evil. He had an impression that this was really the other Laura Sarelle, that she had returned to earth either to accomplish some desperate purpose or to avenge some desperate wrong.

He was angry with himself for allowing such fancies to touch him, but the likeness was very strong and the costume was actually the dress worn by the original of the picture; he broke up the ugly interview by taking Laura’s hand and drawing her to the door that he opened for her and leading her into the corridor.

Then he returned to Theo and said firmly:

“This confirms my decision. I leave your employment at once. Frankly, I do not care for your treatment of Laura. She may be foolish, but you are unduly harsh.”

Somewhat to his surprise, for he had expected a violent defiance, Theodosius, who had again sunk into the chair and was passing his handkerchief over his forehead, damp with sweat, replied in low tones:

“You would not say that if you knew the whole story. You don’t understand with what I am confronted.”

“Then why not tell me?” asked Lucius eagerly. “I might be able to help you. As somebody who is outside all this, surely I could offer some assistance? What is it, some family legend, haunting, ghosts?”

“Do you think,” replied Sir Theodosius, stern again, “that I should be affected by nonsense of that kind?”

“No, but perhaps Laura is——”

“She doesn’t know anything about it,” replied the baronet, still ghastly livid.

“No, maybe she doesn’t know anything about it, but she may sense or feel something. It might be in the atmosphere of the house, you know she’s always loathed it—can’t you tell me if anything did take place here? If that other Laura Sarelle was connected with anything that was horrible?”

“Why do you use the word ‘horrible’? You know that old story. It’s been repeated again and again, you must be weary of it.”

“I don’t know why I did use the word,” replied Lucius Delaunay thoughtfully. “It came to me just now, when I saw Laura. She looked so charming, yet I just had that impression of something horrible.”

“Then you certainly are becoming foolish too,” replied the
baronet sternly. "All these foolish, girlish, sick fancies. Perhaps it would be as well if you went, Lucius. I see that we are not likely to be able to work together."

"Not unless you alter your attitude towards Laura, Theo. It is disagreeable to stand by and see what one disapproves of and to be in the position of the paid servant to a man whose actions you dislike."

"So you presume to judge me!" exclaimed Theodosius, who was in an increased state of violent agitation. "But I tell you nothing can move me. Laura stays at Leppard Hall, and so do I. I was brought up with this one object—that I should rule here and Laura should stay with me until she made a suitable marriage."

"What," interrupted Lucius Delaunay, "do you consider, Theo, a suitable marriage for Laura? Don't you think that a man who could love her and understand her and take care of her would be a suitable husband?"

"You speak very romantically," sneered the baronet. "I consider a suitable marriage one that would increase the prestige of our family, that would give her an establishment equal to mine."

"And yet," replied Lucius curiously, "you have enough money, Theo, to set your sister up handsomely, to give her a fine dowry."

"It is the provision of my father's will that I dower her," said the baronet. "I might add to it, I am a wealthy man. No doubt you know that, Lucius?"

"Yes, I know, but it's never concerned me much. So Laura is to remain here until someone comes along sufficiently rich and noble to please you, to raise the prestige of the Sarelle family?"

"You're sneering at me, Lucius, I know."

"I never sneer, Theo, I hope. Perhaps there was some irony in my words. I think that you're going to sacrifice that girl for your own ambitions. And they're such strange ambitions, too. You live the life of a recluse here. Why don't you go abroad into the world and find a wife for yourself and found your own family—and take Laura with you and let her meet people of her own station?"

"When Laura is twenty-one, steps will be taken to present her to London Society. And then no doubt there will be sufficient pretenders to her hand."

"No doubt, when the amount of her dowry is made known.
But will she find among those pretenders someone whom she
can really trust and love?"

Sir Theodosius returned to his papers, which he now put
into order with quick, neat, nervous movements.

"So you wish to leave Leppard Hall at the end of the
month?" he said coldly.

"Yes, Theo. I've given you my reasons as best I can. All
my papers and accounts are in order. As for the translations
—as I said before, you pass me in scholarship. I can't help you
much there."

And as if he wished to say no more, the young man, with
a brief salutation, left the room. He was at once relieved and
disappointed at having put his resolution into action. He would
be very glad to be away from Leppard Hall and even from
Theo, whose company he had found for several months now a
burden. He had first felt affection towards the sickly lad whose
tastes were so much like his own, whose position was also like
his own, in so far that he was orphaned and solitary. But these
warm springs of feeling had been dried up by the constant
coldness of the baronet, who was certainly as affable towards
him as his nature allowed, but who had never admitted him
to a close intimacy and who had made use of him in every
direction without offering any return.

Lucius DeLaunay was too generous-hearted to resent this
behaviour on his own account, but he much disliked Theodo-
siuss' attitude towards his tenants and most of all towards his
sister.

Why, then, did he slightly regret his resolution to leave
Leppard Hall? He hardly knew himself; it was probably be-
cause of the fact that the girl must be left behind to the cold
tyranny in this unnatural life.

He walked through the park; a fine rain was falling and all
the landscape was blurred in a pale, azure mist. He turned
towards the river, since he had a brief leisure, to take the
path that was bordered by wild mint, thyme, cresses and flags,
and he was startled to see Laura ahead of him. And again he
had the second's chilly feeling that it was a ghost he saw, for
she still wore the fantastic, hooped yellow dress, but she was
moving with a hurrying step towards the distant spire and the
blot of grey that was the church and the graves that, huddled
and leaning, overhung the sedgy banks of the Avon.

He hastened after her, and she looked at him with a glad
surprise that he was relieved to see, as it proved her humanity.

"Why, Miss Laura, you must not come abroad like this! That ancient gown is very thin, I'll swear. You should have a cloak, it's raining."

"Yes, see how the drops stay on my powdered curls." She pulled one of these over her shoulder. "You see the pomade will not allow them to penetrate my hair. I don't know when I shall ever be able to brush this stuff out, but I like it. Don't you?"

"Yes, Miss Laura. As I told you, I think you look lovely indeed."

"More lovely than the portrait?" she questioned him. "I shall have to find out about her now, shan't I?" She put her hand in his and laughed. "You see what courage this disguise gives me. I can say things now that I could not have said in the ordinary way. Oh, Lucius, you protected me, didn't you, just now when Theodosius was so unkind?"

"I hope I didn't need to protect you, Laura."

"But you were on my side. You were there. If he'd threatened me, or struck me, you would have interfered."

"Theo would never have done that," replied Lucius, frowning. "You mustn't think such things, Laura." But in his own heart he was not too sure. There had been a dark violence under the young baronet's usually cold demeanour that had surprised and shocked him at the time. "But you'd best not play tricks. You'd best run home and take those clothes off and try to please your brother. The two years will soon pass and then—he's promised, you know—you are to go to London and have as much liberty as any young lady."

"Now you're treating me as a child," she said. She made a movement as if she brushed his words aside. "And you don't mean what you say. How strange that we should be walking together like this! You, in your riding-clothes, might be from the eighteenth century too. You should have powdered hair, or your hair long and tied in a ribbon. Like the other portrait. But you don't resemble that, I think."

She looked at him so anxiously that he became uneasy.

"Laura, you must not give so much importance to these fancies. I think those clothes, and everything else you found in the trunk, should be burnt or put aside. You mustn't think so much of this other girl. After all, she was no near connection of yours, the whole thing is a mere accident."
"A mere accident that I've come here, bearing her name! Well, I suppose so. I don't care!" She sighed. "Look! The clouds are passing!"

He glanced upwards where the faint wreaths of mist were sailing away over a sky of the most delicate blue.

"How lush the meadows are! When I come along to the river I don't dislike the place so much. Can you smell the thyme and mint as we walk along and crush it beneath our feet? I should like to have a boat here, then we might go together."

"Laura," he checked her suddenly, "we shall not go together anywhere much longer. I'm going away."

He felt the shock go through her, for she was still holding his hand. Then it seemed as if she were about to fall, and his arm went round her shoulders to steady her.

"Laura! Dear child! Don't mind! I know that you can't afford to miss friends, but indeed I must go away. And there will be other people, I'll speak to other people. They must come and take you out—from that house you dislike."

Again she brushed aside his words, raising her hand and letting it fall.

"Lucius! You can't go away! You must remain! Do you understand?"

He took his arm from her shoulder and they stood side by side on the bank of the river. The flags with their gold-and-purple-striped flowers were in front of them and the river was moving with a slow sullen speed under the short alders and willows that dipped and trailed their long grey leaves in the sluggish water.

"You can't go away," she said, as if she stated a fact. "You can't go away, Lucius."

"My dear, I must. If I stayed I might become too fond of you."

"But I am too fond of you already. I tried very hard to conceal that, yet somehow I always hoped that you knew it. Now my plans are awry I must tell you."

"I mustn't listen to that, Laura," he interrupted with great tenderness, taking her hands, "nor consider it seriously. You are so young and inexperienced, dear, just a fanciful child. And I am the only person anywhere near your own age or station about here. Your liking is sure to have fallen on me. It doesn't mean what you suppose, Laura. You mustn't think of it again."
"You are being cruel, and even wicked," she responded, and there was a hint of her brother's sternness in her manner, "to put me aside so, when you know what I say is true. When you know that I—I'm not going to say it here . . . And this is not perhaps the place and the time. But you can't go away, Lucius."

"I must. Now, more than ever, I must. Say no more, but come back with me towards the house. Remember that the whole world is before you, and a wide choice of suitors, and that I am but a penniless man."

Laura laughed wildly.

"Go back to the house by yourself!" she cried, and ran from him along the flag-bordered river path.

Lucius felt obliged to follow the hurrying figure in the fading primrose silk, although it inspired him with a faint, almost supernatural horror so that he would, could he have followed his own, as he felt, cowardly instincts, have turned and left her in the mist to which she seemed to belong.

It was not long before he overtook Laura, who had paused, panting, where the bank was slightly steeper and was leaning against one of the bent willows. They had come much further than he had first supposed and were now not far from the churchyard.

She looked at him in the strangest way, her expression, he thought, was one of surprise and reproach touched still by wildness.

"I hope that you will not remember anything I said, Lucius. I speak, as you know, in a capricious fashion."

"I shall never remember anything of you but what is full of respect," he replied. He was not usually at a loss for words, but now he scarcely knew what to say or even how to be sure of his own emotions.

She gathered her breath and walked on ahead of him; she seemed resolute to reach the tall church and lichen-covered gravestones.

"Laura," he said, keeping beside her with difficulty, for she had broken into a run again and he did not wish to have an appearance of undue haste, lest they should be observed and he should be supposed to be pursuing her. And strange she looked, as he well realized, in her gown of the last century and her long powdered hair. "Laura, nothing of this has anything to do with you. Why are you hurrying towards those graves?"
"The mausoleum," she replied, "is even more melancholy, but let us not talk of that. You may leave me, Lucius, I do not desire your escort. I think I shall do what Theodosius so often bids me do—pay a duty call on the vicar's wife and ask her if there are any sick or poor in the parish whom I may visit with my basket of jellies and fruits."

He knew that she spoke in mockery, but she seemed to him to have quite regained her control, and that he was even inclined, though with a flat sense of disappointment, to believe her when she said she had meant nothing of what she had said in the earlier part of their conversation.

So he raised his beaver hat and turned and left her abruptly, admitting that both the girl and the moment had defeated him.

He had work to do, work for Theodosius, and for the first time since he had been in the young baronet's employment that thought galled. Repairs were needed to the wheel of the old stone mill, which always seemed, even to sunny-tempered Lucius Delaunay, a gloomy place. But Theodosius did not easily pay for his repairs to his property, and it was the business of the steward to see that all expenditure was well laid out. The thought of this task that he had to do for the brother hung strangely in his mind as he turned and watched the primrose-clad figure of the sister stealing towards the churchyard.

Well, no doubt he had spoken more truly than he had thought at the time when he had said that she was but an undisciplined girl and her fancies should be taken no notice of. She led an idle and perhaps a pampered life. He must harden himself against her, must not allow himself to feel too sympathetic and sensitive towards one who, after all, had so little to complain of. Her dislike of Leppard Hall must be but a petulant whim and what she had said to him but a whim too. Why, she was too young to know her own mind. The whole world was before her and in a year or two she would have changed entirely.

So he made his way to the mill that stood on a bend of the river about half a mile from the Hall in the opposite direction from the church. It was an ancient building, and he noted again the date 1605 cut above the doorway. The sound of the mill wheel was both soothing and melancholy in the ears of Lucius Delaunay. He watched it for a moment as it went round and round, the long weeds dangling dark and wet from
the slats, the water racing and curling in brown foam in the mill-pool.

Then he looked up and down the river. So impressive had been his last interview with Laura Sarelle that he believed he would never be able to see the banks of the Avon without seeing, too, her figure in the pale silk gown hastening along the sedgy path.

What she had said about the landscape was true enough; it was melancholy, so flat, so faint in hues, so desolate. There was not a human being in sight and the constant mist from the river and the water-meadows seemed to enclose the landscape more surely than mountains.

Leppard Hall, too, the mill, the mausoleum, the church and the home farm, it was true that they were all grey and sombre in outline and in hue.

He tried to dismiss these thoughts, foolish as they seemed to him, from his mind; he tried to persuade himself that it was not because of the general isolation and melancholy of the place that he was leaving it. He felt like a man who was making an effort to throw off a spell, to get to his own kind, his own kin and friends in a country where there would be more company, more active work for him to do. He had been as if drugged by this long routine, a certain sloth had fallen upon him. It was true that he had plenty to do, both on the estate and in the study of Theodosius, yet the days were so monotonous, each so like the other, that he felt that his faculties were becoming numbed.

. . .

After his business talk with Mr. Tampion, the miller, it occurred to Lucius Delaunay to ask him about the history of the Sarelles, a thing that he had never done since he had been in the employment of Sir Theodosius—first, out of indifference, then, during the last few months, out of delicacy; for since Laura had begun to protest about the portrait hanging in the dining-room of Leppard Hall and to make her nervous inquiries about the history of the original, since he had seen the dislike of Theodosius to touch upon this subject, the steward had felt that it was merely good manners to refrain from endeavouring to satisfy any curiosity he might himself have on this matter.

But so powerful had been the impression made on him that
afternoon by his talk with Laura Sarelle, so shaken was he still inwardly by the emotion she had roused in him, that he put such fine considerations aside and asked the man bluntly (for he knew that his family had been long at the mill, since the days of Elizabeth, he believed) what was the story of the last heiress of the main branch of the family.

"There's something, I believe, and it's not easy to come at," he added.

The miller looked straight at him and made a surprising answer:

"We all hold our leases, sir, on condition we don't speak about that."

"Surely you have nothing so fantastic in writing?" demanded Lucius Delaunay.

"No, sir." The man seemed uneasy yet prepared to stand his ground stoutly. "But it was well understood in the time of Sir John. My father had his lease renewed by him, sir, but we were not to make any remarks or cause any gossip or scandal about what had happened at Leppard Hall. For it's a long time ago, sir, and nobody's concern now."

"No, and certainly not mine. If you're rebuking me, you're certainly in the right," said Mr. Delaunay. "But I'll tell you what made me ask you. Miss Laura is a very sensitive and nervous young lady, she's taken a great dislike to the Hall. I'm not telling you a secret, for I know she informs everyone of it. You must have heard it."

"Yes, she speaks freely in front of the servants, sir," agreed Mr. Tampion rather shortly, "and I've heard of it. She came down here herself one day and went all over the old mill and asked me a number of questions."

"And you answered her, I suppose, as cautiously as you're answering me now. Well, I'll not press the matter. But I thought perhaps that if I knew something I might be able to help her. She is, in a way, haunted," he added. "And if one knew the truth one might help to lay the ghost."

"To know the truth wouldn't help you in that task, sir," replied the miller grimly. "I can assure you that it's a story best forgotten. It's a long time ago," he repeated, "and it's such a dark business and one that no one knows the truth about, even now."

"There was an inquest, wasn't there?" said Mr. Delaunay, who was by no means prepared to relinquish this opportunity of finding out something about the dead Laura Sarelle. "This
young woman—the heiress to the whole estate, wasn’t she—died soon after?”

“You may leave it at that, sir.”

Lucius was inclined to laugh at this deep reserve.

“I understand the bottom of the whole business,” he smiled. “Sir John, as I’ve learnt from Sir Theodosius, and his younger brother were both determined to be very stoic and philosophical. They were sceptics in all religious matters and resolved to allow no touch of superstition to weaken them in their beliefs. I think that’s why they determined that Sir Theodosius and his sister should live at Leppard Hall. Although they must have known,” he added, drawing a shot at random, “that it was a sinister place.”

Richard Tampion looked sharply at the steward.

“They didn’t live there themselves, sir, you’ll notice. Both the old baronet and his brother were always away on one excuse or another. The younger had his estate in Jamaica, the elder was fond of travelling. And I heard say that that was why he never married. He said the Hall wasn’t a fit place to bring a woman to.”

“Now we seem to be coming to the heart of the matter,” said Lucius Delaunay. “Why wasn’t it a fit place to bring a woman to? You know, I’m inclined to agree with him. That’s why I’m sorry for Miss Laura, and even for her companion, Mrs. Sylk.”

“The maids don’t like staying at the place, though some of them are not aware of what took place there,” admitted the miller confidentially. “You notice, sir, that the girls are always changing, and then they’ll get fresh ones from Warwick or Rugby who don’t know anything about it. And then there’ll be a whisper, or a look, or a noise heard at night——”

“Are you telling me the place is haunted?” interrupted Lucius Delaunay. “You’d better tell me the whole tale and have done with it.”

But the miller seemed to think that he had already gone too far. Either from fear or honesty or from some ingrained taciturnity, for it seemed to have been impressed on both him and his father that they should be silent on this matter, he refused to say any more, and Lucius Delaunay had to turn away from the old mill unsatisfied.

‘I am becoming infected by this place,’ he thought, ‘making something monstrous out of nothing at all. What have I learned from that good man? Merely that there is a lot of
gossip and talk about something that happened in one's grandparents' time.'

He tried to reconstruct what possible stories of the dead Laura Sarelle there might have been. No doubt she was a nervous and sickly girl like the present bearer of the name. Sickly, that was, in her imagination, for he could not think of Laura Sarelle as suffering from any bodily malady; she seemed, indeed, to give out a radiant vitality.

Well, then, Miss Laura Sarelle in the year 1780 would be living in Leppard Hall. It must have been the same then as it was now, the façade would almost be new, for it had been put on by the sixth baronet in the middle years of the eighteenth century.

Would she have been living there alone? Delaunay puzzled over that. Sole heiress and mistress of the servants and the estate? It was not likely. She must, at least, even if she had been orphaned, and he did not know if that was so, have had a companion, a Mrs. Sylk. He smiled to himself, thinking of the two ladies in their eighteenth-century dresses in the house where Theodosius and Laura now lived. The furniture would be the same, and on the wall no doubt would hang the picture that Laura so disliked. It must have been painted when that Laura Sarelle was very young.

Had she gone to London for the sitting or had some journeyman painter—that was what the quality of the work seemed to indicate—come to Leppard Hall?

Then this cousin, who was he? Or was it even a man? Delaunay was not sure that he had heard the sex of the victim named. Indeed, it was only lately that he had begun to take an interest in the affair. Why had this cousin, male or female, taken the sleeping-draught? What was the malady that the drug was supposed to soothe, and how came it that the girl and not the victim himself or a servant had administered it?

And then an inquest—a rare thing in those days. Doctors, as Mr. Delaunay knew, were both ignorant and careless in the eighteenth century, and there must have been something glaring to arouse the suspicions of the local physician. And what had happened at the inquest?—something unpleasant, some prying into the privacy of the heiress of Leppard Hall, some hint, that she had, perhaps, been not only indiscreet but malicious?

And, when all was over, had she returned feeling blasted,
tainted, to that lonely sombre house and died? Of what? 'Like the ermine, from the first stain upon her snowy fleece,' thought Lucius, indulging his fancy. 'Or, in more practical common sense, as I have heard, from a consumption of the lungs, speeded, perhaps, by the damp of the water-meadows?'

And so she was the last of her line, and they laid her in the churchyard—now, why the churchyard and not the mausoleum? And why no kind of epitaph or text upon her grave? That, for the period, was certainly unusual. Still, she had died and been carried out to her grave and a distant cousin had inherited the Hall and the grounds, and all the estates and the plumbago and the coal mines as well.

And he had married in due course and had his two sons—the younger had taken on the Jamaica estate that had been for so long in the family, and the elder, Sir John, had inherited, also in due course, Leppard Hall. But neither he nor his father had lived there, nor had his younger brother. Yet there had been this charge upon these two young people to do so.

'This is, no doubt,' thought Mr. Delaunay, 'a fantastic family.'

And he worked it out in his mind that the three men who had evaded living, save for the briefest space, on the Warwickshire estate had, as it were, soothed their consciences by laying a charge upon the present generation to do so.

'Perhaps they think that whatever happened has been dispersed by now, as an evil vapour slowly disperses by the action of time. Perhaps they think that anything melancholy or sombre about the place will have worn off through the passage of the years. Of course, there would be a great pride in the place that had been in their hands for so long, they would want to keep up the continuity of the family. I believe there was a stern injunction on Sir Theodosius from his father, though I doubt if he'll carry it out. The whole tale leads one into some curious corners of the human mind and I shall be glad to be away from it all.'

... ...

The steward performed his other duties, routine and monotonous, and in the evening, instead of going as was his custom up to Leppard Hall for dinner, he went to his own house—the Dower House, that was on the opposite side of the Avon
and reached by a small Georgian bridge. This house was far too large for Mr. Delaunay’s use and he occupied but three rooms on the ground floor, the rest being shut up but kept aired and spotlessly clean by his good housekeeper, Mrs. Pettigrew.

In the apartments that he occupied he had put a good many of his own possessions. He came of as good a family as the Sarellas and had many relatives who were interested in him; therefore he did not lack for personal possessions of a certain value and richness, and the three rooms had been transformed into something far more pleasing, and in a way splendid, than the handsomely appointed rooms of Leppard Hall. Pictures, mirrors and carpets the steward had, with a lavish hand, arranged about the place, something to the resentment and even the sneers of Sir Theodosius. But that had been one of the understandings on which Mr. Delaunay had, rather reluctantly, taken up this post with his college friend—he must have his own possessions about him and, to a certain extent, lead his own life.

‘And I was a fool,’ he thought now, looking round the room that he had himself made pleasant, ‘to undertake this work. I thought I was a solitary and I’m not. I thought I was a keen classical scholar, and I’m not. I thought that I was fond of Theo, and I’m not. And I thought I was going to be quite indifferent to his sister, and I am not.’

He looked round at his books, the bright and agreeable portraits of his father and mother, the bowls of early flowers, brightly coloured tulips, daisies and roses that his housekeeper had arranged on the highly polished furniture.

He realized—how was it that all of a sudden he had come to all these sharp realizations?—that life at Leppard Hall had only been endurable because he had had this retreat to come to, that he had just put through and made tolerable his visits to Leppard Hall by the thought of this retreat, where often he had the acquaintances he had made in Rugby and Warwick to visit him, and where the neighbouring gentry called far more frequently than they did at Leppard Hall, where the pedantic young master discouraged all visitors.

He had been there two years. There would be a certain amount of trouble in packing his possessions and taking them on the rail and ship to Ireland. But it would have to be done and he would be glad when it was over.

To give himself a sense of support he took from his desk
the letters that his uncle had recently written to him, urging him to leave what seemed to be a paltry post and to rejoin his family and friends in Ireland. Though he had but little fortune he was not a pauper, his poverty was merely comparative to his rank.

His uncle urged marriage upon him, too, and mentioned the name of a lady whom he, Lucius, had once regarded with great admiration but whom he had never dared to approach owing to his lack of fortune. Now, reading her name, the young man felt cold towards her, she was but a pleasant memory, the perfume of a last year’s flower.

When his housekeeper, Mrs. Pettigrew, came in to set the cloth for his elegantly served meal the steward asked her suddenly, as he had asked Mr. Tampion, the miller, if she knew anything of the former history of the Sareles, and particularly of that of the last Laura Sarelle. And he outlined, as the woman stood attentive before him, all his reasons for putting these queries.

Her reply, given placidly enough, was that she knew nothing. She was a Londoner, and though she had been on the estate for some years she had only come there on her marriage. She had, it was true, questioned her husband on these very subjects herself—“but his mouth shut like a trap, sir, if you’ll believe me. It seems that everyone here is under some bond or pledge not to talk about the past. I think something very scandalous or disgraceful happened.” She lowered her voice discreetly. “The young lady, as I suppose, tried to run away with one who was much inferior to her in birth. She died of a broken heart when she was prevented.”

This commonplace episode was not in the least what Lucius Delaunay had expected. His curiosity was sharpened. He asked Mrs. Pettigrew if she could tell him of anybody likely to give him any information about the Sarelle family. It seemed ill-bred to pry into the secrets of Sir Theodosius behind his back, but he thought of Laura, her loneliness, her fear, her distress. Only by some knowledge of the past could he help her, then he checked that excuse.

“Who am I, to be thinking of helping Laura Sarelle when I am leaving the place, and leaving so soon?”

Indeed the suddenness of his departure seemed to him almost like a flight, yet he meant to help Laura, even from a distance. He would write to Theodosius, he would see if she had friends and relatives in London; he could wait on them
and tell them of the girl's plight. And how much easier it would be to present his case if he knew the grounds for her fear and distress! Yet there again there was confusion, because Laura herself did not know what was alarming and agitating her so profoundly.

'But I,' thought the young man, 'will find out.'

The housekeeper, pressed, suggested that the Reverend Nathaniel Mist, the vicar of the Church of St. Nicholas, which was the family church of the Sarelles and also of the neighbouring village, might be able to tell him something. . . .

'Of course,' reflected Lucius Delaunay, 'there will be records in the church, but nothing else. And I dare say the old man will be as tight as an oyster. It will be more difficult to deal with someone of education than with these country people. The Reverend Nathaniel Mist would know how to evade me. I wonder how long he has had the living. . . . He is an elderly man and seems retired to the point of moroseness.'

* * *

The following morning Lucius Delaunay, who had no particular business on hand, avoided the Hall and set out instead for the church. He went towards the path where his remembrance of his last meeting with Laura Sarelle was so clear that he could see her pale yellow-clad figure in front of him, and he met one of the men from Leppard Hall, who seemed to be returning from the village, making across the open parkland. This fellow stopped, and touching his hat respectfully asked the steward if he had heard of the illness of Miss Laura Sarelle.

"Sir Theodosius has been asking for you, sir, and I was coming up to the Dower House to see if you were there. He would like to see you as soon as you can get up to the Hall."

A curious sense of shock held Lucius Delaunay immobile. It was as if a long-expected calamity suddenly confronted him, but his breeding enabled him to pass the moment over with no more than a decorous show of alarm and sympathy.

He asked for details of Miss Laura's illness, but the man knew nothing save that Dr. Selby from Warwick had been sent for. He thought that the young lady had got chilled walking out late yesterday in the water-meadows.

"She had thin shoes and some kind of a fancy dress on, sir. Mrs. Sylk said that she got her feet damp. She's supposed to
be better this morning. They do say as she was light-headed last night.”

Lucius Delaunay considered rapidly: ‘If I go to Leppard Hall I shall not be able to see her. Theodosius will be agitated, even angry. Better to let some little time go by.’

So he said, “You may tell Sir Theodosius that I shall wait on him this afternoon,” and continued his way to the vicarage.

This was a low, grey stone house close to the churchyard, and the sombre melancholy of its outline was concealed by climbing roses, ivy and jasmine, and the garden was pleasant with the May flowers.

Martha Mist, the vicar’s wife, a dreary woman who seemed to have no direct contact with life and in whom no one was interested, was not yet out of bed. She suffered from some kind of unnamed complaint that kept her, in the genteel phrase, “confined to her chamber”. But Agnes, the comely maidservant, a little startled at seeing the handsome young steward in the doorway, as if she was not used to anything so vital and vivid in the drab house, said that her master would soon attend to Mr. Delaunay in the library.

In this shabby room the steward waited. He had seen the vicar only on formal occasions and knew little of him, though it had been necessary to go to church on Sundays and sometimes on other days as well; it had been necessary to endure the dull man’s tedious sermons, and his slow and lagging administration of the Anglican ritual.

There was something about the old house that was full of this same flat personality. In the room everything was worn and cheerless, the books on the shelves were all of the most commonplace nature; but Mr. Delaunay, kept waiting some while, had nothing better to do than to look at these volumes, mostly ecclesiastical works, sermons and dreary diatribes on obsolete points of theological doctrines.

But as he glanced round the shelves he saw a few calf-bound books and some old pamphlets loosely stitched together on the history of Warwickshire and Northampton. Thinking there might be some reference to the Sarelle family in these, he took one down at random and turned the pages. He found nothing to hold his attention save a rudely executed print of a handsome man whose face seemed to him faintly familiar. He studied this for some time, trying to fix the resemblance in his mind, but could not do so. His curiosity, how-
ever, was sufficiently quickened for him to glance at the opposite page of browning yellow print.

This contained an account of the execution of a certain Captain Avershaw in the county town of Warwick. The unfortunate man was spoken of as "an elegant gentleman entirely dressed in black, who had a flower in his mouth and bore himself with the greatest punctilio on the scaffold".

Glancing higher up the page, Lucius Delaunay read that the criminal had contrived to get hold of a basket of black cherries while in prison and had made several drawings on the wall of his cell that were allowed to possess considerable artistic merits.

The steward had got thus far in his reading when he heard the shuffling steps of the vicar, and not wishing to be caught, as it might seem to be, prying, he shut the book up and returned it to its place. The image of the man in the cheap engraving still, however, hung in his mind as if it were a bad copy of some face that he knew. Although there was no name on the plate he believed it to be a portrait of the unlucky Captain Avershaw, and it at once excited and repelled him because it was so unlike the face that one would suppose a murderer to possess; for his hasty glance had told him that Edward Avershaw had been hanged for murder. The features were gay and even noble, and the curled powdered hair, the nicely knotted cravat and brocade coat were the height of luxury, though they had the melancholy of an old fashion.

The Reverend Nathaniel greeted his visitor with an embarrassed attempt at cordiality that barely concealed his surprise at this visit.

"I hope, sir," he asked uneasily, "you've not come on behalf of Miss Laura—to summon me to the Hall I mean?"

Lucius Delaunay understood that the clergyman thought the girl was seriously ill, perhaps dying. He quickly, and with a touch of horror, disclaimed any such errand.

"I know very little about the illness of Miss Laura. It was sudden and not, I think, severe."

"You haven't been up to the Hall, then, to-day?"

"No, sir, I'm going this afternoon."

"Why, I should have thought, Mr. Delaunay, with this news, you would have been up there this morning to see what help you could be."

"Well, sir, it's a large household."

"But Sir Theodosius lacks friends. I was going there myself." The vicar glanced down at his slippered feet as if an-
noyed with his own inertia. "My wife, as you know, takes a
good deal of my attendance and my care, but I was certainly
going up to the Hall myself. It's an isolated place," he added,
scratching his chin, "and there are few neighbours."

"But Miss Laura's not seriously ill."

Lucius Delaunay, feeling that he had been rather remiss—
but how could he possibly explain to the vicar the cause of his
remissness?—repeated what the servant he had met on the
banks of the river had told him, that Miss Laura was in no
danger. "She's liable to these attacks, you know. She was out
yesterday in thin shoes, in a fanciful dress, that of an an-
estress, which she found in a chest."

The vicar gave him a sly look out of his dull eyes, took off
his spectacles, polished and replaced them. Then he said, in
a dry mumbling voice:

"Miss Laura was found in the river, close to the church.
My gardener and the sexton pulled her out. It's no use making
a secret of it, the whole village knows."

Lucius Delaunay had enough self-control to remain silent,
but the words that flashed through his mind were: 'So she
threw herself into the river a short time after I left her. . . . '

The vicar, looking away from the young man, continued
in his slow, stupid voice:

"It was an accident, of course. The river bank is very
slippery just there. As you say, she had those thin shoes on,
the soles were coated with sticky mud. She's a capricious
young lady. It was raining at the time—a foolish thing to be
out in those light clothes."

"A dangerous accident," agreed Mr. Delaunay quietly. "I
had no suspicion—from what Halston said—"

"Well, she might have died. I suppose the weeds and rub-
bish would have held her up for a while; it's very thick there,
you know, with undergrowth just underneath the churchyard.
But the sexton was passing and he called my gardener's boy
and they had her out in a trice. She swooned, but only from
shock, I think. We did what we could for her here and sent
up to the Hall, and Mrs. Sylk, the housekeeper, and her
brother came and took her back. I don't wonder she's ill.
If I were you, Mr. Delaunay, I should go and see Sir Theodo-
sius."

Then he added suddenly: "But I forgot! Of course you came
to ask me something. What is it? What can I do for you?"

Lucius Delaunay found his resolve quickened, not slack-
ened, by the shocking news he had just heard. He put his case
quickly, with well-chosen abrupt words, before the vicar, both in view of the state of Laura Sarelle’s health and his desire to know what was the history that consciously or unconsciously tormented her uneasy mind.

The vicar did not dismiss the matter as easily as had the miller and the housekeeper. He said very gravely:

“I’m afraid, Mr. Delaunay, I’m not at liberty to answer your question. It’s an old and it’s an ugly story, and all of us round here who are in any way connected with Leppard Hall are pledged not to repeat it. The idea of Sir John and of his brother, the father of Sir Theodosius, was always that the tale should be forgotten.”

“But you can’t, you know!” exclaimed Lucius with vehemence. “It comes up, like burying a strong thing alive in a shallow grave—it will start up again. It’s like trying to ignore a ghost, it must be laid——”

“Well, that sounds very superstitious sort of talk,” returned the vicar with a sickly smile. “I don’t know anything about hauntings or ghosts, there has never been anything so far as I know. And I’m inclined to believe that these old tragedies are best ignored. It’s true that none of the three first heirs of the cadet branch of the Sarelles lived at Leppard Hall; no doubt they had their reasons. But I think it was the idea of both Sir John and his brother that the tragedy, whatever it was, is worked out now and that the family ought to take up residence here in the old place again.”

“But they’re dead, all of them,” interrupted Lucius, “and I’m not concerned with them, sir, under your pardon.”

“Whom are you concerned with?” asked the vicar slowly. “With Miss Laura Sarelle?”

“Yes, with the girl, and in a sense with her brother, too. Oh, I am not emotionally involved,” smiled Mr. Delaunay. “In fact, I am leaving Sarelle. I think my life here is too easy and slothful. I have a more active turn than I thought I had. My relatives in Ireland want me also. They can find more energetic work for me. I might even go abroad. I’m not a man to stay in one place long.”

“You make a great ado to excuse yourself, sir,” replied the Reverend Nathaniel Mist. “I always wondered why a young man of your temperament remained at Leppard Hall. Well, though you’re going away, you want to do something for Miss Laura? But I don’t see that you can. And even if I were to tell you all the story I don’t see how it could help you. Mind you,
she knows nothing about it, so it can’t be that that’s making her melancholy or uneasy.”

“But she senses it. Don’t you understand? It’s about the Hall, something quite intangible, like a haunting, or a dream. I don’t care for the place myself. Of course, I’ve a great deal else to think about and work to do, and I absorb myself in my spare time in the Greek studies of Sir Theodosius, but I have felt it. And to an idle girl, shut up there all day, one can’t doubt when one listens to her, sir, of her sincere desire to escape. I think she ought to be helped.”

The vicar stretched out his chin and stroked it.

“Perhaps,” he said in a hesitating manner, “this illness will be an excuse. You should see Dr. Selby, or rather—what am I saying, you’ve not an authority. It would make mischief for you to interfere. I’ll see him myself. I’ll suggest that he urge Miss Laura is taken away. I suppose they’ve relatives somewhere?”

“Distant connections, I believe. Anyhow, friends could be found who would take the lady.”

“It’s a strange affair,” sighed the vicar, “a very strange affair indeed. If I were to tell you the whole tale you would realize how strange it is.”

“I’ve come here to urge you to tell me the whole tale, sir.”

“Well, you’re going away and I don’t see why you should concern yourself with it,” returned the vicar obstinately. “You won’t be able to help Miss Sarelle any better if I tell you the story of her ancestress. And it isn’t really her ancestress either; that other Laura Sarelle ended the first branch of the house. They are distant connections from Yorkshire, as I suppose you know.”

“Yes, I know all that,” replied Lucius Delaunay impatiently. “But I want to know what’s at the bottom of the business. Why the whole house, the mill, the home farm, even the fields, seem hateful, haunted. The girl feels it, I know, in every nerve. You wouldn’t want her to stay here until she was desperate and did herself a mischief, would you?” he asked direct.

He could see that the old man knew what he meant. Both of them were thinking of yesterday and the fantastically dressed figure that had slid through the alder and willow bushes into the turgid waters of the River Avon.

“No, it would be a shameful wrong,” agreed the vicar reluctantly. “Her brother’s a very strange young man, very
learned and precocious no doubt, and I sometimes wonder—” he added with a shrewdness that was unusual in him. “Of course there are matters one must not talk of or even hint at, but the family has always been eccentric.”

“Well,” said Lucius Delaunay, exasperated, “I suppose I can ride into Warwick or Rugby and buy some local history, some antiquarian pamphlet on the place and find out the story of that Laura Sarelle. And this mysterious cousin—was it a man or a woman?—who took an overdose of a sleeping-draught?”

“You may buy histories, but you’ll never get an account of that tale. The whole affair was too carefully hushed up, the family was far too powerful. It’s known only to a few people. There was an account of it published and I’ve a copy here”—he nodded towards the bookcase—“but there was only a small number of examples issued from the press and they were withdrawn.”

“Well, sir, will you lend me yours?” asked Lucius Delaunay eagerly.

“I should not think of doing so, my dear sir. And even if I were to it would not make any difference. You would not, as the saying goes, be able to put two and two together.”

“Can you, at least, tell me,” asked Lucius, “the identity of the person upon whom the inquest was held? Was the cousin male or female?”

“It was not a cousin at all,” replied the vicar, turning his fingers inward and looking down reflectively at his nails. “It was not that girl’s cousin—but her brother.”

“Her brother!” cried Lucius Delaunay, startled. “I did not know that there was a male heir at that time.”

“Yes, they were twins,” said the clergyman. He looked out through the rather dingy cotton curtains of the vicarage into the garden, full of striped pinks and rose bushes beginning to show small glossy leaves. “I know there is a confusion in the minds of most people. They believe that he died several years before. As I tell you, that part of the Sarelle history is kept purposely obscure.”

“I want to understand why,” insisted Lucius Delaunay.

“But, my dear sir, it is really no matter of yours,” said the clergyman. He looked up, and his pale face, which was slightly freckled, reminded the young man of the placid, sad, ugly countenance of a toad. “And I can’t say I know a good deal of it myself. I have never, you understand, gone into de-
tails. I consider that it would be disloyal to do so. But perhaps what I have told you will induce you not to pursue your investigations. There were twins—brother and sister, Laura and Theodosius—"

"Theodosius, too?" interrupted Lucius Delaunay. "The same name?"

"Yes, a very sickly young man, not destined, I think, in any case, to live long."

"And he died through the overdose of a sleeping-draught?"

"He died through taking the wrong medicine," said Mr. Nathaniel Mist, still gazing out of the window. "His sister was a very nervous creature and did not long survive the shock. I think we could leave the matter at that, Mr. Delaunay. I believe I can congratulate you on leaving Leppard Hall."

"You do not, sir, care for the place yourself?" asked the young man sharply, with narrowed eyes.

"I believe no one does. I don't know why I've endured it so long. At least, I do know, but I don't care to admit the reason even to myself." The shabby clergyman gave him a sideways look. "I'm an old man, and I mustn't pick and choose where I spend my last years. I'm not much of a scholar and nothing of a preacher. I do my routine work, that's all, and look after my poor sick wife. My children are scattered, you know, one in India, one in America. Well, well, one mustn't complain."

Lucius Delaunay thought that the old man was rambling in his speech and wished to make his escape. But while he was considering how he could do so courteously Nathaniel Mist came straight back to the point.

"I have rather an odd little library collected during my leisure moments. I've been interested in strange happenings, queer subjects like necromancy, and phantoms and haunt-
ings. I don't wish to talk about that now, but I might put one or two points before you, sir, that would perhaps help you to consider this case." He suddenly pointed a fat, pale finger at the young man. "Have you ever thought of this—the dreams of the dead?"

"Nay," replied Lucius, shaking his head. "It sounds hor-
rible. Impossible, too," he added impatiently.

"I don't know. Wasn't it our great poet, our Swan of Avon himself, who said 'in that sleep, what dreams come'? I sometimes think that this whole place is infected with the dreams of the dead, that they can project them into very powerful
forms, phantoms perhaps—whispers—suggestions. My wife," he added, "insists that she has seen these spectres, though I bid her be very cautious how she speaks of them."

'A sick woman's fancy,' thought Lucius, and he turned away towards the door, saying civilly:

'I suppose, sir, there are few old houses, or churches, or villages in the country that do not have their ghosts or phantoms. I confess I have no opinions on this point. I would be neither rashly sceptical nor blindly credulous. I came to you for some knowledge of the history of the Sarelles.'

"Don't inquire any further," warned the clergyman. "I have given you one or two hints. I think that Miss Laura should be taken away from Leppard Hall."

"I have no power to persuade Sir Theodosius," said Mr. Delaunay heavily.

"But you are his best friend. You help him not only to manage his estate but in his pastime, his classical studies that we all hear are so abstruse. Arrian, eh? A Stoic!"

"Still, I am not close in his intimacy. He is a strange young man, but my friend, therefore I must not discuss him. But I can tell you, sir, strange for his years."

Lucius Delaunay left the conversation at that, for the clergyman, though willing to ramble on about topics that interested him, for he was a lonely man and, given as solitaries are to inconsequent speech, was obviously not inclined to impart the information that Mr. Delaunay had come to gather.

As the steward passed into the passage, closing the door on his host, who did not accompany him, he saw the little maidservant, Agnes, a rustic girl hardly yet broken into the decorum of genteel service, standing by the newel-post and looking at him with shy intensity. As he closed the study door she came forward and, dropping a curtsy, whispered:

"Please, sir, the mistress would like to see you. She can't leave her room, but she begs that you'll come up."

In a voice that was full of curiosity and awe the girl, who was little more than a child, added in a hoarse whisper:

"She saw you, sir, come up the path. We don't often get a visitor. Will you please to come up?"

Mr. Delaunay was very doubtful about the tact, or even the propriety, of accepting this invitation. He had but seldom seen the clergyman's wife, and then always with a sensation of distaste. Besides, this visit, that seemed to have a clandestine air, might displease the vicar. But it was not in his good-
nquared heart to refuse the importunity of the child, who
looked a rather forlorn figure with her flat bosom, her dark
kerchief and her mob cap that was too large for her small
head.

“Very well, I will wait on your mistress with pleasure,” he
said, and followed the little maid up the winding and none too
clean stairs, for his trained eye observed the dust on the wood
that should have been clean and polished, the cobwebs that
hung high up on the plastered walls.

Martha Mist had prepared herself for this visitor. She was
wrapped in a large white shawl of intricate design and had
drawn over her untidy hair a large erection of old Malines
lace and black watered ribbon. Her hands, which seemed to
tremble with a perpetual ague, were encased in coarsely
knitted mittens and her feet were raised on a beaded stool.

As soon as the young man entered she motioned him, with
a nervous gesture, to a rush-bottomed chair that stood near,
sent the girl out of the room with a quick look and began
without preamble:

“Did you come here today to see my husband about Laura
Sarelle?”

“No, ma’am,” replied Mr. Delaunay, wondering how she
should have guessed at least something of the nature of his
errand, but resolved to put no material in the hands of a
woman who was probably loose-tongued and gossiping.

“I’m disappointed at your lack of candour,” returned
Martha Mist shortly. “I’m quite sure that you did come be-
cause of that. Is she very ill, is my husband wanted up at
Leppard Hall? Is he to attend her?”

“Indeed, ma’am,” replied the young man warmly, “nothing
of the kind. I came to see your husband on a matter of my
own, a little curiosity I had about some local history.”

“Well,” replied the sick woman with a peevish look, “if you
come to ask about the history of the Sarelles he won’t satisfy
you. Nathaniel will never tell you anything, nor will anyone
in this place. It took me years to find out the little I know.
When I first came here,” she added regretfully, “I was able to
get about. Before I had the paralysis. Of course, I found
everyone as if their lips had been locked. And all the records
destroyed too; even at Rugby and Warwick you couldn’t find
out anything.”

“What made you think,” interrupted Lucius Delaunay, who
was revolted at the prospect that his curiosity might be satis-
fied in this vulgar manner, "that there was anything to find out, madam?"

"The tombs," said Madam Mist promptly. "The stone in the church. I said to myself the moment I saw it, it's the queerest thing in the world for there not to be any text or any inscription. You know," and she laughed unpleasantly, "the usual list of Christian virtues, the hope of the Resurrection and all the rest of it. But nothing—nothing at all. And then I went to the mausoleum, and I saw all the tombs of the Sarelles there and I wondered why she wasn't with them. And I found out that Sir Theodosius, who was buried there, was her twin. They were twenty-four years of age and she survived him six months only. You know the mausoleum? Too near the house I think."

"It's an old story," said Lucius Delaunay, with an effort, "and I'm concerned, ma'am, with the living, not the dead."

"Ah," replied Martha Mist shrewdly, "but the dead affect us, don't they? We can't forget them, we can't get away from them. What is the good of despising the past? Doesn't it colour everything we do in the present? You know it does, sir."

"One's own past, perhaps," he admitted, thinking of many things that he would have wished undone, and many things that he rejoiced at in his own life.

"The past of other people, too," persisted the old woman. "Those Sarelles, now, they can't come and live at Leppard Hall and try to ignore everything that happened before. Why did the father, the uncle and the grandfather stay away? Two wouldn't bring their wives here and the other had no wife to bring. I think Laura Sarelle's the first woman to live there since her namesake was carried out feet first, sixty years or so ago."

"That's an unpleasant thought, ma'am," said the young man warmly. "Miss Laura doesn't realize that, I'm sure. She shouldn't be reminded of it."

"She realizes something," insisted the clergyman's wife with spite and malice; "she was pulled out of the river, close by here, at the bottom of our garden where it abuts on the churchyard, yesterday."

"I know. She was wearing thin, fancy shoes—she slipped and fell." Lucius Delaunay was angry with himself, angry with the woman; he felt he had been trapped into a disloyalty to the Sarelles, and in particular to Laura.

But Nathaniel Mist's wife laughed on a harsh note.
“She threw herself in, of course, poor fool! She’s haunted. She came to see me once or twice. She explained her pains and tribulations. Of course, my mouth was closed, I wasn’t going to be the one to start spreading anything. Let her, I thought, find out for herself.”

The woman went on talking in a loose, vindictive style, her head and her hands slightly shaking with the palsy that afflicted her. Lucius Delaunay was thinking hotly: ‘So everyone will believe, and I suppose it is the truth. After she parted from me the poor girl did throw herself into the river. She ought to be taken away, and there’s no one to rescue her but myself.’

“I could tell you a few things about the Sarelles,” the thin, acid voice of the vicar’s wife penetrated his heated, hurrying thoughts; “perhaps you could make sense of them. I’m bedridden now, but if I could get about a bit I think I could find out some things.”

“There’s nothing I wish to know, ma’am,” said Mr. Delaunay. “I am delighted to find you in such excellent health. I will not intrude my company upon you any longer.”

And he was gone swiftly through the garden with the pinks, the budding roses, the stocks and wallflowers, while the little maid ran to the door and gaped after him, and Nathaniel Mist came heavily on his lumbering, gouty feet to the study window and stared after him, and the clergyman’s wife dragged her wheeled chair along also to the window and drew aside the dimity curtains and gazed down as if he were an object of fearful curiosity.

The steward skirted the churchyard, with its huddled, crowded lichen-covered graves where the humble folk lay neglected, grey and gold mosses obliterating their names and dates, and looked at the trodden weeds and trash on the slippery mud of the river bank where last night the sexton and the vicar’s gardener had pulled Laura Sarelle in her dragged finery from the slow river.

He was aware that the Mists were staring after him, from the quay parsonage, but he did not intend to be intimidated by what he felt to be their malicious curiosity.

The dreams of the dead! He wished the vicar had not spoken those words, they had an ugly sound.

He turned across the humped churchyard instead of going direct back to Leppard Hall and walked between the pollarded limes that formed an avenue from the river to the
church. He had often glanced casually and with but a faint interest at the white marble mural tablet which the vicar’s wife had called “the tombstone” of Laura Sarelle.

Now Lucius Delaunay wanted to look at it again, with some distracted idea that it might afford some clue to the identity of the person whom it commemorated. There was a certain potency in the thought that her grave was so near the house where she had lived, it was but a short walk from the room where her portrait hung to the church where this tablet bore her name, the date of her birth and death and nothing more.

Why had she not been buried in the mausoleum beside her twin brother? Perhaps by her own desire she lay in the cool, remote shadows of the church, not in that grey lonely charnel-house by the river bend.

It was a small church, the atmosphere damp and musty, badly kept, too: there was dust on the faded cushions in the pews, the brass lectern was dim for lack of polish, the altar furnishings were shabby, cobwebs darkened the dirty glass of the cracked windows. Sir Theodosius, who attended the services as seldom as possible and would not have attended them at all had not decorum obliged him to do so, was not generous in his contributions towards its support, and the living was poor, while the people of Leppard village shared their pastor’s slothful indifference towards religion as typified by the Anglican Church.

Lucius Delaunay paused before the mural tablet. It was of fine white Italian marble and therefore had a ghastly whiteness in the dim greenish shadows and was for that reason livid and ugly. The name “Laura Sarelle”, and the dates were well cut in graceful lettering and Lucius Delaunay observed what he had never noticed before: that underneath in low bas-relief were two boughs of laurel, the stems crossing, the leaves and berries pointing upwards around the name and date. Had Laura spoken of this and he forgotten?

He supposed that this design was in the nature of a rebus, as was the branch of laurel that the lady held in her hand in the portrait, but the date was late for this mediaeval practice and did not seem to him to be, somehow, in the best of taste; why, he could not have told. But it seemed to him that they who were buried in Christian churches should have some Christian text to grace and sanctify their memorial, and this might well have been a heathen decoration.

Lucius walked round the shabby, dim-lit church, trying to
compose his thoughts and to strengthen his resolution, that had been taken while Madam Mist had been speaking to him. He was not a man to do anything hastily or impulsively. At twenty-eight years of age his character was formed and he had made up his mind on all the important questions that were likely to come his way. But neither was he a man to go back on something that had been decided in a moment of impulsive generosity, of ardent feeling, for his nature was both magnanimous and romantic.

He glanced up at the funeral escutcheons of the Sarelles that hung above the short, thick Norman pillars. The elaborate coats-of-arms repeated in the various black-and-white lozenges, white on the right hand if it was a husband who lamented a wife, white on the left hand if it was a wife who lamented her husband. That of Laura Sarelle was all white and that of Theodosius, her brother, all black—unmarried, then, both of them. Beneath were the mottoes, written in heavy letters, and coming, as he thought, mockingly, in that place—"We live in one another."

Like most of these old mottoes, it was so mutilated that it had no meaning, yet he knew that the Sarelles had borne it for generations with some pride and had even got a certain satisfaction out of the fact that it was in English, not, as usual, Latin.

The Sarelle arms most familiar to Lúcius, though not ostentatiously displayed at the Hall, appeared again and again in these hatchments quartered with those of heiresses whom the Sarelles had married, and that they had for a generation at a time used.

These arms were unusual, and seemed now to the young man who studied them to have a melancholy significance: _qu. a fesse or, between three goshawks displayed, az. guttée du larmes._

The knight's belt on the red shield, the three birds of prey, keen and cruel, and the azure tears dropping down.

Lúcius walked again round the church, so dusty and neglected; Sir Theo, for all his pride of family, had not even concerned himself to attend to the ancient Sarelle chantry, or the tombs of his armoured ancestors, with their pointed mail-clad feet resting on the stiff backs of the three goshawks, and the tears cut on the shields placed round the stone bases of the tombs.

Grey with dust was the tilting helm, hung high over one of
these tombs; all the Sarelles had been buried here until the early years of the eighteenth century, when a Sir Theodosius Sarelle, returning from Italy, had built on a classic model the grey mausoleum that had seemed so elegant and modish at the time, but which now seemed so gloomy and dreary.

Lucius paused again before the funeral hatchment of Laura Sarelle where the quarterings showed dimly on the dingy white of the lozenge, and his anxious yet preoccupied glance traced the motto.

"We live in one another." Idly, as men will when their thoughts are deeply troubled, he repeated the words; then the meaning came to him with a dismal shock. They might be interpreted as meaning that one generation would live on in another . . . yet how fantastic was the supposition that the dead Laura Sarelle might be haunting the living bearer of her name! . . .

Lucius Delaunay quickly left the church. There were now no prying eyes at the vicarage, the curtains hung limp at the black windows, in the neglected garden the river wind was blowing the pinks, the stocks, the wallflowers.

He averted his eyes from the trampled earth that showed where Laura had slipped into the river and been dragged out last night and hastened along the path set with lush thyme, parsley, and mint, where he had followed her in her pale-yellow gown, and went directly to Leppard Hall, and directly to the rich library where he hoped to find Sir Theodosius; and the young baronet was there in his usual chair. Dr. Selby had just left him, he was in an angry mood and he greeted his steward curtly, not rising.

"I hope," he began at once, "you have reconsidered your decision, but you understand that now, in my present trouble, I cannot possibly dispense with your——" he seemed about to finish the phrase in a conventional way and say "services", but changed his mind ungraciously and added, "friendship."

"I hope you will not have to dispense with my friendship, Theo," replied Lucius quietly. "But I have not changed my mind about leaving Leppard Hall. First, how is Laura's health?"

"Laura is much restored; it was nothing but the prank of a foolish girl. I suppose she wanted to attract attention to herself, to become a melodramatic or romantical figure."

Lucius Delaunay interrupted sternly.
"You do not think, do you, Theo, that she threw herself in the river?"

"Threw herself in! No, of course not! I think that she wetted her feet and her skirts and then set up an outcry to attract attention. Of course, you may be sure that before she put herself in the least danger she was quite aware that the sexton was in the graveyard and the gardener outside the vicarage."

"I do not think she was," replied Lucius quietly. "I do not think she knew of anything that was about her. Besides, the dusk was falling, it would not have been very easy for her to see them, though they, on the height above, could easily have observed her. No, you can imagine the two men, grey like the tombstones and trees in their drab clothes, would not have been very noticeable, but she, in that extravagant pale dress——"

"What are you talking about?" interrupted the baronet angrily. "It seems to me, Lucius, as if you, too, were infected by Laura’s nonsense. Dr. Selby tells me that I’m liable to have a deal of trouble with her. She needs very firm handling. Of course, those clothes have been taken away from her. I’ve given orders to have all the things that were found in the great bedchamber destroyed. None of them was of any value, except a small miniature,” he added, “which I shall send to London to be appraised."

"You will not do much good by destroying those things, whether they were of value or not; the past has too strong a grip on Laura for you so easily to absolve her from its spell."

"You’re talking in a strange and, as I think, ridiculous manner, Lucius.” Sir Theo sat in an exhausted attitude in his great chair, resting his elbow on his handsome desk, his thin face in his thin hands. "What have we to do with the past?"

Lucius recalled the words of the vicar’s wife; she was a foolish woman, but she had spoken the truth there, he knew.

"You cannot get away from it, Theo, especially in an old place like Leppard Hall. You’re living in those dead people’s house, using their furniture, sleeping in their beds, with their portraits hanging on your walls. Everything you spend or have was theirs, or earned by them, or left by them. Their graves are only a few yards away, and there is some story about them that you very carefully conceal. That’s a mistake, you know, Theodosius, you should bring it up into the daylight."

"There’s no story!” declared the baronet angrily, glancing
up. "I've told you again and again, it is a small nucleus of unhappy facts only on which all this gossip is founded."

"You never told me," returned Lucius swiftly, "that it was not a cousin of that first Laura Sarelle on whose body the inquest was held, but a brother."

The young baronet rose at once; his face was blotched, his dry lips drawn back from his teeth. Lucius Delaunay was startled by the ugly transformation to raw passion so seldom seen on a human face.

"For God's sake, Theodosius!" he exclaimed, and the force of the exclamation caused the baronet to compose himself. He drew out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. Then he got out, with a painfully obvious effort at control, these accusing words:

"You have been spying. You've been going round among my people trying to find out things. I thought it was understood that nothing of this kind was to be done."

"You seem to have made it fairly well understood," replied Lucius hotly. "Nobody will talk. That's what makes what is probably quite an ordinary story into something monstrous—the very silence of your tenantry, of the vicar and his wife, everyone whom one meets, gives this place a haunted air and ill repute. Why? If there was nothing to conceal everyone would be open."

"When you came into my employment," said Sir Theodosius, with an ugly stress on the last word, "I think I warned you, Lucius, that I would have no talk about my family."

"If you did, I forgot, I took the matter casually. I did not know then how it was going to affect me, or Laura."

"You had better, sir, leave my sister Laura out of the conversation. You are taking, it seems to me, too deep an interest in her and her whimsies."

"You'll understand my interest," replied Lucius Delaunay in a steadier tone, "when I tell you that I have come to ask you for her hand in marriage."

If Sir Theodosius had looked livid before, he now turned a countenance that expressed nothing but evil on the young man who spoke, and Lucius, seeing and almost shrinking from that dark and ugly look, exclaimed:

"Don't speak, Theo, till you have thought a little! Don't say anything that I must resent."

Sir Theodosius put his thin white hand over his eyes and Lucius saw the finger-tips press into the flesh of the cheeks. He
wondered even at that moment why the young man was so deeply moved at what perhaps was a most unexpected and even an unwelcome proposal, but that could not, surely, be the cause of so much anger and discomfiture.

He began, more to gain time and allow them both to control themselves than in the hope that his words would have any effect, to explain himself. His family was good, he was not a pauper, he had relations who would help him and many offers of employment; he did not believe that Laura cared much for luxury. He wished to marry her immediately and take her away from Leppard Hall, to Ireland, where his relatives—and there were many pleasant women among them—would cherish her and give her all that brightness and pleasure in her life that she had lacked.

When he had finished it was plain that Sir Theodosius had again complete command of himself. He took his hand down from his eyes and said in a hard voice:

“I suppose you know how much dowry she has?”

“I do not, and I do not expect more than a reasonable sum that shall be settled on her, and her only, and spent on her, and her only, as a marriage portion. I’m well able to support my wife—yes, and my children also—in an honourable position.”

“You’re talking great nonsense, Lucius. I am following out my father’s plan with regard to Laura. She is to make a marriage that will increase the prestige of the family. I thought I had made that clear to you before. And she is not to marry at the age of nineteen years. I will not even think of such a thing until she is of age. You know that she is unable to contract a marriage without my consent, and I absolutely refuse it.”

“You are very sharp. I should have thought you knew me too well, Theodosius, to speak to me thus abruptly. Why should you use your sister so cruelly?”

“And why should you dare, so suddenly and unexpectedly, to ask for her hand? How I have been deceived!” And again Sir Theodosius’ passion almost escaped his control. “I’ve allowed you to see her without supervision, you have come freely into this house, and all the time behind my back you—a man many years older than she is—were insinuating yourself into her good graces, turning her romantical head.”

“No love passages whatever have passed between me and Laura,” interrupted Lucius Delaunay firmly. “It is only lately
that I have come to understand the deep regard in which I hold her."

"Have you told her of that same regard?" sneered the baronet. "Have you persuaded her on some moonlit night to pledge some foolish schoolgirl vows to you?"

Lucius Delaunay kept his temper. He had expected the interview to be an unpleasant one, though he had not been prepared for quite such insolence and violence on the part of Theodosius. He said quietly:

"I tell you nothing has passed between me and Laura. She is, as you have reminded me, very young. I think she may come to care for me, I think I can make her happy. Better leave it at that. I have made my offer as you are her guardian, as again you have reminded me. You cannot control her heart or her feelings, and if you refuse her to me I would warn you that you keep her here at your peril."

"My peril?" Theodosius repeated softly, and with a look, Delaunay thought, of fear.

"I mean peril to your own conscience, for I think that she may become a very sick woman, perhaps a half-crazed woman, if you subject her to these influences that are at work here."

"You are talking like someone who is crazed yourself," retorted the baronet hotly. "What influences? Are you going to pretend that you have seen spectres or phantoms, that you have heard ghosts shrieking?"

"It is you who are talking nonsense," replied Lucius, with an air of contempt. "I thought that your mind was finer than that, Theo, your spirit more alert. What do you think is going on in this old house? You affect to despise the past, but what of those?"—he pointed to the books piled up on the floor and desk. "Do you not bury yourself in the past when you read your stoics? You will not tell me the story of your family, of your ancestor, you will not tell Laura. But she will find out, and then perhaps it will be the worse for both of you."

"So you threaten me! You will leave the Hall, Lucius, never to enter it again. You will remove your property from the Dower House as quickly as you can, and while it is being removed you will take lodgings in Warwick or Rugby—or in Hell for all I care. You have proved a traitor to me; because I thought you sober and steadfast, because I thought you spent your leisure in learning instead of with drink or women, or games, or racing, I allowed you here. I picked you very care-
fully for this post, Lucius. I was not unmindful of the fact that I had a young and romantic sister.”

He rose and moved with a threatening step towards Lucius, and that young man, standing his ground, thought curiously: ‘It is not so many years ago we should have fought a duel on this, and one, or perhaps both of us, would have been slain.’

He tried to reason with the angry man.

“Is there any need for this violence, Theodosius? I think I have served you well.”

“What monies I owe you,” said the young baronet, “will be sent to your bankers. I wish to have no communication with you. And if I see you in the grounds of Leppard Hall my keepers will turn you off as if you were a vagabond.”

Lucius Delaunay smiled sadly.

“You talk of Laura being romantic. You are ranting like a play-actor. Doing it, I think, to hide an uneasy conscience, Theodosius. Well, there is nothing for me to do but go. When Laura is of age and her own mistress perhaps I shall seek her acquaintance again.”

“I should have thought, sir, that if you had a sparkle of pride you would have been gone by now.”

“I have not so much pride but that I ask that I may say good-bye to Laura, and in your presence if you will. But I should beg that it might be in that of Mrs. Sylk only.”

“In the presence of no one! The girl is ill and I do not doubt that it is your insinuating tongue that has put all these childish notions into her head. You shall not see her! All her letters will be intercepted; if you try to write your epistles will fall into my hands.”

“All this,” said Lucius Delaunay at the door, very pale, his lips pressed together between his speech and his eyes narrowed, “seems to me almost incredible. I never liked you very much, Theodosius, though I tried to persuade myself into the attitude of your friend. I tried to think of you even as a benefactor, but I did not realize, what is revealed now, the kind of man you are.”

The young baronet still standing by the desk gave him a glance of bitter hatred and contempt, and Lucius Delaunay left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

For a moment he stood in the corridor, trying to control himself in order that he might behave both with dignity and prudence. He scarcely felt humiliated by the insults of one who was, in everything, his inferior, save in the detail of
wealth, but he was bewildered, stung, as a man might be who has been struck suddenly by one whom he thought, if not his friend, at least just and honourable.

Lucius had not hoped for much success from the interview, but he had supposed that Sir Theodosius might give some grudging consent to a continued friendship with Laura, that he might allow that, if no better suitor came along, she might one day marry Lucius Delaunay. . . . Theo had never asked, that hard, narrow boy, how Laura’s heart was set.

‘And how is it?’ thought the young man, looking up the wide, shallow, silent staircase that led to the girl’s room. ‘Was it but the dewy vision of youth, but the fancy of her opening years, that made her turn to me yesterday? I hope it was no more, and yet indeed I have long felt, I believe now, as secretly towards her as perhaps she has long been drawn towards me.’

Lucius raised his hand and let it fall. ‘Alas! Dream or reality, it is over.’

He was quite powerless. Sir Theodosius had the authority to turn him, as he had turned him, out of his house and estate like a dog. ‘There’ll be some talk, some scandal, especially coming on top of poor Laura’s accident, I can best serve her by going quietly and with a casual air.’

And he thought as he left the Hall that he would make up some tale of his relative in Ireland and a sudden call home, while some excuse must be given for his instant vacation of the Dower House and his residence in Warwick.

When he reached the middle of the drive he looked back at Leppard Hall. The grey straight façade of the house seemed to him monstrous, as if it blotted out all the peace of the sky, all the tranquil beauty of the landscape. And yet, on a second look, there was neither beauty nor peace in either sky or landscape, all was veiled by a sullen and sinister mist; all was silent, yet, to the young man’s excited imagination, full of expectancy, as if the stage were set for some ghastly drama.

The past was indeed impinging upon the present, and across those parkland slopes he seemed to see moving forward the figures that had once played some dismal tragedy in this melancholy scene.

What were they like—those twin brother and sister, that other Theodosius and Laura? Was the unknown portrait that had excited Laura Sarelle’s intense dislike that of the former Sir Theodosius? Lucius Delaunay did not think so; there was
no family likeness to his companion in that alert and vivid face. Besides, it was that of a man of at least thirty years of age and one who was robust, whereas that Theodosius Sarelle had died young and was of a sickly habit.

Lucius Delaunay returned to the Dower House. He was perplexed and vexed; he was sorry that he had no better knowledge of human nature than to approach Sir Theodosius with a straightforward proposal for his sister's hand. It would have been better to have been a little crafty, to have waited, to have sounded the girl's mind and heart a little further, to have induced her brother to allow her to come to London and then to have an opportunity for her better acquaintance, and so to have won her over. . . . He paused at this part of his reflections; there was no need to win her over. Had she not offered herself with sweet, half-unconscious surrender but yesterday? And he had put her by and allowed her to run from him, and in her despair and her melancholy loneliness she had cast herself into the river beneath the churchyard. It was because he had been aware of that that he had gone to her brother with his request.

It was impossible for his honourable and open nature to have taken advantage of what was perhaps a passing, girlish caprice and to have married the heiress without her brother's consent. Besides, and here again he pulled himself up, he could not have married Laura without Theodosius' consent, since her brother was her legal guardian until she was twenty-one years of age.

It would have been better, however, to have been cautious and prudent and to have waited, and begged Laura to wait too, since he was above the mean fear of being considered a fortune-hunter; he was quite prepared—and believed that Laura would be also—as he had assured the young baronet, to give up her dowry, save a small portion that for her own safety should be settled on herself. Yes, they should have waited, got to know each other better, consolidated, as it were, their affections, which, he believed, on his part would have bloomed into a deep love.

Now his precipitate action had destroyed all those hopes, and he must either endeavour to beguile the girl into leaving her guardian and her home or abandon her to whatever dreary fate was in store.

Lucius tried, as he put his few necessities together in his valise and told his manservant to saddle the horses, for they
were riding into Warwick at once, to persuade himself that Laura would forget him. He knew how often young love vanished, quickly as the golden bloom on a butterfly's wing when June is past.

'In two years' time,' he tried to console himself, 'when she has her freedom she will have forgotten me. And then, I suppose, perhaps this young fool will relent and allow her to go to London, or even Paris or Vienna. And there she'll meet suitors enough.'

He wondered quite how much money she had, for he had never troubled to inquire. She had said something in the train that day they had come back from London—a hundred thousand pounds, he believed. He did not know if she had spoken the truth. Anyhow, it was clear that she was the heiress to a very considerable fortune and therefore would not lack pretenders to her hand. And she was lovely, in a strange and sad fashion—lovely.

He wondered if Sir Theodosius himself would marry. It seemed unlikely. The black-browed young man was a born celibate. Who would he get now to help him with his books and estates? There would be candidates enough for both offices.

In the twilight of that day Lucius Delaunay and his servant rode into Warwick and put up at the hostelry near the Castle—the **Bear and Ragged Staff**.

* * *

That evening he waited on Dr. Selby, chancing by luck to find the physician at home, and without telling him any of his own circumstances asked him directly of the condition of Miss Laura Sarelle. The other looked at him queerly as if questioning his right to question him. He had no doubt, Lucius thought, heard something of the tale already. But he was a good-natured, just-minded man and did not seem disposed to be unduly loyal to the young baronet. He said that he thought the young lady had received some severe shock. She had, he thought, barely escaped a brain-fever. Oh, she was now out of danger; he had just returned from Leppard Hall. She had been given a strong sedative... 

Lucius interrupted: "Brain-fever?"

"Well, she was raving last night. She had strong fits of delirium. She declared that a young girl, in every way like
herself, was by her side, encouraging her to something dreadful—self-destruction, I suppose. She should, of course, be taken away from that old house. Why, I don't believe," added Dr. Selby with emphasis, "they've changed a single piece of furniture since my grandfather's day. He was the physician who attended that other Laura Sarelle. But there is a story there, as I dare say you know, that's not to be told."

"I'm going away," replied Lucius Delaunay heavily. "Perhaps it's better that I should know nothing. But if you think fit, tell me. If I can help—"

"Laura Sarelle?" interrupted the doctor shrewdly. "Is that, sir, what you mean?"

"Yes. But while she is under her brother's guardianship I feel powerless."

"Is it impossible for you to remain in your employment?"

"Quite impossible. Pray ask no more on that point."

"Then, sir, if you must go away, I see no reason in telling you what I might chance to know of an old story."

"I hope to renew my acquaintance with Miss Sarelle when she is free—of age."

"Two years is a long time."

"So I have thought," answered Lucius, raising his bright glance frankly. "Therefore I was inclined to leave—even without a question or a demur—yet I was anxious, too, and so could not forbear coming to you."

Dr. Selby seemed gratified by this candour, but remained cautious; his family had had a long connection with Leppard Hall, but Miss Laura he had known for two years only, and he could scarcely undertake to pronounce upon her case. He thought that she enjoyed bodily health and had shown but little signs of nervous disturbances until she came to Leppard Hall, though he had heard that she had always been what her guardians termed wilful and passionate.

"I suppose, like most young ladies, she had her fill of novels and romantic tales, and so was keen to know the story of that old house, especially as she soon discovered both the grave and the portrait of her namesake. Then," added the physician, labouring carefully at his explanation, "there was the atmosphere of the house, nothing changed for two generations or more, save in the smallest details; the great chamber, as they call the marriage-room on the first floor, locked up, with that chest of clothes within——"
"She should never have been exposed to this," said Lucius Delaunay sternly.

"Yet you must allow, sir, that she made a good deal about very little. The principal bedchambers, as you well know, of these fine mansions are never used save on the marriage of the master, and it is common enough to preserve old portraits and old costumes."

Yes, so it seemed now to Lucius Delaunay when he looked round the comfortable room of the country doctor, with the beau pots of tulips and daisies, the shining furniture, the well-swept hearth, the prints of English worthies on the panelled walls—common enough—yet there was something behind that was not so common.

"Why should all this have so wrought on Miss Sarelle?" he asked gravely.

Dr. Selby glanced at him quizzically and did not remind him that he had agreed, obliquely at least, to leave Warwickshire with the story of the Sarelles untold.

"She was lonely, Mr. Delaunay, melancholy at being in the country, she began to dream——"

"To dream——"

"Yes—when she first came here. Mrs. Sylko consulted me about that. One can understand how her state of mind came about—until some shock"—he paused deliberately—"sent her headlong on an attempt to escape, from I scarcely know what, some destiny that she fears. Of course it is all fanciful and this illness may be the end of it——"

While Dr. Selby was speaking, Lucius Delaunay was considering, most earnestly, if Laura had indeed made the attempt on her life for this reason or because she believed that he had repulsed the passionate affection she had been surprised into offering him—surprised by the news of his departure. Or was Sir Theodosius correct—that Laura had but made the petulant gesture of a romantic girl, chagrined and disappointed, intending to do no more than "wet her feet"?

Dr. Selby had been closely absorbing the young man's handsome, clouded face.

"I don't deny," he added, "that they are odd people—Sir Theodosius will become very eccentric if he don't change his way of life, and Miss Laura will always be excitable."

'Is he trying to tell me,' thought Lucius, 'that there is insanity in the family? The last baronet was a recluse and little is known of him—or of this Yorkshire branch.'
Aloud he said:
"I can do nothing. Try to persuade Sir Theo to let his sister go away. As for this old story——"

"Don't make too much of that," advised Dr. Selby. "It is very obscure and should not be given much importance. Once Miss Laura leaves the place she will forget all about it, I do not doubt——"

'And forget me also, I suppose,' thought Lucius Delaunay. 'I'm infected by her fanciful follies to think otherwise.'

He left, with many compliments, the courteous physician and returned to the Bear and Ragged Staff. As he went into the parlour to speak to his manservant he noticed, what he had noticed before on his visits to the old inn, a heavy gold-handled riding-crop in a glass case over the long mantelpiece. It had always been as indifferent to him as were the stuffed birds and fishes that cumbered the walls; he had vaguely supposed that the trophy had belonged to some notable Nimrod, now he glanced at it with a sudden heightened, almost sharp interest. But quickly, like one conscious of a folly, he put it out of his mind, and addressed himself to the business in hand, that of his removal from the Dower House and the neighbourhood of Laura Sarelle.
PART TWO

Sir Theodosius Sarelle, with the air of a reserved man who tries to be fluent upon an important matter, explained the situation to Mr. Spryce.

The lawyer listened with some diffidence. He was aware that there was an attempt on the young baronet's part to persuade him to conclusions of which he did not, and could not, altogether approve. At the same time he knew that he was powerless to offer anything but advice, and also aware that this same advice was likely to be very ill received.

So he sat silent in his dingy, drab Lincoln's Inn office, his fat hands spread out upon his fat knees and his dim spectacled eyes fixed firmly upon the pale square of the window.

It was a windy day in October, and Mr. Spryce seemed to be counting mechanically the bright gold and tarnished brown of the motionless leaves of the trees in the Square, that appeared to be painted on a pale-blue sky.

"I intend," the baronet was saying, "to accept the offer." And as if weary of his own long and pedantic discourse in which he had striven to make his position and his difficulties clear to the lawyer and to satisfy his own conscience, he added impatiently: "Laura has been an intolerable burden for the last eighteen months. I must, somehow, make a settlement for her."

"It will not be so very long," the lawyer suggested, "before she is of age and may take her affairs into her own hands."

Sir Theodosius made a gesture of contempt.

"Do you think that another six months is going to make any difference to Laura's character? She will be exactly the same —moody, whimsical, impossible. Pray do not suppose," he continued, in quick self-defence, "that I have been in any way unreasonable. When Selby suggested that she should have a change of air, that she should leave Leppard Hall—well, I allowed her to do so. She and Mrs. Sylk went to London and to
Cheltenham. I looked up such friends and relatives as we had and begged them to entertain her. But nothing was of any use. In confidence, you know what it is that ails her—a lovesick fancy for that Irish adventurer."

"So you told me before, Sir Theodosius," replied the lawyer dryly, not altogether caring for this description of Lucius DeLaunay, whom he had highly regarded, and he added: "They have not seen each other, I suppose? Mr. DeLaunay is still in Ireland?"

"Yes," replied Sir Theodosius, with a violence unusual to his quiet self-control; "and may he stay there, and rot there."

"I thought, sir, he was once a friend of yours?"

"He played the traitor in my establishment. He is to blame for Laura's state of mind—"

Mr. Spryce interrupted.

"That may or may not be so, Sir Theodosius. You remember that before she met Mr. DeLaunay, when she was a schoolgirl, there were these same complaints about her wilful disposition. Well, you were informing me that you had accepted Mr. Harry Mostyn's proposal for her hand and that she is agreeable, and the wedding is to be fixed for an early date."

"That is what I came to tell you." A touch of uneasiness was noticeable, the lawyer observed, in the baronet's manner. He seemed not altogether pleased with his own decision, but rather as if it were one into which he had been forced against his will. "I like Mostyn, there's nothing against him, and a good deal for him."

"What, precisely, are his merits? Since you ask my advice, I must have all the details of the situation before I can give it." Mr. Spryce smiled in an attempt at geniality. He did not like Sir Theodosius, but he wished to keep on good terms with him; the lawyer was, deep under his professional callousness, fond of Laura Sarelle and sorry for her, and his wife, unimaginative and dull little woman as she was, had often pointed out to him with some warmth the unenviable situation in which the orphan girl stood with so grim and precocious a brother as a guardian.

"Mostyn's advantages," replied the baronet, who seemed glad to relate them for his own sake as well as for that of his hearer, "are, as I think I mentioned, that he's a connection of mine—a second cousin of my mother's. And he is willing,
when he marries Laura, to take the name and arms by royal licence."

"Surely it is rather impulsive of you to rule out all question of a marriage for yourself, Sir Theodosius?"

"If I do marry, and it is not likely, then of course Mostyn can retain his own name if he wishes. But I have consulted several physicians lately, whose names would be well known to you," added the baronet with acid grimness, "and my health is not good. Neither does family life appeal to me. I have, I suppose, the temperament of a scholar and a recluse. All I ask for is what I have not yet been able to obtain—tranquillity."

"And you think, sir, you will obtain it by this marriage of your sister Laura with Harry Mostyn?"

"I think so. She seems very amenable, she's agreed to everything. As I say, he will assume the name, and he will take over Leppard Hall and the estates. He will undertake not to change anything."

"The family of Mostyn is known in Jamaica?" asked Mr. Spryce cautiously.

"Yes, they had a large estate there, the neighbouring penn to my father's. That is how the families became acquainted. It is a well-known name there—a Mostyn was a governor about sixty years ago. And they made a big fortune out of sugar."

"Invested wisely, I hope?" commented the lawyer.

"Oh yes, Mostyn puts up a good appearance. He's hired a handsome house near Hyde Park. I think he'll sell out in Jamaica now, as we did, and settle down over here."

"Won't he buy an estate of his own, or does he intend to absorb himself entirely in that of Miss Laura?"

"Oh, the last, entirely! And that's what pleases me."

The lawyer was silent, considering this, to him, peculiar exhibition of family pride.

"Well, you are a young man, Sir Theodosius, and this question of Laura's inheriting your estate and of her intended future husband's taking your name must be a question of the far-distant future."

"Not at all," interrupted the baronet with great irritability. "I've told you my life is not a good one, my lungs are not strong."

"Then surely you should not live in that waterlogged house close to the river, infected as it is with mists."
Mr. Spryce spoke with some feeling. He had never enjoyed his visits to Leppard Hall, which seemed even to his prosaic eye a gloomy and haunted place. He detested the flat landscape with the water-meadows and frequent vapours.

Sir Theodosius waved this protest aside with the impatient gesture common to him, a quick lift of his thin hand.

"The Sarelles are bound up with Leppard Hall. That's part of my heritage—to live there. Besides, the country there suits me well enough."

"Miss Laura won't return there immediately, I suppose?" suggested Mr. Spryce. "No doubt," he added, making a bold stroke for the sake of the girl, "Mr. Mostyn will take her to Jamaica? It will be a good change for her, she'd enjoy the light, the sunshine. Childhood memories would come back, no doubt. She was born there, after all——"

"Nothing is decided," said the baronet with considerable irritation, "and of course the marriage won't take place until she's twenty-one years of age. And, God knows, she won't be fit for matrimony then, wild and wilful as she is. But Mostyn will keep a firm hand on her, I think, and at least the burden of it will be off my mind. Yes, he may take her to Jamaica, I don't know."

"You'll be glad, perhaps, to have Leppard Hall to yourself, but you must give the girl an establishment. Mostyn, you say, sir, has only a hired house in London?"

"Well, I could buy her a town mansion, or a property somewhere else, what does it matter? Leppard Hall will be her home eventually. How many times must I tell you, Spryce, that I don't look to make a long life?"

The lawyer hunched his thick shoulders in the ill-fitting black coat.

"I think you've got something, Sir Theodosius, of your sister's wilfulness." And he thought very cautiously, for even in his mind he was prudent: 'I wonder—I wonder if there's a touch of insanity in the family?' Then aloud he said: "I suppose this young man——"

"Not so young," interrupted the baronet. "Mostyn is thirty-eight."

Mr. Spryce expressed no surprise. No doubt a staid husband would be very suitable for a young lady of Miss Laura's volatile temperament. Perhaps, too, she was very fond of the fellow. Mr. Spryce had not seen him, but had heard him described by common acquaintances as polished and charming.
"He was married, you know," continued the baronet. "His wife, a Dorothy Weston, died of yellow fever in Jamaica, together with two of their children. The shock made a wanderer of him for years. I'd really almost forgotten about him, but, searching in my mind for someone to divert Laura after that serious illness she had eighteen months ago, I remembered him. I wrote to his bankers and found he was in London and begged him to call on Laura and Mrs. Sylk. And so it's come about that he's made me the offer."

"And Miss Laura's pleased, you say? Well, it all seems a very agreeable sort of arrangement."

"She's as pleased as she ever is about anything. There is no satisfying the girl. When she is at Leppard Hall she is gloomy and like one distraught. When she is in London she is sullen and refuses to go anywhere."

"That girlish caprice of hers, as you call it, that early affection," suggested the lawyer cautiously, "perhaps goes deeper than you suppose, sir. I thought Mr. Delaunay a very amiable and accomplished young gentleman, I hardly understood your strong objections to that match. It seems to me he might have suited you as well as this Mr. Mostyn; in age at least he is more suitable to Miss Laura."

"Delaunay, I tell you," replied the young man with a distorted look on his regular features, "played the traitor. No man could forgive that. He made suit to my sister behind my back while pretending to be my friend. He is much older than she—although nearer her age than Mostyn, as you say—and far more experienced, and it was quite easy for him to turn her head. I believe all those foolish notions she had about Leppard Hall..." he seemed to change what he was about to say, and, after a pause, added abruptly, "came from him."

"I do not think it's likely," declared Mr. Spryce, defending the young man. "I saw a good deal of him, you know, sir. He used to come to town about your business. I thought him very capable and conscientious."

"He was that," the baronet admitted, with a shade of regret clouding his pale face. "My present man, Erskine, is able enough, but not so efficient as Delaunay, I admit that. I have given him notice to leave. I shall try to manage the estate myself with the help of an accountant who will come in from Warwick once a week."

"And you have no secretary either, Sir Theodosius. It must be more lonely than ever before at Leppard Hall."
“No, I do not mind seclusion, and when I am in a difficulty with my translation I come up to London and consult some of my learned friends.”

The baronet rose impatiently and coughed as if the least movement shook him. Mr. Spryce, in view of what he had just said about his health, regarded him quickly and observed that he did look lean and hollow-chested. His cheeks seemed to have fallen in and his eyes were feverishly bright. ‘He leads such an unhealthy life,’ thought the lawyer, ‘always poring over those books in that damp house. Why does he do it, especially when he knows he’s delicate? It’s as if he wished to commit suicide.’

“I suppose,” he asked aloud, rising also, “Mr. Delaunay has not tried to write to Miss Laura or to see her? If he had, that might account for her moods.”

“I don’t think so,” said Mr. Theodosius, with a vindictive look. “I have her most carefully watched. I can now rely upon Mrs. Sylk. At first she tried to play the traitress too, as these foolish women do. She actually went over to Warwick to try and find Delaunay before he left under the excuse of a visit to a shop or the dentist or some such stupid lie. But he had gone, and one of the maids told me what Mrs. Sylk was trying to do. I spoke to her sternly and threatened her with dismissal. I think I gave her a fright, she has not tried any tricks since.”

‘You are a born tyrant,’ thought Mr. Spryce judiciously, ‘that is what you are, young man—a born tyrant!’ He said aloud: “Well, Delaunay’s still in Ireland, I know. He’s in employment on his uncle’s estate in Antrim. Anyhow, he’s not our concern. But this Mostyn—do you wish me to make any inquiries about him? I might find out more, perhaps, than he’s told you.”

This suggestion seemed to anger the baronet. He replied haughtily that he could take Harry Mostyn’s word on all points concerning himself. It would be insulting to have a gentleman of his position investigated as if he were a servant applying for a place. His family was well known, if not in London, at least in Jamaica. “He is,” and this seemed to the baronet quite sufficient in the way of credentials, “a connection of my own.”

There was no more for Mr. Spryce to say on this point.

“Well,” said he, “tell me when I am to draw up the marriage settlement. I shall be ready. Do you wish to add to the
hundred thousand pounds that is to be Miss Laura's dowry under the provisions of your father's will?"

Sir Theodosius replied shortly that as his sister would have everything on his death, and he added grimly that he was heavily insured as well as being a very wealthy man, there was no need for her to have more than the stipulated sum when she married.

"It is more a home she needs than money," remarked the lawyer, and he thought that it was an odd combination of circumstances that the girl who had neither father nor mother nor any guardian but this brother, nor any home but that at Leppard Hall, so isolated and dull, should be marrying a man who seemed also as solitary, whose home and relations were far away, and had few, if any connections in London. He wished for Miss Laura's sake that he knew more about Harry Mostyn; how the man had spent his years as a widower, what was his reputation in the cities he had frequented, for Sir Theodosius had said that he had travelled in France and Italy.

"I suppose," Mr. Spryce added sharply, "that Mr. Mostyn will make settlements on his side?"

"Of course, with everything he possesses," the baronet replied. He frowned, coughed again, and seemed troubled.

There was one more point, a delicate one, to be broached. Mr. Spryce thought that perhaps it was this subject that was troubling Sir Theodosius, therefore he, in his professional capacity, took the onus on his own capable shoulders and asked coolly:

"Is Mr. Mostyn to be told anything of the family history?"

"Nothing whatever," replied the young man, with barely suppressed violence. "Why should he be? What has our history to do with him? Besides, I scarcely know to what you refer."

"You've driven it so far to the back of your own mind that you believe you've forgotten it, I suppose, Sir Theodosius. But it's there, you know, and I believe it does affect your sister."

"My God, Spryce, I should have thought you were the last man in the world to be fancifull!"

"It's not fancy. Dr. Selby must have told you as much, you must have believed as much yourself, Sir Theodosius, or you would never have allowed her to leave Leppard Hall. I remember how resolute you were that she should stay there and learn all the duties of a country châtelaine."
"We'll not argue the point. The past is the past, it does not concern us now."

"Never was anything more foolish said." Mr. Spryce repeated almost the words that Sir Theodosius remembered Lucius Delaunay had spoken to him eighteen months ago in the study at Leppard Hall. "The past colours, lightens or darkens everything we do or are, everything we say and have. I should think that that ugly episode of sixty years ago had better be brought out in daylight now, Sir Theodosius."

"Don't you realize that it might be the means of breaking off my sister's marriage?"

"Ah! You think that!" said Mr. Spryce. He had never heard Sir Theodosius give so much importance to the secret history of the Sarelles before. "Well, then, in that case, what will his feelings be if he discovers it after he marries her?"

"Then he will be a member of the family," replied Sir Theodosius, "and have as much concern as I in keeping silent about old and foolish stories."

With that he took up his hat with a quick gesture before the lawyer had time to say anything else, and left the room, proceeding at once through the dry, airless streets, for the season was unusually hot, to the tall brick house in Queen Street where Mrs. Sylk and a well-selected establishment of domestics kept watch over Laura Sarelle.

The girl was in the drawing-room, sitting listlessly in front of a pianoforte. On the music-screen was propped a pale water-colour drawing that she was touching up with a languid hand.

When Sir Theodosius entered the room his glance went at once to this picture. He saw that it was an attempted likeness of the portrait that hung at Leppard Hall, that of her namesake in the primrose-coloured dress, holding the sprig of laurel leaves. The sight filled him with anger and distaste, but he judged it prudent to make no comment on this subject.

But he began to tell the sullen girl, who took little notice of what he said, of his interview with Mr. Spryce, and he gave a false impression of the lawyer's acquiescence in the marriage scheme by saying:

"Mr. Spryce thoroughly approves of Mr. Mostyn and of the suggested alliance. He thinks it in every way suitable, Laura. I value his approval since he is one of the few people left who were our father's friends, who knew his wishes. He thinks that this match would in every way have pleased him."
"What does any of that matter?" asked Laura. She swung round on the revolving music-stool. "When am I going to Jamaica?"

"You talk like a fool!" cried Sir Theodosius, losing his temper at this stupid remark. "You cannot go to Jamaica until you are married, and I do not intend you shall be married until you're twenty-one. Besides, I do not know what Mostyn's plans are. I think he wants to settle in England."

"I dislike England," sighed Laura, narrowing her eyes. "Still, if we are to live here we must have a house."

"Why, so Spryce said," declared Sir Theodosius, further irritated. "A house will be found for you. The means are not lacking. But what is more important, my dear girl, is that you should decide on a settled way of life and leave this idleness, this sickly mooning. What are you doing now, for instance? You sit down there as if you were going to play on the pianoforte, and then you start scribbling a ridiculous picture. You are lucky," he added, the words struck out of him because of the intense vexation he had felt at seeing the portrait, "that you have found so good a husband, for I assure you, Laura, that you are not the kind of woman that most men would choose for a wife."

"Harry is marrying me for my fortune," sneered Laura. "Don't you know that? He is something of an adventurer. I think he's in difficulties, too, debts—I believe the estate in Jamaica's encumbered. Have not you troubled to find out? But what does it matter, he seems to have a great influence over you. He flatters you. Strange, that he can do anything he likes with you and you couldn't even be civil to——" She would not speak that name in his presence, but turned away again and with a brush dipped in green paint outlined more darkly the laurel leaves in her sketch.

Theodosius controlled himself with difficulty.

Laura was capable of exasperating him into a scene that had a very ill effect upon his health, and his physicians had warned him that he should remain, at all costs, cool. He could endure the girl's insolence only by reminding himself that she would soon be off his hands. He had put up with a great deal from her since the illness that had followed her accident when she had fallen into the Avon by the churchyard, endured her moods, her whims, her sullenness, her refusal to be entertained, to take any interest in such society as he allowed her to frequent. Her constant plea, her one
urgency, had seemed to her to be allowed to get away from Leppard Hall, and after a struggle of several months he had allowed that, even hired a house for her in Cheltenham, and then this establishment in London.

But she had seemed just as dissatisfied, just as capricious. Had she not proved such a torment her brother would not so easily have allowed her to engage herself to Harry Mostyn; Sir Theodosius had had far larger ideas for his sister, a title, a big estate, a man in a fine position. When he had spoken to Mr. Spryce he had made the very most of Harry Mostyn’s qualifications in order to justify his own consent to the match, but of course, when Laura spoke of the man as an adventurer, and said he only wanted her money, she was talking at random, as usual. Sir Theodosius had assured himself of the sound position in which his sister’s suitor stood. And he was gratified by Mostyn’s instant agreement to take the name of Sarelle and to carry on the estates at Leppard Hall. The entail would end with himself and it would be in the power of Laura’s husband to sell the place and allow it to pass into other hands, and this, to the intense family pride of Theodosius that he had fed through many morose, solitary hours of introspection, was intolerable, so Mostyn’s promise to bind himself to carry on the name and to keep the place was most important to him.

But he could not bring himself to say the kind or soothing words that might have touched or pleased his sister, or to explain to her his reasons for wanting this match. Instead, he replied curtly:

“Your behaviour is altogether repulsive, Laura. You agreed quite readily to marry Harry Mostyn. How, then, dare you speak of him as an adventurer?”

“Oh, there are worse things in the world than being an adventurer,” smiled Laura. “I like him well enough. He is kind, and agreeable, and he is going to take me away. That is the great attraction, is it not?”

“He and I and Mr. Spryce will arrange your future,” said the baronet, coughing and sinking into the armchair by the fire, where a few logs were burning into ashes. The autumn day was clear and warm, but Sir Theodosius was always chilly, and a fire had been lit, not for the first time that year, to please him. “You know that my lease of this house ends with this month. In November you must come to Leppard Hall. I shall ask Harry, too. Erskine is leaving, and Harry can take
his place for a while—he’s agreed to this—and learn some-
thing about the estate.”

Laura sprang from the music-stool, swept to the centre of
the room and stood there with her hands clasped tightly be-
hind her back.

“I will not go!” she cried. “I will not return to Leppard
Hall!”

“Nonsense, my dear girl!” Sir Theodosius pressed his
handkerchief to his lips and tried to speak coolly. “You’ve
been in London since the spring, right through the summer,
that agreeable weather when you should have been in the
country, on one excuse or another—now you are returning.”

“Returning in the winter when the days are short and
there is always mist——”

“Don’t, pray, be romantic and poetical,” interrupted Sir
Theodosius. “The Hall is extremely comfortable and well-run.
You may go, when you please, into Warwick or Rugby. You
may even come up to town again for Christmas. But I don’t
intend to go on paying the expense of this house, this estab-
ishment, for you to sit idling on a music-stool, scribbling.
Oh, I have a full report from Mrs. Sylk of your behaviour.
How you lie abed and refuse to see company, and when you
escape from the house you take long walks by yourself.”

“Does Mrs. Sylk betray me like that?”

“Nay, Mrs. Sylk is your very staunch ally, but she can’t re-
fuse to answer yes or no when I put questions to her. And I’ve
a very shrewd idea, my dear sister, how you employ your
time. I know that you often refuse to see Mostyn when he
calls to take you to a concert or the theatre or the opera.
You’re going to marry him and spend the rest of your life with
him, therefore you must get to know him better. At Leppard
Hall you won’t be able to escape his company.”

Sir Theodosius spoke harshly, and the girl gazed with
male, with eyes expressing fury. He saw that expression
and winced, as one human being will wince from hatred in
the eyes of another; it is as rare a passion as love, and as
powerful.

He turned away sharply, more moved than he liked to
show, and gazed into the glowing embers that were becom-
ing quenched into grey ashes, while Laura remained erect
in the centre of the correct room furnished coldly according
to the taste of the upholsterer.

Her one interest and extravagance since her brother had
allowed her this amount of liberty had been clothes. She wore now a charming gown of a lilac silk with a sarsanet jacket laced with green ribbon, and looked even to her brother’s prejudiced eyes a lovely woman. She was so slender and finely formed and her hair had such a rich bloom on it, though her face was of an unhealthy pallor, and without the artificial red on lips and cheeks she might have appeared ghastly. Her eyes were very luminous and a little blurred as if she had been weeping. The hands that she twisted nervously behind her back were of extreme delicacy; so was the arched foot that she tapped on the thick carpet.

A pretty creature! A splendid creature! A girl who had an air of breed and nobility, a sister that he should have been proud of, yet a plague and a vexation, and, horrible to realize, a creature who hated him. Sir Theodosius did not believe that he had given her any just cause for that hatred. She had always been a burden to him, even as a child, when she had been at school in London and he a youth at Oxford who had been obliged to come up to the capital now and then at his father’s or his guardian’s request, to visit her, to take her out, to supervise her education.

She was so different from himself that she reminded him of that page in the family history which he most wished to forget. It had been unfortunate, he thought, that she had ever been born. Yet if she had never been born he would have been forced to marry in the hope of begetting an heir for fear the name of Sarelle should become extinct. For after these two there were none of that name in the whole world, and it would be an end of that family. How useless, then, would seem all the money that he and his father had hoarded up if it was not used to extend the grandeur of the Sarelle family!

Sir Theodosius, looking at his sister as she stood there, softened a little towards her, realizing that she had her uses. He might enjoy the kind of life he wished, as a scholarly recluse, a celibate, and she would marry and bear the children who would carry on the name, and who would in time inherit all his treasure. And if Laura had no children—his mind darted ahead into the future—why, then to whom should he leave all his wealth? To his old college at Oxford, he thought, and only the bare bones of the estate for the next-of-kin, some distant cousins of his father’s by the name of Conway whom he had only met rarely on the most formal occasions, in his boyhood, and who were now in India. Since
the estate was not entailed he would probably decide that it
should all go to the hammer and nothing be left at all to those
distant relatives, who cared nothing for the name of Sarelle.

The young man drew himself up with a start, realizing how,
as he gazed at the immobile figure of Laura Sarelle, his mind
had wandered from the point at issue. What need was there to
concern himself about these things? She would marry and
have children and their name would be continued.

He rose abruptly, for he did not lodge in this house that he
had hired for her, but in a suite in the Golden Lion, a hotel
off the Strand, and told her to make all her preparations, for
by the end of the month she should be in Leppard Hall.

"Thank you for lighting the fire for me, Laura—I fear the
room is oppressive now."

He tried to leave her on this courteous note, but she lifted
her lip daintily at him in silence.

Laura Sarelle glided into Mrs. Sylk's room that night, when
that good woman had put out her candle and drawn her bed-
curtains, making her start as if a ghost had suddenly entered,
for the girl had bare feet, a light wrap thrown over her shoul-
ders, and Hetty Sylk had left the shutters of the window apart
so that a beam of moonlight fell through, which revealed the
girl's figure.

"How easily you are frightened!" said Laura contemptu-
ously. She found the matches and lit the candle in the silver
stick, then closing the shutter, added, "It is cold, but I want
to talk to you."

"Oh, Laura, you're wild and wilful as usual. You have no
slippers on and that cashmere shawl is not warm enough."

"What does it matter? I want to tell you something. Theo
was here to-day, as you know, but later than we expected him.
We are to return to Leppard Hall."

Mrs. Sylk rose out of bed and put on her own dressing-
gown. She was very willing to humour the girl. She wished
that it were possible for her to light a fire, but there were no
sticks or coal in the grate, so she drew the blue woollen cover-
let off the bed and threw it round the girl's shoulders and the
two of them sat down together in the great tapestry chair
with arms.

"Well, dear, you knew that you'd have to go back some
day, and I suppose it won't be for long. You'll be married in another six months."

Hetty Sylk spoke with great uneasiness, she had no faith nor hope in any of these schemes. She hurried on:

"And I think Sir Theo has striven to humour you. He has allowed you to have this house and go to Cheltenham."

"Humour me! He broke my heart! Don't you know that, Mrs. Sylk?" and the girl turned her large blurred eyes towards the older woman. "When he sent Lucius away, that broke my heart!"

"Oh, that's a phrase merely, dear," replied Mrs. Sylk with still greater uneasiness. She tried to speak in a caressing tone. "People don't get their hearts broken, though they think they do—women especially. But you'll grow out of it."

"I know all that you're going to tell me, the same as Theo said, and what you told me when I was ill—that it was just a fancy, my love; that girls felt like that for any young man who was well in his person and happened to be about them. But it is not like that with Lucius and me, you know it is not. Why did he separate us? What is there Harry has that Lucius has not?"

"I couldn't tell you, dear. I suppose they quarrelled. And men, when they take a spite against one another, are cold and unbending. I think Mr. Delaunay made a mistake in speaking to your brother."

"Speaking to him?" cried Laura, starting up. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Mrs. Sylk unhappily.

"Do you think that he asked Theodosius for my hand?"

"Well, dear, I should think it's quite likely, or otherwise why did he leave so suddenly, not even going to sleep another night at the Dower House, but riding straight to Warwick, as you know."

"Yes, it was Patty, the little servant, who told me that. And then I induced you to go into Warwick, but it was several days afterwards and he was gone."

"Don't go over all that, dear. Try and forget about it. Whether he asked for your hand, or whether they quarrelled over something else, he went away."

"And he didn't come back!" said Laura. "And what was the use, after that, of letting me come to London, or to any of these other places!"
"Well, dear, you always wanted to meet people, have entertainments and fine clothes."

"But with him, with him, Mrs. Sylk. I wanted us to go together to all those places. But I hated Leppard Hall. I hate it still, and I've got to go back there. And Lucius won't be there. And it'll be the winter-time."

"Well, there's your marriage to look forward to," urged Mrs. Sylk, shivering a little. "Mr. Mostyn's a fine gentleman and will make you a good husband, I've no doubt. He's kind and amiable."

"Yes, he's very different from Theo. He flatters me, even spoils me a little. But you know he doesn't love me. He admires me, thinks I'm pretty, but he doesn't love me, Mrs. Sylk. I think he loved his wife. I never thought I'd marry a widower. He had a wife and two children, and he's nearly twenty years older than I am."

"He doesn't look it," protested Mrs. Sylk feebly, "he's a handsome gentleman."

"Do you think so? I might have thought so if I hadn't seen Lucius."

"You mustn't keep talking of Mr. Delaunay, dear. That way lies trouble, and perhaps tragedy. It's but a fancy that's become fixed in your mind. It was unfortunate it all happened together—your accident and his going away."

"My accident?" said Laura with a sly smile. "You know that I tried to drown myself."

"Hush!" Mrs. Sylk put her hand over the girl's hot mouth. "Don't breathe it, it's not true!"

"Well, I should know whether it is true or not."

"No, you wouldn't, Laura darling, you wouldn't know. It was that old trailing dress you wore, and those thin, slippery shoes," continued the distracted woman, hardly knowing what she said.

"Why didn't they let me go down to the river? I saw her then, you know. She came out of the church where she's buried."

"You must not say those terrible things, Laura!" Mrs. Sylk began to weep. "You take all my strength away, you really do. I don't know how to answer you. I shan't be able to stay with you if you say things like that. You wouldn't like me to leave you, would you?"

"No." Laura was silent, as if communing with herself, then she said abruptly: "But I've been good, haven't I? I
haven't even spoken about Lucius. You'd think he would write, wouldn't you?"

"I don't think it would be much good if he did. Sir Theo would see you didn't get the letters."

"But there would be a chance of his seeing me if he came to London now. Why does he stay in Ireland?"

"My dear, my darling girl! You must get used to the fact that he's gone out of your life. He'll marry another woman, you know. You'll have to get used to that idea, too. He's away in another country."

"Yes," said Laura. "But I'm bound to him, you know, for ever. He's just part of myself. Why do people think that because one's young one doesn't understand these things? I knew, and he knew! Ever since I first saw him, I suppose. And yet it's all believed to be a fancy and a caprice. What shall I do when I get back to Leppard Hall?"

The older woman looked forward indeed to this return to the country with heavy foreboding. She could not see how that combination of Sir Theo and his sister, and the bad feeling there was between them, and the prospective husband (whom Hetty Sylk in her heart thought to be something of an adventurer and whom she did not believe was really in love with the girl but only with her tempting fortune), would fit in against the background of that sombre, melancholy mansion, the flat winter landscape, the steady routine of little regular duties that made up the dull days. And then Laura's terrible fancies! . . . If only she could think of something to banish those!

It certainly was, as the girl had just said, some while since she had spoken of them, but Mrs. Sylk knew that they were always in her mind. That drawing, for instance—she would bring it out at intervals and touch it up. She kept it hidden cunningly; Mrs. Sylk had tried in vain to find it—often enough.

"Well, I've disturbed you for nothing," said Laura, with a curious smile. "I can't help my fate, can I? I mean, I shall have to go back to Leppard Hall whatever I say or do."

"But Harry will be there, and he's cheerful company."

"What's the use of cheerful company? Whenever I go abroad I shall think of Lucius, whenever I see a horseman I shall hope that it is he. You can't think what it was like in the spring when I was there. I was looking for him everywhere. And when I went those long walks I always pretended I was
going to meet him, and when I sit in a concert I like to have an empty seat beside me, and imagine he has gone out for a little and will return to keep me company.”

“You must not speak like that, Laura. You must distract yourself by some other thoughts. Don’t you realize that you do a wrong thing to marry one man when you have another so much in your mind and heart?”

“Yes, I’m being selfish. I’m marrying Harry because he’s going to take me away. We shall return to Jamaica; I can just remember it, you know. There was light and colour, and people laughing, great flowers with strange blooms such as we have never seen in England, and a blue sea, and trees wreathed with light creepers. Then we might travel, he might take me to Italy. We might even have an apartment in Paris. That’s why I’m marrying Harry. I told him so, and—he didn’t seem to care, just kissed my fingers and laughed.”

“You didn’t tell him, I hope,” said Mrs. Sylk in a faltering voice, drawing the girl closer to her in the shadows—she thought that the solitary candle shed a dreary light over them—“about—about Mr. Delaunay?”

“No, I didn’t think that fair to Lucius. I don’t want him to quarrel with Harry.”

The two sat silent in the chill, interlacing shadows; a draught between the shutters of the window set the candle-flame flickering.

“I think,” said Laura at last, in a low voice, “that if I was to ask Harry to find out about that other Laura Sarelle, he would. Don’t you?”

“I shouldn’t do that, dear,” replied Mrs. Sylk, with great uneasiness. “I don’t think it would be fair to your brother. You know, you’re making something out of nothing. The story is quite plain and straightforward.”

“I suppose so.” Laura sighed. “They burnt all those clothes, everything that belonged to her, didn’t they, because I meddled with them? Do you know what I found, Mrs. Sylk, just before we left Leppard Hall last May? I went into that great room where those things were kept——”

“Oh, you did!” exclaimed Mrs. Sylk in dismay. “I told the housekeeper never to give you the keys.”

“Well, I stole them one day when she left them on the kitchen table. I unlocked the room and there was an inner closet. That was locked, but I got in. And what do you think it
was? A distillery! There was a still there, and all the apparatus for making essences.

"Well, why not?" said Mrs. Sylk, greatly relieved. "People often had that as a pastime, especially in the old days. You might learn yourself, Laura. It is very amusing to make perfumes. We could learn to distil roses, for instance."

"Yes, I thought of that," said Laura. "That's one thing why I don't mind going back to Leppard Hall," she added, to the elder woman's great surprise. "I want to use that little room. I'm going to ask Theo to give it to me as my own, and I want to learn to distil—oh, all kinds of things, to make perfumes, essences, and ointments too. I shall get a book of instructions while I am in London. Yes, Mrs. Sylk, the thought of that still is quite engaging."

Mrs. Sylk was as pleased as she was surprised by this remark. It certainly would be a good thing if Laura found some means of employing her idle time and might send many foolish, dangerous fancies out of her mind.

Mr. Mostyn made a great point of waiting on Mr. Spryce and behaving with great amiability towards the lawyer. He had, of course, his own attorney, who had undertaken all the legal arrangements of the marriage settlement, but he wished, he declared, to make the personal acquaintance of the old family friend of the Sarelles.

He was genial, appeared candid, but, as the lawyer quickly noticed, committed himself to nothing. Mr. Spryce had made some cautious inquiries about Mr. Harry Mostyn and was not altogether satisfied with the result. The gentleman was well-known on the Newmarket and other racecourses, and at the card-tables of several fashionable London clubs. He had been, for a short time, in the Diplomatic Service, and he had left, suddenly, for no good reason that Mr. Spryce could discover, save possibly a quarrel with his superiors. Yet he did not seem a man to provoke hostility or easily to enter into arguments or debates, and Mr. Spryce, looking at him now, thought that perhaps he had given up his diplomatic career either for some more serious reason than a difference of opinion with someone in a higher position than his own, or out of mere idleness.

Still, there was nothing against the gentleman; from many
points of view he was no doubt quite a good match, but not, Mr. Spryce thought, for a girl in the position of Laura Sarelle, with her hundred-thousand-pounds dowry and her extremely good prospects.

This, as a matter of fact, was the opinion of Mr. Harry Mostyn himself. He considered that the meeting of his distant connection had been the most extraordinary stroke of good luck for himself, and when Laura in her wild way had called him an adventurer she had not been far wrong, though of course she had spoken only out of a mingled shrewdness and fantasy that happened to hit the mark. Her surmises had been based on her conviction that Harry Mostyn did not love her and on some chance remarks she had heard among her acquaintances in London.

The truth was that Mr. Mostyn's affairs were far more embarrassed than he cared to own. He still had a substantial fortune, but it was a good deal damaged. He had some heavy debts and some pressing creditors, and as he did not wish to retrench his style of living it would be highly convenient for him to announce his betrothal to a great heiress. It was not his purpose to have the marriage settlement drawn up at once. He wished first (and he arranged this in his mind with an unconscious duplicity, not with any set scheme, but only as a matter of mere self-interest) to consolidate his influence over the young baronet and to make, if possible, his future bride far more infatuated with his own person than she was at present. Then, when he had the brother and sister safely bound to him by ties of affection, and, he hoped, love, he would be able to broach gradually, and by degrees, the fact that he was by no means the wealthy man they had thought him.

His visit to the lawyer was part of this plan. He wished to ingratiate himself with everyone connected with the Sarelle family and to impress on Mr. Spryce the considerable concessions he was making in consenting to adopt the name of Sarelle and to squire it in Leppard Hall if the brother should predecease the sister.

"For you know, Mr. Spryce," he remarked with an agreeable smile, "I'm a cosmopolitan, a man of the city, and I don't know that it would come very easily to me to live in that remote country place. Yet for Laura's sake I'm quite willing to come to this agreement."

"It's a very handsome estate," said Mr. Spryce dryly. "Miss
Sarelle would find no difficulty in getting someone who would agree to her terms, or rather, I suppose I should say, her brother's terms."

Then Mr. Mostyn went on talking agreeably about nothing in particular, although the theme of his conversation seemed to be willingness and readiness to do all that was required of him. But when Mr. Spryce came down to detail in the matter of settlement he put that off, saying that the marriage would not be for a year at least, until Laura was of age.

Mr. Spryce did not like him, and summed him up as a pleasant, florid-looking man whose thick, reddish, curling hair, exquisitely dressed, was beginning to turn grey on the temples, who was very self-possessed and had an air of good humour. He was nearly ten years too old for Laura Sarelle and was quite obviously marrying the fortune and the estate, not the girl.

Mr. Spryce blamed the baronet, a young, bookish, sickly and peevish man he termed him, who was thus sacrificing his sister to the first-corner, as he bitterly put it to himself.

And in an oblique attempt to save the girl, he checked the suitor's easy conversation by remarking suddenly:

"You don't think Sir Theo's for a long life, do you? There's consumption of the lungs in the family, you know. Both his father and uncle had it, though they lived to over a fair age, over sixty-two. And all of them were eccentric."

This was said so abruptly and yet with such tacit meaning that Mr. Mostyn was brought up short. He stopped and looked at the lawyer quizzically and a shrewd expression came into his grey eyes, which were generally gay and careless enough.

"What are you trying to suggest, my dear sir?" he asked.

"Oh, merely that there's not much attraction except the money in marrying into the Sarelle family," replied Mr. Spryce.

"Their history doesn't interest me," replied the suitor, quickly recovering from his slight discomfiture. "My dear sir, you take an entirely dry, professional point of view. You forget my feelings for Miss Laura. She's a very charming and beautiful young lady."

"And a very wild and wilful one, too, and scarcely out of the schoolroom. And not, in my opinion, fitted for marriage," said the lawyer. "There, I spoke freely as an old family friend. You said you came here for frankness."

"Nonsense!" replied Mr. Mostyn easily. "Laura's no more
capricious than most young ladies of her age who've had every luxury and indulgence."

"She may have had the first, but she's never had the last," replied Mr. Spryce. "In my opinion, her brother deals with her very harshly. Has she ever told you what her feelings are about Leppard Hall?"

Mr. Mostyn replied truthfully: "No."

"Well, she dislikes the place. She will do almost anything to get away from it. She's counting very much on your taking her away—to Jamaica, she hopes."

"I don't intend to live in Jamaica," replied Mr. Mostyn softly. "But that is for future discussion. You know, it's part of my agreement that I should reside at Leppard Hall."

"Yes, if Sir Theodosius dies. But there's no reason why he should. I know his health is not very good, but he may live for years yet. And meanwhile, you can take Laura abroad." He thought: 'That's the least you can do for her, if you don't care for her and are marrying her for her money. This is a bargain she'll get nothing out of unless you do give her those few years of freedom.'

Mr. Mostyn replied in agreeable and conventional terms that of course if Miss Laura wished she could travel abroad, have an apartment in Paris or a house in Florence.

"Believe me," he added with sincerity, "I don't care much for Leppard Hall myself. I've been there several times, you know, since I renewed acquaintance with Theo. If it ever came into my possession I should be tempted to rebuild it."

'If it ever comes into your possession,' thought Mr. Spryce, 'I doubt if you'll ever live there at all.' He looked with disapproval at the well-appointed figure of the handsome gentleman with the easy town air and his almost mechanical smiles, gestures and courtesies.

"I'm going down there now. The Sarelles have already left London, you know," added Mr. Mostyn, with a touch of regret. "I can't say I look forward to the visit. This isn't the time of year for the country. Still, it will be a chance to examine the estate. The steward is leaving; Sir Theo wants me to look over things with him."

"Sir Theo is always changing his stewards and his servants. You don't find the same people there six months together," said Mr. Spryce. "It is a pity, in my mind, that he quarrelled with Lucius Delaunay. He was his friend, you know, who was both his steward and his secretary."
“I never heard of him,” replied Mr. Mostyn. “Why do you think it’s a pity he left? And why did he? I suppose Sir Theo’s quarrelsome, peevish, difficult to get on with.”

“I’ve told you,” said Mr. Spryce, with a steely look, “that the whole family’s eccentric.”

“You emphasize that word so much, my dear sir, that you make me believe you want me to think they’re slightly insane.”

Mr. Spryce did not reply, and Harry Mostyn, fearing he had said too much, laughed to cover any offence that his words might have given.

“Do you know anything of their history?” asked the lawyer, after he had again in vain pressed Mr. Mostyn about the settlement and been told casually that that would be gone into in good time.

“Oh, vaguely, yes. They were great people in Jamaica.”

“No, I mean the elder branch—the Sarelles of Leppard Hall. They’ve been there since the days of the Plantagenets—it’s a French name, of course.”

“Well, I suppose I shall have to look it all up, genealogy and everything else,” said Mr. Mostyn good-humouredly, “considering it is to be my name when I marry Miss Laura. But all that’s for the future; there’s a good deal to be discussed and a good deal to be found out first.”

He took his leave, amiable and debonair, and the lawyer, returning to his desk, sat thoughtfully tapping his teeth with his nails. He looked up at the neat boxes that lined the room; it was the hour of dusk, candles would soon be brought in. How short the winter days were! The night would darken down at Leppard Hall by the middle of the afternoon. He thought of Laura already there and was glad that Mrs. Sylk accompanied her. It was a crazy scheme, that marriage, though he could understand the motive that had induced both brother and sister to accept Mr. Mostyn’s offer.

Sir Theo wanted to be rid, at any cost, of Laura, so long as he could be rid of her in some way that at least had an honourable gloss over it. He was flattered, too, of course, by the elder man’s offer to accept his name and the charge of his estate. ‘Though I shouldn’t be surprised,’ thought the lawyer, ‘if the boy doesn’t marry himself one of these days and have a large family and throw all their plans out. Still, I didn’t like the look of him the other day. He seemed sickly, but he will live in that damp, God-forsaken, fog-ridden country.’
But Laura’s motive—well, just the caprice of a wilful girl who wanted to escape from tutelage, wanted to go out into the world, wanted to be her own mistress and wanted to have the prestige and freedom, as she hoped, of a married woman.

Mr. Spryce did not know the reason why Lucius Delaunay had left Leppard Hall, though sometimes he came near to guessing it. He thought that it must have been a very powerful and personal motive that caused the young man to dismiss one towards whom he had seemed so affectionately disposed and who had been of such assistance to him.

‘Well, if it was that,’ thought the lawyer, still staring at the deed-boxes on which various names were written in large white letters, ‘he has made a mistake. Better Lucius Delaunay with his pittance than Harry Mostyn with whatever fortune he may still have—and I don’t think it’ll be much when he has discharged his debts and his other obligations. Yet,’ thought the old man, ‘no doubt after all it would be better for Laura to marry Harry Mostyn than to remain at Leppard Hall.’

If she had had a schoolgirl fancy for Lucius Delaunay she had probably got over it by now. It must be a year and a half since she had seen him, and perhaps she would be very happy with her amiable husband, who would not, Mr. Spryce thought, take her very often or keep her very long at Leppard Hall.

Then he thought about the secret of the Sarelles. It was known only to himself and a few other people, and he wondered, with a touch of malice, whether Mr. Harry Mostyn was so very lucky, after all, in marrying Laura Sarelle and undertaking so cheerfully, almost so eagerly, to merge himself into her family and to become the squire of Leppard Hall.

One of the boxes at which Mr. Spryce stared was labelled with that name—“Sarelle”—and among the documents that it contained was a sheet of notepaper, now much yellowed, on which was written in fading ink the will of Laura Sarelle, dated 1780. It contained only a few words. Mr. Spryce had read them a long time ago when his father had put the affairs of the Sarelle family into his hands at the request of Sir John Sarelle, who had wished the young lawyer to wait on him at Leppard Hall.

The will was of no importance, but it had impressed Mr. Spryce, never a man of much imagination, both as a pa-
thetic and as an impressive document. He remembered every word:

This is my last Will and Testament: I have been given over by the physicians and expect nothing but a speedy dissolution of body and soul. I die a wealthy woman, but I am ignorant how much of my money I may dispose of, the estate being entailed and my distant Yorkshire cousin coming, as I believe, into all my property. I am, however, moved to make these, my last, requests. They are that my body be buried in the church, not in the mausoleum beside that of my brother, Theodosius. That my name, and the date of my birth and death be set there plainly, with no other adornment than a design of laurel leaves, which the curious may interpret as they will. It is also my earnest command to my heirs that they destroy Leppard Hall and everything that is within it, burning all the furniture, pictures, and ornaments of every description and razing the building to the ground. I do not know if I have the power to enforce this wish. But if it is not complied with, I think that my successors may find themselves accursed.—Laura Sarelle.

Well, the will had not been respected save in so far as the poor woman had been buried in the church and the local mason had been allowed to sculpture a design of laurel leaves round her name on the plain slab of Italian marble that bore her name.

Nobody even knew of the will except her heir, and he, that distant cousin from Yorkshire, had never for a moment considered that it would be reasonable to destroy the fine mansion that had been so lately added to and improved and that was so handsomely furnished and full of so many beautiful and curious objects.

He knew there was a good reason for Laura Sarelle's request and that it was one that many people would have carried out. But he was not a superstitious man, but rather one who prided himself on his cool head and logical mind. He intended to live down the old tragedy, not to emphasize it by razing Leppard Hall to the ground.

And Mr. Spryce, staring at the deed-boxes as the maidservant came in with the candles, decided that, of course, Sir Richard Sarelle had been right. It would have been a very foolish thing to destroy Leppard Hall. People who flew in the face of superstition were to be commended for their courage.
It had, of course, been an act of moral bravery to defy the opinion of the entire county and leave the Hall standing and all the furnishings untouched, even that room, even that closet, exactly the same as Laura Sarelle and her brother had left them.

But neither Sir Richard, nor his son, Sir John, had been quite brave enough to live at the condemned house, although they had made a great flourish at keeping it in good order, well stocked with a constant changing of servants.

"It's a wonder," said the lawyer, with a sigh, rising and turning to his tall hat and drab coat that hung against the smoke-stained wall and preparing for his journey home, "that someone has not seen a ghost there."

... ...

When Mr. Mostyn, after delaying as long as he could in London, arrived at Leppard Hall, it was the twilight of a day in December and the snow was falling in fast flakes.

He looked out of the carriage window as the vehicle turned into the drive between the piers with the stone supporters, and stared with a good deal of curiosity at the estate that was to be his wife's dowry, for he felt quite certain of that in his own mind, though for decency's sake he would never say so, for he did not believe that Sir Theodosius would marry, or that he was, indeed, likely to enjoy a long life.

The aspect of the grey-fronted mansion against the grey sky, which seemed every second to grow darker, was so disagreeable that Mr. Mostyn had a little shock of surprise.

'It's a confoundedly dreary place, more gloomy than I remembered,' he thought, 'and certainly, if I ever have the chance of doing so, I shall rebuild it. That last-century façade, if that was taken off and it was touched up in the Gothic style...’ He leaned back in the carriage, trying to distract himself with plans for the future, for he did not expect much pleasure from this visit.

It was, of course, wholly unreasonable for Sir Theodosius to wish him to come to this country place at this season of the year when they might have all lived so cheerfully in London, or even in Cheltenham, or some other genteel neighbourhood.

Mr. Mostyn groaned a little to himself when he wondered what he would do with his days, deprived of all his usual diversions, friends and acquaintances. But the prize was worth a
few disagreeables. Why, Sir Theodosius, had he known it, could have got, by snapping his fingers, half a dozen titles to compete for Laura’s hand, but he had never, so to speak, put her in the market. Hardly anyone knew of her existence or of her great fortune.

‘The fellow’s damnably secretive,’ thought Harry Mostyn. ‘What a stroke of luck that I was related to him! I should never have heard of him else.’

As he sat there in his warm fur coat in the well-padded carriage he recalled what Mr. Spryce had said about the family history, how he had talked about their ill-health, their eccentricity, hinted even some doubt of their sanity.

Mr. Mostyn was prepared to risk that. Laura was a charming creature; he could even persuade himself he was a little in love with her, though she was young enough in mind, if not in years, to be his daughter. She had a bloom, a freshness and a vitality that was very attractive, and though she might be capricious and wilful—well, he dared say that he could tame that. . . . A few airs and graces were not unbecoming in so pretty a woman.

As for the brother, Mr. Mostyn candidly hoped that he would not live very long, or that if he did he would keep to Leppard Hall and his books and allow Mr. Mostyn and his bride to depart on their travels. A hundred thousand pounds would go a long way even in a luxurious life.

Mr. Mostyn was good-natured, though not very scrupulous. He did not intend either to ill-treat Laura or to stint her in any of her desires, but he did intend to get a hold on brother and sister so as to confuse them as to his desirability as a husband for the great heiress.

He travelled with his own servant and carriage and horses and put up as good a show as possible, preferring to go deeper into debt than to admit that his resources were in any way strained.

When he stepped out of the carriage in front of the Hall he looked up at it again, and again was most unpleasantly impressed by its dark and gloomy appearance. The windows were already shuttered or unlit, the whole place was blank. Mr. Mostyn did not wonder that Sir Theodosius frequently changed his stewards and his servants, and that very few guests ever came to Leppard Hall.

The door was soon opened and Mr. Mostyn was received with due ceremony, being offered, as he had to admit himself,
a very handsome suite of rooms on the first floor, consisting of
a bed-chamber, a parlour, and a closet, arranged in the
eighteenth-century style for powdering.

He remembered that Sir Theodosius had told him he took
pride in leaving the Hall exactly as it had been when he had
inherited it. Neither Sir Richard nor Sir John had touched the
furnishings, even the very positions of the pieces were the
same as they had been when Laura Sarelle had died in
1780.

Mr. Mostyn’s rooms were, he noticed at once, decidedly
old-fashioned. The pieces of furniture were well polished, the
floor and walls glowed in amber colour in the old panelling,
the pictures, rich landscapes and fruit pieces, were well pre-
served and well framed, but all had an antique air not alto-
tgether pleasing to the man whose own taste was very much of
his own day and even of his own moment. And again he made
a secret decision that if ever he was master of the place he
would alter the interior as well as the exterior.

Sir Theodosius received him gloomily in the large with-
drawal-room or salon that opened into the opposite side of
the wide corridor to the dining-room, and the elder man saw
that he would have to make a considerable effort to retain his
hold over this difficult and peevish youth, for Sir Theodosius
seemed little more, although he was nearly in his twenty-fifth
year.

He coughed a good deal and complained about his health
and the weather, said that he had been confined to the house
for several days by the snow and the cold, that a case of books
he had been expecting from London had not arrived, and
seemed to regard Harry Mostyn with such languid interest
that that gentleman wondered if he had cooled in his attitude
towards the proposed marriage.

The guest therefore exerted his not inconsiderable charm,
was gay, solicitous and amiable, and had the pleasure, in half
an hour or so, of seeing the young man considerably more
cheerful. He listened to Harry Mostyn’s anecdotes with some
appearance of appreciation and even smiled in response to
some of his quips and tales of London life.

‘I shall have to amuse him,’ Mr. Mostyn was thinking. ‘I
shall have to keep him interested in life. Why, he’s half dead
already. This won’t do, not until things are a little more for-
ward. The guardian sickly and eccentric, and the girl not
knowing her own mind, why, everything might be broken off
yet!” And he thought with an unpleasant wince of the money that he had already spent in order to keep up appearances while he had been engaged to Laura Sarelle.

The suitor did not see the lady until the elaborate and formal dinner was served. Then she appeared in a gown of a dark-green silk with a necklace of turquoises round her slender, long neck. He thought that she looked extremely beautiful, and his spirits rose at the prospect of possessing this delicious creature and her golden fortune.

He was gay, amusing, and seemed to please not only the baronet and Mrs. Sylk, who was also at the richly appointed table, but Laura herself. He spoke of plans for the future, of visits to Italy, to Venice, Rome and Florence, Paris, of concerts and balls that they must attend in London. He suggested that they should leave Leppard Hall in a short while.

“Your brother’s health doesn’t seem too satisfactory down here in the winter.”

“Oh, he always has that cough now,” said Laura indifferently.

And the baronet declared with sudden peevishness that he disliked any reference to his health, and that he was far better at Leppard Hall than he was in London.

Mr. Mostyn drank a good deal of Sir Theodosius’ excellent wine in order to keep up his spirits, for his task was not too easy. He felt the atmosphere of the house oppressing him, and he really disliked Sir Theodosius, who was in every way antipathetic to him—a scholar, a dry, reserved, precocious young man, who had not a single taste in common with him, Harry Mostyn.

But he did not drink too much, he was careful there, only enough to make him a cheerful, flattering companion.

When the two women had left the room and the men were alone with their host, he redoubled his attentions to the young man, who sat in a drooping attitude in the big chair by the fire, having left his place at the table, with the filigree silver bowl of hothouse fruit and the glass of wine that he had scarcely touched at his place.

Harry Mostyn tried to think of some subject that might be pleasing to his young host. It was hopeless for him to talk of the classics, of Greek, or Latin, or Hebrew. He had had the usual education of a gentleman, but was nothing of a scholar, and not remotely interested in such subjects. And it was no
good for him to try to talk to Sir Theodosius of his own pastimes, sports, companions and diversions.

Therefore he decided to talk about the one subject that they both had in common—the Sarelle family and Leppard Hall. He handsomely praised the place, the costly antique furnishing, the rich tapestry, the well-polished panelled walls, of linenfold Tudor design, and he asked, to make conversation, who were the originals of the two graceful portraits that hung at the end of the room facing down the table, as if they too were guests who had their place at the board.

“One is Laura Sarelle, who was the last heiress of the main line,” replied Sir Theodosius petulantly. “We don’t know who the other is. It’s a very fine piece, by Gainsborough, it is supposed. It was found in the attic. Laura has an intense dislike for both those pictures, that’s the reason I leave them there. She mustn’t be indulged, you know.”

“Laura Sarelle!” said Mr. Mostyn, with a quizzical look. “It isn’t like her namesake, is it? Yet, I don’t know—perhaps if she had the same powdered hair—”

“Pray don’t speak about it,” broke in Sir Theodosius. “She found that very dress once in the attic, and put it on. There was an accident. She tripped in the long skirt and got her feet wet in the river. She was ill for quite a while, they thought she’d have brain-fever.”

Mr. Mostyn was rather startled by these laconic sentences. He saw that he had for once, and all unknowingly, been tactless. It occurred to him that it would have been only kind on the part of Sir Theodosius to remove these pictures if Laura disliked them, especially now, as she must have such unpleasant associations with them.

And he asked why the original of the portrait had not been married. And Sir Theodosius replied curtly that she had died very young of a consumption in the lungs.

“It’s an hereditary disease with us, you know, but Laura seems free. My father died of this, as did my mother, in Jamaica, but my uncle lived to a good age.”

“You shouldn’t talk in so melancholy a fashion,” urged Mr. Mostyn warmly. “And, Theo, I do think you should get away from Leppard Hall. It really is damp here—and melancholy,” he could not refrain from adding.

Yes, it seemed damp and melancholy even in that comfortable room with the great wood-fire and the shutters closed over the snow and cold. Yes, a clinging, chilly, unhealthy
atmosphere seemed to fill the splendid chamber. And Harry Mostyn, looking at the table with the filigree service and the rich appointments of silver, porcelain and glass, had a sudden impression that he looked at a banquet that had been set for the dead, as if the table had been arranged thus for years, as if the wine and fruit had been kept intact, the china shining, the glass gleaming by some enchantment. He felt as if he peered through a window at another world.

The heavy, florid man shook his shoulders, straightened himself and rose. With an excuse that lacked something of his usual grace he took his leave of the sullen young man in the chair by the fireside and crossed the passage to the withdrawing-room.

Mrs. Sylk was in the window-place, reading; she had tactfully withdrawn herself, knowing that the suitor was likely to follow the beloved. And Mr. Mostyn took the hint and crossed to the hearth where Laura, in her green gown, sat on a low divan of dark-yellow silk.

The room was as "old-fashioned"—that was the term Mr. Mostyn used in his mind—as the rest of the house. Heavy pieces of furniture, inlaid and finely finished, dark pictures of the last century (no portraits here, but fruit pieces and landscapes again such as he had in his own room), a rich marble chimney-piece, great blue vases of Rockingham china, painted with bunches of roses and carnations, chairs covered with that rich dark-yellow satin. The room gave a great impression of wealth and dignity, but it was not an apartment that Mr. Mostyn cared for in the least.

He found the exertion of making himself agreeable more and more difficult, yet he was a man to whom it came very easily to charm and ingratiate himself with people, and Laura smiled at him in amiable fashion, as if she were glad to have his company. She made no pretence of needlework or of turning over the pages of a book, her hands lay idle in her lap. She lifted up a corner of her dark-green skirt and asked him if he liked the colour of the material.

"The colour of laurel leaves; you know—Laura," she smiled, and he made some conventional remark about the poetical association with her charming name.

He then asked her, in a tender tone that could not possibly give offence, why she disliked the portrait in the dining-room.
"I think it very unreasonable of Theo to keep it there if you don't care for it. I'll get it removed for you, dear Laura."

"Will you?" She seemed surprised and grateful, touched at anyone taking such interest in her. Her eyes turned on him with an intensity of expression, an expression he could not quite understand, but that almost embarrassed him, easy man of the world as he was. What was the matter with the child?

"Why, of course I will! It's only a little thing. Your brother's difficult sometimes, isn't he, Laura, but I dare say I can manage him for you."

"Yes, I dare say you could, Harry. You seem to me the sort of man who could manage most things. But it's no use having the portraits moved." She was silent a moment, then she added: "For I think it is too late."

"What do you mean—too late, dear Laura? Do you mean that you'll always remember the portrait even when it's moved?"

"You're quick, and I'm not used to having quick people about me, not since Lucius went."

Mrs. Sylk looked up from her book at hearing this name. How could Laura speak this name in such a casual fashion in front of this man who was to be her husband! But Laura seemed to have forgotten that anybody else was there; she rose and rested her elbow on the marble mantelshelf close to the gleaming splendour of the dark-blue Rockingham vase, the firelight glowing all over her beauty and her silk.

"This Lucius was a friend of yours, was he not?" asked Mr. Mostyn gently.

"Yes, a friend. A friend of Theo's too. It's no use speaking of him. And I don't think it's any use your having the portrait moved. You might find out who the original of the other portrait is—the man, you know."

"It's a fine piece of work, I dare say it would sell for a round sum. Perhaps as it's not a member of the family, we could induce Theo to part with it, eh, Laura?"

"You're kind," she complimented him again, looking at him with a smile. "It's quite a fair bargain between us, isn't it? You will be kind to me and take me away, and then you can have all my money. I believe you want it, don't you?"

"You're a most precocious girl, as precocious as your brother. Why do you keep telling me that I want your money?" He was able to be quite easy, though she in her
childish candour had come so near the truth. "Everyone’s glad to have large sums of money to handle, Laura. Yours will be wisely invested and wisely spent. You shall have as much of it as you wish for yourself."

"I don’t know anything about it," she said indifferently. "If it’s any good to you, I’m glad. I shall be so grateful to you for taking me away."

"It’s pretty dull here in the winter, what do you do all day?" he agreed. "I must try to think of something to amuse you."

"Oh, but I have an amusement! I do distilling. I found the still upstairs in the little closet. You know, that one near the great chamber where the dress was." She paused, looked at him doubtfully, then continued: "I found the yellow dress that the woman in the picture, the other Laura, is wearing."

Mr. Mostyn affected a surprise that masked curiosity.

"And then I was rather ill. And they took it away and destroyed it. And there were some other clothes too, some trinkets and odd things, I believe some letters. I wish I could have read them." Her face puckered up like a child’s who is about to cry. "They left the furniture. It’s a fine room, the best in the Hall, I must show it to you. And there’s a closet off it, and it’s arranged as a distillery. And, I’ve got Mrs. Marston, the housekeeper, to show me how to distil, and when I was in London I bought several books. When the roses and carnations come I shall make the perfumes and essences."

"That’s a pretty art," said he, glad that she had found something to please her, for he good-naturedly liked to think that the girl was happy in this wretched place, for so, for all its splendour, he thought Leppard Hall. "To-morrow you must show me; I know nothing of such things. But you have no flowers to distil just now."

"I experiment with evergreen and what I can get from the hothouse," smiled Laura. "How strange to see you at Leppard Hall," she added inconsequently. "You don’t seem to belong here at all. And yet you are to be a Sarelle also. Do you know anything about us?"

"Is there much to know?" he parried. "You have a long and honourable history. Your brother is very proud of it, I think."

"I don’t know that there’s anything to be proud of," said Laura. "Do you like Leppard Hall? I think it is horrible, so
ugly and gloomy. It always seems cold, too, as if the fires were of elmwood."

"Why, doesn't elmwood give out heat?" he asked easily.

"Don't you know? It's the wood they make coffins of, the very flames are cold."

"You have a curious fancy, my dear Laura—a little morbid, don't you think, and unwholesome? Do you go riding? Shall we, if the snow holds off sufficiently, go riding to-morrow, say to Rugby or Warwick? You have friends in the neighbourhood?"

He probed eagerly into the girl's pastimes, habits, and diversions.

But Laura shook her head; a sudden languor like that which had attacked her brother seemed to come over her. She rose, made a quick curtsy, and left the room, saying she was tired and on the morrow would show him her still.

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Mr. Mostyn endured the life of Leppard Hall for a few days, and then, under the excuse of looking for some books that Sir Theodosius was expecting by rail, rode into Warwick. The day was fairly fine and he tried to persuade Laura to accompany him, but she refused to leave the house. She was a good horsewoman but not fond of that exercise and preferred to walk along the banks of the river, leaning on the arm of Mrs. Sylk, or by herself, sometimes very slowly with a heavy dragging step, sometimes with great rapidity, almost, Mrs. Sylk thought with terror, an unnatural swiftness.

It took all the glitter of the Sarelle fortune to reconcile Mr. Mostyn to the match. After two days at Leppard Hall his dislike of Sir Theodosius was intensified and he found that he was not as much in love with the charming Miss Laura as he had hoped he was.

The girl was unaccountable, her thoughts always seemed far away. He wondered if she was in love with another man. He had made some shrewd inquiries about Lucius Delaunay, who had been so popular in Leppard and who had left his place so suddenly. Not that that was uncommon; Mr. Erskine, the present steward, was about to leave after remaining only eighteen months. He was an austere Scot and not much was to be got out of him, though Mr. Mostyn had tried his genial good-humour upon him in a series of questions, some more
or less flattering, about the estate and his management of it.

'I feel like an interloper here,' Harry Mostyn thought as he rode into Warwick. 'I don't like the place, and I can swear that it doesn't like me. That reflection shows I am getting as superstitious as they are. It's all old-fashioned, out of date, behind the times, that's what it is. It isn't wholesome not to change a place for nearly a hundred years.'

The books had not arrived at Warwick station, and Mr. Mostyn, who knew no one in the town, refreshed himself at the inn, the Bear and Ragged Staff, and as he drank in the parlour noticed a very handsome whip in a glass case over the mantelpiece. Surprised at seeing such an object so carefully preserved in such a position, he asked the landlord, who was serving him, the meaning of it.

"Why, that," replied the man, with an air of relish, "belonged to Captain Avershaw."

"And who might Captain Avershaw be?" asked Mr. Mostyn good-humouredly. "I'm a stranger here, I don't know your local celebrities."

"He's a gentleman who was hanged here, something like sixty years ago." The landlord still seemed to enjoy the dark mystery, as Mr. Mostyn supposed it to be.

"Ah, well, in those days they hanged people for very little. What was this—highway robbery?"

"No, it was murder." And the landlord refused to say another word on the subject. "We won't talk of it. It's one of those tales that are supposed to be hushed up, as the saying goes."

Harry Mostyn was not much interested in this relic of a murderer or in the hint of a tale the landlord mouthed over with slow pleasure in a local celebrity; Mostyn had, in the course of many travels, come across extraordinary mementoes of the past from emblazoned monuments to such personal trifles as this. And as he looked with indifference on the glass case that contained the handsome riding-whip, he wondered to himself why he did not leave the man to his dull gossip. But there was a heaviness, not customary with his usual volatile spirit, on Mr. Mostyn. The scene about him seemed to recede and to become like a painted drop-cloth. He had a sensation almost as if he had been partially stunned or by some means had lapsed into a sudden half-consciousness. He saw the parlour in every detail, from the sand on the floor to the whip in its case and the fire burning clearly behind the brightly
polished bars of the steel grate; he saw the landlord with his
veinous nose and mottled dewlaps of flesh, and he heard his
voice saying:

"Yes, Captain Avershaw was a grand gentleman. He used
to come here in my grandfather's time, and he sent him that
whip from the prison—the castle, you know—for they let him
keep some of his possessions—the day before he went to the
cart and the rope. He was a merry gentleman to the last and a
good painter, too. My father used to say that he painted a
sign for this inn instead of paying the bill once. He did it in a
couple of hours, but where it's gone to I don't know."

Harry Mostyn heard these words and they seemed to him
as if they were recited by an actor on the stage. He felt dis-
gusted, almost alarmed by the lethargy that had crept over
him, he believed, when he had first entered the town of War-
wick, and insensitive as he was to the overtones and under-
currents of life, he began to feel susceptible to a certain peril
of the mind.

Putting his glass down, he said half stupidly, and it was
not his usual manner to be stupid, for he was a man who was
alert and keen to both the business and the pleasures of life:

"For what was this Captain Avershaw hanged?"

"For the murder of his brother-in-law," said the landlord,
with relish. "He had great connections, too, came of a noble
family, as you might say. But there was no sparing him,
though he had a London surgeon and a London lawyer down,
who made a great fight for him at the Assizes."

"Well, it's an old story now," said Mr. Mostyn, still making
that effort as if against the misting of his senses and a weight
upon his tongue and eyes, "and has nothing to do with me.
It's a queer thing for you to keep that whip there; it must be
valuable, too. The handle seems of gold."

"Gold-plated," remarked the landlord with pride. "Can I
get you another drink, sir?"

"Nothing more. I suppose," Mr. Mostyn added, and he
could not understand why he asked the question, for it did not
sound like his own voice speaking, "he hasn't left a ghost be-
hind, this gentlemanly murderer of yours?"

"I never heard of it," answered the other, with an ugly, sly
look. "You can still see up at the Castle prison some drawings
he made on the wall—with the juice of black cherries some
friends sent him, I believe, for it was the summer season
when he suffered. They say his lady walks, but that would be
at Leppard, where she’s buried, not here.”

“Buried at Leppard, eh!” repeated Mr. Mostyn, lazily pay-
ing the reckoning. “Ay, I think that place is haunted enough.”

He spoke entirely from his own impression of the Hall and
the surrounding country, for he had heard no sinister tale con-
ected with either, but the landlord took him up as if he under-
stood perfectly what he had meant, and with an odious
chuckle said:

“Ay, sir, I’ll wager that’s haunted—every corner of it. And
as for trying to live an old scandal down, why, it’s nothing but
foolishness and tempting of the Devil.”

Mr. Mostyn went away quickly, forcing his own sloth. He
would have liked to stay by the fire, for the weather was grey
and chill, and he was reluctant to return to Leppard Hall. But
he also had a strong dislike to remain in that parlour and
hear the landlord talking of the hanging of Captain Avershaw.

“So Madam Avershaw lies in Leppard Church or the church-
yard,’ he mused. ‘Well, it always seemed to me a place to be
avoided. I suppose I’ll have to go there on Sundays. I’ll look
out for her grave.’

Then he checked himself for his thoughts, so suddenly that
he pulled at his horse’s bridle and made the animal prance.
Again he was aware of that peril to the mind, that super-
natural terror that seemed enveloping him as the mist en-
veloped the water-meadows.

“What’s any of it to me?” he considered. ‘I’ve never dwelt
on such matters before. Am I one to be frightened at ghosts
or bogeys?’

But he rode back in a gloomy and sober mood, as if he
had left all his wits, as he thought bitterly, and all his gaiety
in London.

Lappard certainly was a melancholy place. And he had
never liked the country save for hunting, and Sir Theodosius
was no sportsman; why, he never left the house, it seemed,
and had no visitors.

For a moment a curious temptation came to Harry Mostyn,
a wish to indulge his own cowardice, his own fear, to escape
from this countryside and return to his usual life and his usual
embarrassments. He did not love Laura Sarelle; he did not,
he thought now in this cold moment of self-examination and
detachment from the situation, even like her. He had nothing
whatever in common with Sir Theodosius; the sickly, pedanti-

Better to leave the whole “damned crew”, as he named

them in his mind. He detested that Mrs. Sylk, too, with her

nervous, frightened air and her prying looks, and Parson Mist

seemed half-witted to the elegant townsman, while his wife

was a crippled imbecile. And the steward, a sullen man,

under dismissal for no fault of his own... fine company, in-

deed... .

But as Harry Mostyn rode back along the high road from

Warwick to Leppard he conquered this mood and despised

himself for having even for a second indulged it. He was not a

young man or one with very much to offer beyond specious

manners, a knowledge of the world, and good looks rapidly

becoming over-florid. Nor were girls with a fortune of a hun-
dred thousand pounds to be picked up any day, even by those

younger and better endowed than himself.

Besides, his financial difficulties were somewhat worse than

he liked to admit even to himself. He had known for some

time that he would have to go heiress-hunting, and this prize

had dropped into his lap, and he would be something more

than a fool to give it up because of the gloom of the country-

side during a hard winter. “It is only,” he told himself, “that

I’m not used to this kind of life. Of course, I could put it

through even if it were worse than this for the sake of the

money.”

His shrewd common sense asserted itself. Not only would

he have to put it through, he would have to go carefully.
Theodosius must be conciliated, he must be flattered. His big

bait, of course, was the offer to change his name. Laura must

be won over, flattered too, but in a different way. Even Mrs.

Sylk must be placated. Tedious, a wearisome task, and there

would be no one to help him. He was single-handed in the

establishment, save for his bodyservant. And he would cer-
tainly have to force his inclinations to show any interest in Sir

Theodosius’ bookish concerns. The only part of the business

in which he was likely to take any pleasure was looking over

the estate and getting hold of the accounts if he could.

Yes, he must concentrate on that. Laura’s fortune, a hun-
dred thousand pounds that he would be able to handle as soon

as he married her, and that larger fortune that she would

come into when her brother died, certainly at least double

that amount.
Two other considerations were turned over in the florid gentleman’s calculating mind as he rode towards Leppard Hall. The first was: ‘I don’t really know sufficient about these people. I thought that old lawyer was fencing with me. I tried to search my mind for what I could remember about them in Jamaica, but it’s not much. Everyone around here seems dumb or stupid, or sullen.’

The second consideration was: ‘When I’m master of the place I’ll have the Hall down. I shan’t very often be even in whatever I decide to raise in its place.’ A Gothic mansion, he decided, with mock turrets, and a lodge like a hunting-box, that would be better than this drab grey Palladian building, which had a horrid air of looming larger and larger as you gazed at it till it filled the whole landscape.

Mr. Mostyn’s body servant, Flasket, was a man admirably suited to such a master. He had been with him for many years and was well paid and well fee’d for his services and his discretion. Mr. Mostyn never had any luck on the racecourse or the gaming-tables of which Flasket did not have his part. There were many little transactions that others might have considered discreditable that had been shared between them.

It was to Flasket, a quiet-mannered, excellently trained man with a porridge-coloured face pitted with smallpox, that Harry Mostyn now entrusted the task of finding out something about the Sarelles. He knew that would not be very easy; the servants had been changed frequently during the three and a half years that brother and sister had lived at Leppard Hall, but some had been there for nearly all that time, and some of the tenants could remember the days of Sir John and Sir Richard.

“Don’t go prying, openly sticking your nose into affairs, I needn’t warn you of that,” said Mr. Mostyn, who had already conveyed in delicate fashion to the manservant how much depended on his marriage to this heiress, “but just see what you can pick up.” And as an afterthought, and really against his own volition, he added: “I’d like to know something about a Madam Avershaw who is buried in the church.”

Having thus set his faithful spy at work, Mr. Mostyn rallied all the patience he possessed to put a difficult business through successfully and gracefully. He devoted himself principally
to Theodosius, with whom he soon (and readily) increased his influence. The young baronet seemed lonely, unhappy and baffled. He liked a companion who endured his moods, his ill-tempers, his complaints, his absorption in his classical labours. One who allowed him to boast, in his genteel fashion, about the family and the estates, support him, indeed, in every whim and every prejudice.

And Mr. Mostyn found the young man's moods and tempers easier to bear, as he mentally noted for himself the extent of the property and how extremely well-kept it was—the farms, the mill, the meadows, the parkland, the fine timber, cattle and sheep, horses and carriages in the stables. Yes, all was well noted by Mr. Harry Mostyn, down to the pictures and the furniture, the gold and silver plate used with unnecessary ostentation at the evening meal, the fine Persian carpets, the valuable hangings, the closets and cupboards stacked with all manner of furnishing.

With Laura the affair was more difficult. There was, after all, nothing much to complain of in the girl, who entirely occupied herself, as Mr. Mostyn noticed with complacent self-satisfaction, in household duties. She had become, of a sudden, domesticated, and she spent most of her time in the little room upstairs fitted up with still and retort that she had turned into her own special apartment and where she was employed, sometimes under the supervision of the housekeeper, Mrs. Marston, and sometimes alone, distilling perfumes and essences and making pomades and lotions.

When she gave her betrothed her company she was pleasant enough, though too shrewd for his liking. She did not hesitate to address him to his face, with a kind of sneering lightness, as a fortune-hunter, and though he was accomplished enough to pass off such talk as mere pleasantry, he did not much relish it as it was too near the truth.

Nor could he make much headway with Hetty Sylk. She seemed to mistrust him, never to let him into her confidence, as he would have much liked to be let into it, for he felt that she held the key to the characters and careers of both brother and sister. But she always kept him at arm's length and he could not make her yield to his subtle and discreet flatteries. He decided that, when he had married Laura, Mrs. Sylk should leave—quite handsomely, of course, with a pension, but definitely leave—his establishment.
It was nearly the Christmas season before Timothy Flasket made his report to his master; Mr. Mostyn had not questioned the servant, knowing that it would be a slow and perhaps difficult business for him to collect his facts and impressions, and that when he was ready he would speak.

But this evening, while he was dressing his master’s still handsome and abundant hair and side-whiskers, a bronze colour becomingly flecked with grey, Flasket began, quietly and decorously, to repeat what he had learned since he had come to Leppard Hall.

It was not very much. The man was disappointed to have to relate, and the master disappointed to have to hear, a report that consisted of very vague impressions and very few facts. The only important thing that Flasket had been able to discover through the servants, and they had been not at all easy to deal with, was the curious little episode when Miss Laura had fallen into the river while wearing an antique gown that she had discovered in the great bedchamber attached to the little room where she now worked at the still: empty apartments opposite her own, and directly above those given to Harry Mostyn, that faced those of Sir Theodosius.

Flasket related the episode, in every detail as he had learned it, to his master. He ventured to think that it was important, because it coincided with the sudden departure of Mr. Lucius Delaunay, who had been considered the closest possible friend of Sir Theodosius. Everyone on the estate and in the house had been immensely surprised by the young man’s departure, and as it came so close on the accident to Miss Laura it had been believed that Mr. Delaunay had made an unexpected offer for her hand, been repulsed, and had gone on the instant, not even sleeping another night in the Dower House, but leaving for Warwick with his luggage all unpacked to be sent on after him.

“Good God!” said Mr. Mostyn slowly, looking at himself in the glass. “Do you mean they were in love with each other?”

The question, though addressed by a master to a servant whom he employed as a spy, was spoken in a respectable tone. Harry Mostyn knew how to give a gloss of decency to these affairs.

“Everyone’s very tight-lipped, sir,” said Flasket—“very tight-lipped indeed. I’ve only put these together from hints. There’s an old man works at the stables who knows a bit more than they think he does. And there’s one of the maids
here now who heard it from another maid. The girls were only together in the house a couple of days, but this Patty, the one who left, she evidently was full of it."

"It sounds quite likely. Who was this Mr. Delaunay?"

Flasket had found out, and related the story to his master.

"So he's gone to Ireland. No danger there, I suppose. Probably by now she's forgotten him. A strange thing for Sir Theodosius to allow a personable young man to be shut up with his young sister. . . ."

"He was well liked, this Mr. Delaunay, everyone respected him. He was a good steward, too; they say he left the place in excellent condition. He used to help Sir Theodosius with his books."

"A paragon," remarked Mr. Mostyn lightly.

"But penniless, sir," said Flasket. "He had very little but the money he got here."

"That would be the trouble, of course. The young lady being an heiress and not going out into society. And why was she dressed up in this antique style? The gown you say that she found upstairs?"

"Yes, and then she had an illness. It was nearly brain-fever, so I hear. And this old stableman, Peach, says there was a great bonfire made, he had to go with a rake and help one of the gardeners burn the things. Clothes they were, and books, packets of letters, drawings, all taken out of the room, the great bedchamber they call it, upstairs."

"To whom did they belong?" asked Mr. Mostyn. He rose, patting the smooth waves of his thick hair. What Flasket had found out might be useful after all. . . .

"Oh, they belonged to the other Miss Laura Sarelle, the lady who was the last of the main branch of the family, sir."

"Yes, I've heard of her," Mostyn said thoughtfully. "She died young, didn't she?"

"Yes. I can't get to her story. But there's something there, everyone's very quiet. She's buried in the church, while the others are in the mausoleum. She was only four-and-twenty. There was some trouble."

"A scandal?"

"I think so, sir, pretty considerable. An inquest. Someone staying at the house and she careless with a sleeping-draught."

Mr. Mostyn knew something of the characters of the two last owners of Leppard Hall, hard-headed men who prided
themselves on their logic and their worldly common sense. He supposed that this was why they had tucked away, or rather refused to take any notice of, an old gossiping tale that other families might have found hard to endure. That was why they had altered nothing at Leppard Hall, why the last of them had allowed his daughter to be christened Laura.

Continuing these thoughts aloud, Mr. Mostyn said:

“You’ll notice, Flasket, that these are the first two Sarelles to live here since Miss Laura Sarelle died. I wonder what room she died in, and of what?”

“A consumption of the lungs, sir, I think. Not a strong family.” The servant added with meaning, “Nor in the head, sir, if you understand what I mean. They’re very eccentric and wild.”

“You’ve heard that! About these two?—Sir Theo and his sister?”

“They’re supposed to be strange, sir,” continued Flasket, picking his words very carefully. “Mrs. Sylk came down one night for a cordial for Miss Laura, she was much agitated. She let the housekeeper, Mrs. Marston then, know that Miss Laura used to have fits at a time when she was a child—nightmares, and sleepwalking and that kind of thing, as if she was always afraid. And that was in the days when she was happy, living with her aunt, Mrs. Tollis, at Hampstead.”

“When she was happy!” Mr. Mostyn caught those words. “Hasn’t she been supposed to be happy while she’s been at Leppard Hall?”

“Not at all, sir. Everyone says that. The young lady’s always wanted to get away. She’s hated the place.”

“She’s never made any mystery of that. That’s why she’s marrying me, and she told me so flatly. You don’t think it’s more than a girl’s whims or fancy?”

“I don’t know, sir. It’s so very difficult to find out. You know the young lady better than I do.” Flasket stared downwards decorously. “She’s thought wild.”

“I don’t care what you say, Flasket, it’s important for me to know.”

“Yes, sir. Some of them think she’s a little unsettled in her wits, unbalanced in her mind, especially since her illness. She was always different, I take it, when she was in the company of this Mr. Delaunay. They used to ride together, visit the estate. And when he was working with her brother, and that kind of thing, sharpening the pens, acting as a secretary, as
you might say, sir. Then, from what I can hear, she seemed happy."

"Well, she seems happy enough now," said Mr. Mostyn, seating himself again in front of the dressing-table while the bodyservant brought out the long fine linen cravat and began to wind it round his throat.

"Yes, sir. But if you'll pardon me, sir, that's thought to be but a passing craze, this distilling and all this housewifery. She never had any interest in it before. And the room, sir, in which she's working adjoins that in which she found the clothes, all the things that old Toby Peach saw burned."

"I don't suppose there's anything in any of it," mused Mr. Mostyn with a frown on the brow that was usually so smooth, "nothing to upset any plans of mine. But I must confess that I think the place is melancholy and it is the prospect of a swingeing fortune that's kept me here."

"I don't like it myself, sir," agreed the servant, "I shall be glad when we return to town."

"That won't be yet, my poor fellow, I can assure you. Things can't be hurried. I shall go and see Miss Laura in her room and try to find out what's in her mind. Perhaps she's heard some old story and is brooding on it. She's a rather strange creature, very high-spirited and shrewd, you know, Flasket, but with moods. Yes, I can understand that she had fits of melancholy when she was a child. . . ."

He turned this prospect over in his mind.

Eccentricities, Flasket had said. Perhaps the man did not like to repeat that he had been told there was insanity in the Sarelle family. Would it matter? He, Harry Mostyn, would have to take the name, the estate and Laura as a wife. Well, it would be worth it. A fortune like that would go far to solace a man, even for a wife who was unsettled in her wits. And if they had children—well, a hundred to one the children would take after him, not after their mother. These fancies were no concern of his, save in so far as they balked his immediate designs.

He stood up, a fine, handsome figure in his correct evening attire, the black coat with the well-cut tails, frills on the broad bosom of the shirt, cravat, pointed collar, well-trimmed glossy hair and whiskers, tight trousers, elegantly cut and strapped under the feet. He surveyed himself with a certain satisfaction; he had always found a naïve pleasure in his own good looks.
"Tell me," he added as an afterthought, "do you hear anything of this Mrs. Avershaw? I don't know why the name sticks in my mind. I think I'm getting infected with the place, too. It's a thing I shouldn't have thought of twice in London, that story I heard in Warwick."

"No, sir, you are mistaken there. There is no Madam Avershaw buried either in the church or in the churchyard. No one knows the name here at Leppard."

"Well, then, I suppose that fool at Warwick was telling me lies. What does it matter?—it's of no moment."

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When Mr. Mostyn went down to dinner that evening he felt in a better mood, for he was possessed of a certain power. The knowledge that he had gained from Flasket was like a secret weapon. He did know these people far better as a result of the servant's prying. He had heard many little anecdotes of the behaviour of Sir Theodosius and of Laura Sarelle; he knew, even, what had been gathered of the doctor's report on the young baronet's health. And then his knowledge of this possible love story—all that was very useful.

He leaned back in his chair, covered with the gleaming brocade, and looked across the branch of wax candles at Laura, who was sitting near the fireplace. She was, after her usual habit, far too richly dressed for a family party in a country house. Her gown of opal-coloured silk reflected the flames in long shimmers of reddish light. Thick lace in the design of cobwebs and roses was over her bosom, her dark hair was caught with little combs of corral. She looked very pretty, too, the calculating lover thought, quite enchanting with her precise features, her dark sparkling eyes, and the flush—not unlike the flush of fever—in her cheeks.

He had not been able, greatly to his chagrin, to oblige her in the matter of the portraits. Sir Theodosius had proved unexpectedly obstinate on that point. On no account would he have the two pictures moved, his principal reason being, so far as Mr. Mostyn could discover, that Laura had asked for them to be taken away. He had emphasized that the girl was wilful and must not be humoured.

Harry Mostyn, good-natured, tolerant, and tactful, had been irritated by this obstinacy, and especially as he had wished to
go to Laura and tell her that he had been able to secure her a favour.

But nothing had been said for some weeks now about the portraits and he hoped she had forgotten them. He noticed she never glanced towards them. For himself, he was rather uncomfortably conscious of them; placed as they were at the end of the room, facing down the table, they sometimes seemed to him as if they were two people seated at that part of the board, which was always empty. The candlelight would catch the carnation, especially in the portrait of the man, which was beautifully painted, and seemed to give it the glow of living flesh, and the dark eyes would appear in the flicker of the flame to move and question, the ruddy lips part with a sneering smile, while the more poorly painted picture of the girl in her primrose silk would be also affected by the light and shade and appear to turn into a pale and wavering apparition standing there in a bewildered way at the head of the board as if looking for her place.

Mr. Mostyn, who had never before been affected by any kind of superstitious fears, found himself reflecting uncomfortably that this house was exactly at it had been when those pictures were painted and their originals were moving about. It was all very handsome, of course, and in the best style. But, for himself, he would have it all altered when he was master here.

For the first time the thought came into his mind: 'I wonder how soon I shall be master?'

He looked away from Laura, with her bewitching prettiness—she was gay to-night and laughing a good deal at the foolish talk passing between her and Hetty Sylk—to the head of the table where the young baronet sat in the great chair of purple velvet padding with arms scrolled up in the back into the carved arms of the Sarelles with their motto beneath, and the goshawks above.

Mr. Mostyn had entered on this match out of entirely self-interested motives, but he had never before admitted to himself that he had been directly calculating on a speedy accession to the Sarelle states. No, such a thing had never occurred to him. His future brother-in-law was a young man, and he put all that into the distance—why, of course, when one thought of it, it was absurd. He was a man of nearly forty years of age, the baronet was but twenty-four. Yet it had come to him, as now, as if someone had whispered the words
in his ear: ‘When shall I be master here?’ And he found himself gazing intently at the young man, marking his thin, almost hollow cheeks, the shadows under his eyes, the narrow chest, the thin hands that rested on the table.

Surely the man was seriously ill, doomed to die young. A surge of triumphant pleasure shook Mr. Mostyn.

Afraid that his feelings might show in his eyes, he turned them hastily away and found them held, as it were, by the gaze of the young man in the portrait. It seemed to him as if that bright and earnest face was looking at him, trying to speak, trying to impress some emotion on him, to convey something to him. The impression was as forcible as if somebody had suddenly gripped him by the shoulder or the wrist.

Mr. Mostyn lowered his glance to his plate. To steady himself he remarked of how exquisite a porcelain it was made and how delicately ringed with painted fruit. A sudden revulsion of feeling sickened him. Never before had he realized that his plan to marry Laura Sarelle was essentially base. After all, it was a usual arrangement for a man, who had himself something to offer in the way of position, to marry a woman much younger than himself with a large fortune and use that to relieve his own embarrassment.

‘I’m going to take the damned name,’ he said to himself. ‘That seems to mean a lot to the young man.’

But he was uneasy, baffled, confused, caught out in a secret villainy, as it seemed to him, and urged on by the contemplation of a yet greater villainy. The hundred thousand pounds that would come to him with Laura now seemed as nothing. It was the house he wanted, the estate. He, who had hitherto been a wanderer, who had largely lived in hotels and furnished houses and never cared anything for the property in Jamaica from which he had derived his money, now felt a lust for the possession of the buildings, the soil on which they stood, parkland, acres, even the old mill, the mausoleum—he wanted to own them.

He looked at the motto cut about the chair-back, that twisted in a dark line above the dark bent head of Sir Theodosius: “One like another.” It was doggerel, it had no meaning.

He put his hand to his forehead and leaned back in his own chair. Sir Theodosius said something to him, but Harry Mostyn did not hear it. He murmured some non-committal reply.
The light chatter of the women went on. Laura seemed excited underneath her foolish gaiety. Hetty Sylk, Mr. Mostyn thought as he looked at her furtively, appeared uneasy, embarrassed. Only social tact enabled her to keep the conversation going.

Sir Theodosius rose. He said that he would not go into the withdrawing-room that night but would return to his library, where he had some work to finish.

"You should employ a secretary," said Mr. Mostyn, with an effort after his usual courteous address, "for these musty labours."

"Yes, yes," said the young man with great irritation. "I have had several applications. I must go to London to interview the applicants. My papers are in a bad confusion, but I would rather labour alone than with someone whom I do not trust."

"Your former secretary, who was the steward too, a wonder of a fellow I should think. Mr. Delaunay? A pity you lost him."

Mr. Mostyn was not quite sure that this challenge was wise, or even discreet. He had a little lost his self-control and did not know why, the words seemed forced out of him. 'After all,' he said to himself uncomfortably, 'it will test whether what Flasket said was true.'

Yes, it was true. Laura stopped talking. She was looking at him across the table with narrow eyes of enmity, while Sir Theodosius said with an exasperation that he did not try to gloss over:

"Delaunay was an obliging fellow, an old friend of mine, but he played me false. He was quite untrue to his charge. I don't wish him spoken of in this house, Harry. Pray understand that for the future."

The elder man had to endure this rebuke, that seemed to him an impertinence. Well, he had found out what he wanted to know. He had seen Mrs. Sylk pressing her lips together and looking frightened. None of them was clever at concealing a secret.

He did not like the expression on Laura's face. Not only did it seem to him to confirm Flasket's story, that she had once been willing to accept Lucius Delaunay as suitor, it seemed to mean that she still had far too great an interest in him.

'I must find out something about him,' thought Harry Mostyn. 'He seems kept at arm's length.' Aloud, in an attempt
to cover the situation, that was more painful than any that had yet arisen since he had been at Leppard Hall, he asked the girl if she would show him her distillery.

"At this hour of night?" said Laura flippantly. "I don't suppose there's a fire in the room, it will be cold. Besides, you're not interested in such things, are you, sir?"

"I'm interested in everything you do, Laura. You spend a great deal of your time up there. You give me very little of your company. If I joined you in your pursuit I might see a little more of you."

He bent towards the girl with the flattering air that he knew so well how to assume and that seldom failed in its effect on women. She seemed to scorn this attractive lure and lifted her lip in a way that irritated him greatly.

"Very well, you may come upstairs. Mrs. Sylk, won't you come too? But first we will go into the withdrawing-room for a little while. They must light a fire, you know."

"I wish you were something of a scholar, Mostyn," complained Theodosius in a heavy tone; "you might come into the library and help me."

"What little Latin I ever knew I've forgotten, and I never was any good at Greek," smiled Mr. Mostyn. He was sorry himself that he did not possess these accomplishments that would have enabled him to get even more firm a hold over the young baronet. "But you know I will do anything in my power to help you," he added earnestly and with a real sincerity. "I'll go up to London if you like and find someone. There must be plenty of starving scholars about only too thankful for such a post."

"I'll think of it," replied Sir Theodosius more graciously. He seldom failed to respond to the flattering advances made by Harry Mostyn. "You've been a great help with the estate. That makes me lazy; I must find another steward, too. Nothing's been done with the estate, save what you've done, since Erskine went."

"Well, that's only a matter of a week or two. You've been having an accountant in often enough from Warwick. The place almost runs itself."

This, Harry Mostyn afterwards felt, was the wrong thing to have said, because Laura put in with a cool, baffling air:

"Yes, that's because of the two years of good work that Lucius Delaunay put into it. He was an excellent steward.
Theo will never find one like him again, to help both in the library and on the estate."

With that she left the room with a burst of laughter, hanging on to the arm of Mrs. Sylk, whose fright seemed intensified.

"Who was this Mr. Delaunay, this Lucius?" asked Harry Mostyn easily.

The baronet rose from the table and came to the fire, standing there rubbing his hands together as if his blood was chilled, although the flames were giving out a strong and steady heat.

"My dear Harry," replied the young man, "it was only a few moments ago I said the name was not to be mentioned in this house again."

"Forgive me! I'm curious. I shouldn't have thought you were a man to harbour petty resentment. What could the fellow have done that so offended you, an old friend too?"

"I tell you he betrayed me. I dare say you think that sounds like the playhouse or an old tragedy, but it happens in real life, you know. One does get betrayed. One trusts, and is deceived."

"He wasn't honest?" Harry Mostyn, though he knew it might be to his own disadvantage, could not forbear from probing the matter. "The accounts perhaps? Stewards have strong temptations."

"Nothing of that kind," replied Sir Theo with sudden heat. "Leave the matter, Harry. I never want to see Delaunay again, and I don't suppose I shall. He's in Ireland with his relatives."

"And he's never been back here since?"

"Why, no, he left at a few hours' notice."

"You haven't met him in London either?"

"Why, no again. Yet, why are you questioning me?"

"Only because I am to marry your sister, take the name, manage your place, Theo. I've a deep interest in all that concerns you."

This was said with befitting dignity, and Sir Theo seemed satisfied.

After the shortest possible delay Harry Mostyn joined the ladies in the great withdrawing-room that looked very pleasant with lustrous brocade and satin and its light charming pictures in crayon and water-colours.

And very charming too looked Laura Sarelle. She had a violet jacket with a big collar of white fur, which she had put
over her opal-coloured silk dress, and seemed now quite excited at the prospect of showing her new toys, as she thought of them, to her future husband.

As she was kinder to him than she had been for some time, his spirits rose. Perhaps after all she was going to be more malleable than he had expected. Perhaps also he was going to like her a little better than he had expected. He tried to dwell upon her pleasing features and forget her shrewd spirit, her eccentric ways, her occasionally wild laughter, tried to forget what was to him, after all, her most objectionable habit—her reminding him now and then of the fact that she knew he was after her fortune and not her person.

How she had picked up such worldly knowledge he could not guess. Someone must have been indiscreet in her presence. Perhaps that Mrs. Hetty Sylk, whom he much distrusted.

When they supposed that the fire had burned up sufficiently to warm the room they went up the beautiful shallow staircase of gleaming amber-coloured wood and reached, on the second floor, the rooms that Laura Sarelle had lately made her own.

These consisted of a large chamber looking on the front of the house, with a smaller closet attached. Remembering Flasket’s story, Harry Mostyn entered this room with some curiosity. He thought that he might find it completely stripped, but no, evidently it was the smaller, articles only that had fed the bonfire that old Toby Peach had helped to turn over with his pitchfork.

The candles, as well as the fire, had been lit and the room was, in outward seeming, a handsome and a pleasant apartment. The shutters were closed over the window and in front of them hung curtains of a plain green serge. The walls were panelled from floor to ceiling, which itself had a handsome design in plaster. This panelling and the oak boards of the floor had lately been cleaned and polished. The fire burned on an open hearth and there was a chimney-piece of white marble fairly carved with cypress leaves.

The fireplace directly faced the door, the window was at the left, and to the right was a single bed with a four-posted tester without any furniture or draperies. A small cabinet of inlaid wood stood beside this, in the window-place was an elegant bureau with a green baize top, and at the foot of the bed was a large chair with arms. There was no other furniture in the room.

Laura crossed it immediately to a door that was directly
opposite the one that opened on to the stairway. In her shimm-ering silk and with her bright air she seemed to catch and give forth again all the light that was in the room.

Harry Mostyn followed her through the inner door and found himself in what she termed the closet, but was really a fair-sized room, which had been fitted up as a distillery. There was the still and all the paraphernalia, including a small oven. It looked, Mr. Mostyn thought, like one of the old prints of an alchemist's cell. But, of course, it had a different and modern air owing to the shape of the room, the panelled walls, the straight window in which hung a long green serge curtain similar to that in the bedchamber. And, oddly enough, there was in this room a small bed also, but without a tester and completely unfurnished, merely the wooden frame.

The rest of the furniture consisted but of a chair and a table, some shelves on which stood various chemist's pots of Delft and Italian majolica.

Although Laura Sarelle had of late spent so many of her hours there, the place had an amateur and a neglected look, as if somebody had begun to experiment and tired of it; pots and glasses were dirty, books were piled in disorder.

In fact, Mr. Mostyn found it all inexpressibly dreary, and it was in vain that he tried to give a light air to the occasion by gaily questioning Laura about her work.

She showed him one or two phials and jars that she had filled with liquids and ointments and old volumes of recipes that she was experimenting with. Mrs. Sylk joined them and the three talked together in the conventional way about the interest of Laura's new pastime.

But Mr. Mostyn felt uneasy. Something was deadly wrong with the place. Both the large and small rooms were to him full of something intangibly gloomy, sad and evil. If there was a ghost in Leppard Hall this surely was its most secret haunt. But what was he thinking about? He put his hand to his mouth in a bewildered way. There had never been any talk of a ghost, only that fool of an innkeeper at Warwick who said that Madam Avershaw haunted the churchyard, and Flasket, who was shrewd enough in his questioning, had found that no such person was buried there.

Harry Mostyn tried to make an effort over himself. He knew that Laura ought to be taken away from this place. The sooner he married her and took her away the better. He wished that it might be next week, to-morrow, that he could secure both the girl and the money and be rid of this infernal
Leppard Hall—yes, the word that came into his mind was "infernal".

But he must be careful. The shrewd, prudent part of him soon had his wilder impulses in check. If he tried to hurry on the marriage, force matters, take the girl away before she was twenty-one years of age, there would be questioning, trouble, suspicions on the part of the brother. There were his own embarrassed affairs to think of. When it came to the matter of the settlement he would have to disclose those, and he did not want to do that until it was impossible for Sir Theodosius to draw back.

All this was passing through his mind as he examined Laura's jars, smelt her perfumes, essences, and looked at the little still in the distillery.

"Who," he asked, with a great effort at ease and pleasantry, "had this place fixed up? A strange thing, it seems to have been a bedroom."

"Yes. I don't know, I can't find out. Someone slept in the other room, and someone else in here, I think. Or else the bed was put up for a watcher, somebody who sat over the retort all night. I don't know." Laura's face looked puzzled. Her eyes had an intent expression, and she frowned. "That's something I'm trying to find out. That's why I come here so often. Sometimes it seems as if I am about to be told the whole story, as if it were really being whispered in my ear. And then it goes again."

Harry Mostyn looked at her sharply. He remembered his own unpleasant experience of a few hours before when, seated at the dinner-table, the thought had come into his mind exactly as Laura now said, as if somebody had whispered in his ear: 'When will you be master here?'

He gave a smile that he knew was sickly, and taking the girl by the elbow tried to turn her away from the still, that stood there with the bed of lime at the bottom.

"How long has the room been like this? Let's go, I think it has a musty air."

"Oh no," said Laura, "I have the windows open in the daytime and fires burning at night. This closet is rather cold, there is no fireplace, but the warmth comes in from the outer chamber. A pity the hangings are gone. When I first came here they were all in their places, on the tester and at the windows. Fine embroideries at that. There were coverlets and mattresses, folded up in that box under the bed. They took everything away, and the chest of clothes—that was burnt too."
It was there I found my yellow dress, you know, the dress worn by the girl in the portrait—the other Laura Sarelle. Perhaps she slept in this room, do you think so? Perhaps she died here, do you think that?"

She turned with a sudden movement that had, he thought, something unpleasantly snakelike about it, and peered into his eyes.

"I suppose you could easily find out," he said, with a deepening of his smile, yet keeping a strong grip on himself in order not to say something that would either exasperate or alarm her; he knew that Mrs. Sylk was looking at them both with a frightened air. He thought: 'My God, I'll find out what's the matter with this place! I'll take this woman away, or give her up!"

"There were a great many papers here, too," continued Laura. She drooped her lids now and was speaking in a musing tone—almost, he thought, like someone in a trance. He had seen some hypnotic, or animal, magnetism in experiments once in Brussels, and he remembered that the people under the influence of the mesmerist had spoken much as Laura was speaking now. "Yes," she said, "there were some papers, packets of them, but I was so excited at finding the dress that I did not stop to look. And afterwards, after my illness, when I came back up here again, everything was gone. Theo had them taken away. I wonder why?"

"I suppose it was nothing but rubbish," put in Mrs. Sylk nervously. "You know if there had been anything important Sir Theo would have kept it."

"Would he? I don't think he even had them looked at. We couldn't find out much about it, could we, Mrs. Sylk? You see, most of the servants had been changed when I was ill, and those who were still here wouldn't talk."

"There was nothing in it at all," said Mrs. Sylk hurriedly, glancing sideways at Harry Mostyn. "Indeed, I assure you, sir, there was nothing in it, naught but a lot of old rubbish, some dresses falling to pieces, and trinkets, and some old shoes and a parasol. And a little picture Sir Theo sold in London."

"And a man's hat," added Laura. "Something like the hat the man wears in the portrait downstairs. Black, gallooned with gold, turned up with a cockade, and the name inside was Avershaw."

Harry Mostyn had a sense of shock; odd, he thought, on so
trifling a matter; he tried to persuade himself that Laura was not speaking the truth and that she had either read his mind or been making inquiries about a man of this name. He said, with as much steadiness as he could muster:

"Are you sure of that, Laura? That name has never been associated with this house."

Her answer confirmed his suspicions.

"I'm sure of nothing," she said, in a heavy, drugged tone. "I thought that was the name."

"I don't think there was a hat," said Mrs. Sylk hastily. "It was all feminine attire. This was a woman's room, and I don't think the other Sarelles lived here. I don't know, but it's the great bedroom, is it not? And no one but the ruling Sarelle and his wife would have it. That which you have," she added, speaking incoherently, "is much pleasanter. Come, dear, you know, your room and mine, and the charming parlour that goes with them—perhaps those are the principal bedrooms on the first floor. Laura Sarelle was the mistress of the house as you are, she wouldn't have slept up here. I expect those boxes of clothes were just put up here out of the way."

"Avershaw," repeated Laura. "Edward Avershaw! No, perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps it was an old book I saw it in. I don't know either. Perhaps I'm dreaming. One does dream when one's alone. I never can be sure of my dreams."

"Day-dreams," said Mr. Mostyn, with a smile of relief. Of course, that was where the girl, fanciful and half bewitched as she seemed to be, had seen the name ... in some old book, some account of the trial. There must be those about, although the landlord at Warwick had said the tale had been "hushed up". Mr. Mostyn thought that he would himself make a few inquiries in the neighbourhood. It was not so long ago, and there might even be people living who remembered the affair.

"But why trouble?" something in his mind said to him. 'Why concern yourself? Marry the girl and get the money and go away. This old, heavy, weary tale is nothing to do with you.'

But he felt that it was something to do with him, that it was creeping over him, hedging him in, hemming him about, and again he had that impression of some grave peril of the mind.

"It's cold in here," he said; "it's a dreary place in which to spend your time."

He spoke in sincere sympathy, for he felt sorry for the girl and wanted to take her away from Leppard Hall, not altogether for his own sake and because of her money.
"Can't you persuade Theo to take you to London? He is not well here, either. Too many mists, it's no better than a marsh, and so near the river."

"You can see the river," said Laura eagerly, "in the daytime. I wonder why they hung those ugly green curtains? There were handsome ones that I saw here first. If you look out of the room you can see the river, and the churchyard. If anybody was moving about among the graves you could see them from here; if a ghost was there at night, a spectre, you could see it from here on a moonlit night."

And she gave a laugh and, turning from the man, took Mrs. Sylk's arm. That affrighted woman began to upbraid her clumsily:

"Really, Laura, you talk like a child, as if you had been bemused with fairy-tales and fables. Let us go out of this room. I think you spend too much time here. You know there is a distillery near the kitchen where you could make your simples if you wish."

"But I like this place," said Laura. "It's where I must come. Don't you understand? I've got to come here."

She broke off and turned to the man.

"Would you like to see the view from this window, Harry?"

"Why, I suppose, my dear Laura," he replied, "it's the same as all the views from all the windows at the front of Leopard Hall."

"It always seems to be different from these two windows," insisted Laura.

And nothing would quiet her but that he must unfasten the shutters, after having drawn the loose curtains, and look out into the winter night.

The moon was rising behind the church, which was outlined, dark, blurred as to detail, beyond the water-meadows. The river sparkled cold and the whole landscape had a lifeless look. The trees made the faintest tracery against a sky that was lightly clouded; all was chill, melancholy, sombre.

But Laura leaned out, regardless of the bitter night air, and gazed with what seemed an intense eagerness and even pleasure at this desolate prospect. It took the persuasions of both Mr. Mostyn and Hetty Sylk to draw her away from the window, to allow them to close it and to lead her from the room after having pulled the bellrope to summon the servants to extinguish the candles and the fire.
In her own room, Laura, greatly to Mrs. Sylk's relief, did not talk of the two chambers she had just left, which seemed lately to have filled her imagination, but of Harry Mostyn.

"He doesn't care for me, Mrs. Sylk," she said, with something of a sigh. "You think so, too. You are sure it's only my money he's after."

"I shouldn't put it like that, I think that sounds rather vulgar," said Mrs. Sylk, raising her hands to her head as if trying to smooth the frightened lines from her forehead. "He's very amiable, he's made himself greatly liked here. Of course, he's too old for you. But we women don't know about men's vices or even much about their faults until we marry them. And perhaps not much then. I think he'll make you a good husband."

"He wants the money, I can understand that. Mr. Spryce nearly told me so; he almost warned me against him."

'Ah, that's where you got that idea!' thought Mrs. Sylk. She had wondered how Laura had been shrewd and worldly enough to suspect Harry Mostyn of being a fortune-hunter. "Well, dear Laura, I'm sure he's fond of you and admires you. How could it be otherwise? You're sweet and lovely and charming."

"Oh no! I'm often wild and wilful and difficult."

"But he's very tender with you. He puts up even with your worst moods, dear."

"He does now, but do you think he always will? Will he give me my way? Will he take me from Leppard Hall, soon?"

"I'm sure he will. He doesn't like the place himself, one can see that."

"No, that's what makes me think he's after the money. He doesn't like the place, as you say, but he's going to take our name, keep it on, all to please Theo. Why is that?"

"Why, I suppose it's because of his love for you, Laura darling. Why not? We may as well give the affair a romantic turn!"

Laura did not answer. Suddenly she threw off the purple jacket with the white fur collar.

"I wish I could understand more about him. Did he come along to be my saviour? Do I like him or hate him? Sometimes I detest him, Mrs. Sylk. At other times he seems the only
person round here I can endure. Everything’s gone wrong so far, do you think it will ever go right?”

Mrs. Sylko could not answer this question. She was herself troubled and bewildered. She had given much thought to this question of the proposed marriage between Harry Mostyn and Laura Sarelle, and on the whole she thought it would be a good thing for the girl, though no doubt there were many disadvantages. But then she had not led the normal life of girls of her age and station and fortune. She had not been taken about and given a chance for people to see her, perhaps a chance of making her own choice. She had been kept away in this unnatural life. Yes, all things considered, it was as well that Harry Mostyn had come along. Mrs. Sylko did not know the worst of him, his debts and difficulties, for he kept up a good show. She did not know some of the unpleasant stories that were whispered about him in the clubs and on the race-courses, nor of the women of poor repute with whom his name had been associated. And so, anxious and rather simple creature as she was, and only fumbling her way, as it were, at the edges of her story, she thought that it would be a fortunate thing for Laura to marry Harry Mostyn.

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When the Christmas festivities, which were celebrated without much gaiety at Leppard Hall, were over, Harry Mostyn took an early opportunity of waiting on the vicar at the old parsonage beside the church.

He went with much the same purpose in his mind as Lucius Delaunay had gone to the same place about eighteen months before; now the garden was winter-bitten and a sparse fire of oak logs burnt in the humble grate.

Like Lucius, he had to wait for the parson a while in the shabbily furnished library, and, like him, he turned at once to that part of the shelf that bore books containing histories and pamphlets on local archæology and folklore. But, unlike Lucius, he was not lucky, his hand did not light on the small volume that contained the history of the life and trial of Captain Edward Avershaw.

So his curiosity was totally unsatisfied when the Reverend Nathaniel Mist at length received him.

Mr. Mostyn was at his most genial. He had met the parson before at the parsonage, because he wished to be friends with
everyone on the estate, even though he had at once made up his mind that when he was master there the living should go to a younger, more alert man—at least, if he, Mr. Harry Mostyn, was to come there but even for the hunting season.

Now he led the conversation round by easy stages to what he wanted to know. The first pertinent question he posed was:

"Is anyone by the name of Madam Avershaw—I don't know the Christian name—buried in your church?"

The vicar adjusted his spectacles, that were square and had silver rims. He gave his visitor a quizzical look as if he was used to this kind of curiosity and knew how to deal with it.

"My dear sir," he said, "anyone of any importance who is buried in the church or the churchyard has a tablet there. I suppose you've seen those?"

"Yes, I've looked for the mural inscription, but there's none of that name."

"Well, then, there's none of that name buried in the church or the churchyard. The nameless ones are poor peasants, labourers—I suppose it's not about them you make inquiry?"

"No, it's the wife of a certain Captain Edward Avershaw, who, as I understand, was hanged in Warwick about sixty years ago."

"Why, if I may ask, should such an ugly story concern you? Your visit, surely, is of the most agreeable nature? I understand you are betrothed to Miss Laura Sarelle."

"That is so," replied the florid gentleman easily, "and I really couldn't tell you why this local tale made any impression on me at all. I suppose it's because there's nothing to do here, life is so monotonous, one day so like another, the least thing stays in the mind. It is also, my dear sir, I must confess, a most melancholy place."

"Perhaps that is because you are used to London, and its clubs, or Newmarket and its racecourses. You yourself told me that these are your usual haunts," smiled the vicar, polishing his glasses again.

"I've been trying to persuade Sir Theo to let me take him and Laura back to town. You must confess, although I suppose you are enamoured of the neighbourhood, that it is gloomy enough in the winter."

"I suppose so—the river overflows in here—up to the graves sometimes—but I'm used to what you might call the rhythm of the place. I feel the pulse of Nature, her breath, you know, sir, going in and out, even in the winter. It's not dead to me."
"It's not exactly dead to me," said Mr. Mostyn dryly. "It's rather too much alive. I feel it——"

"Haunted?" put in the Reverend Nathaniel Mist, with a wide, loose smile that showed his broken teeth. "Well, I suppose there are ghosts in every part of this old land of ours. Where will you find a single name that didn't boast a spectre?"

"I don't know, I never went into the matter before. I don't believe in these children's tales, I don't say I do now. The only ghost I've heard of is this Madam Avershaw. Some fool in Warwick said she walked—that's an ordinary expression, isn't it—walked? But used of the dead it's gruesome enough."

"In the churchyard, I suppose?" said the vicar, with what seemed a sneer. "Well, it's easy to imagine one sees a ghost walking in the churchyard when the moon is shining. Is that all you came to see me about?"

"I came to enjoy your company," replied Mr. Mostyn with great affability. "There's not much society round here, and unfortunately I'm not like my predecessor, Mr. Delaunay—I'm not able to help Sir Theo with his books." He added graciously, yet abruptly and emphatically: "Were you a friend of his, this Mr. Delaunay, my predecessor?"

"Your predecessor?" questioned the vicar.

"Yes, I'm acting as Sir Theo's steward. Everything is in excellent condition, there's not much to do. Well, Erskine's only been gone a few weeks. He was a good man, too."

"Yes, I think Lucius Delaunay did very well indeed. He had no pastimes or distractions, save helping Sir Theo with his books. They were college friends, you know. Why are you curious about him?"

"My dear sir!" Harry Mostyn made a deprecating gesture. "I'm not curious. I must talk about something. I'm cut off from all my usual interests. I heard the man mentioned. It seems there was some trouble and drama about his leaving, it was very sudden. Strange, too, for old friends to break off like that. The fellow must have been very useful to Sir Theo."

"I don't know why he went," said the vicar mildly. "There was some disagreement, perhaps some quarrel. Sir Theo's not an easy man to live with."

"Was Mr. Delaunay?" questioned Mr. Mostyn.

"Indeed, yes, I think so. Irish, you know, romantic perhaps, but not hasty at all, or violent, not boastful or arrogant. A quiet man, and," added the vicar with what seemed a touch
of malice, "handsome in his person. About twenty-seven years of age."

"Ah!" Mr. Mostyn smiled thoughtfully. "And he's not been here since, or had any communication with the Sarelles?"

"He has not returned to Leppard, sir, certainly. I'm in a central position in the village, I should have known if he had come to the Hall, but how should I know if he has communicated with Sir Theo or with any member of his household? It doesn't concern me, sir, I assure you. And I should not have thought that it would concern you either. Eighteen months ago, a year and a half—and that's a long time in a young girl's life."

"Why do you say," asked Harry Mostyn softly, "a young girl's life, sir? We haven't been discussing any ladies."

"No, but I've said that Mr. Delaunay was romantic, and I was thinking of the stories there were about the place. That he had an affection for a lady here, and, because of that, offered for her hand, was refused, and so left. That's all."

"He offered for Miss Sarelle, I suppose?" said Mr. Mostyn coolly.

"If you have heard that you must have been listening to gossip, sir," replied the vicar slyly.

"One can't help hearing gossip," retorted the town gentleman, "in a place like this. What does it matter, it was an absurd proposal."

"Not so absurd, in my opinion. Mr. Delaunay was very well born, of Lord Belmont's family. I think he might have given her what she needs, a true and strong affection."

"I hope to give her that, as you know, sir," smiled Mr. Mostyn, who refused to be ruffled. He believed that he could obtain no further information from the old man, who seemed sometimes intelligent and sometimes stupid but probably always crafty and playing a aprt.

So the florid gentleman made some excuse and took his leave, turning up the collar of his greatcoat as he went into the wintry garden, where the air, that seemed thickened by the cold, blew in bitter eddies from the river.

An impulse that he did not greatly like indulging, but that was not to be resisted, made him turn up the avenue of stumpy trees, now leafless, that edged the path through the graveyard to the church door. The graves, wet with the winter rains and snow, were of the colour of the ground from which they rose, and the church too was dun-hued, like old
moss or lichen. Inside the neglected building it was very cold; Mr. Mostyn had entered it on Sundays only when the stoves were lit, but now he shivered.

He walked round looking at the mural tablets, thinking perhaps he had overlooked one with the name of Avershaw. . . . Why, in the name of sanity, did he concern himself with all this childish nonsense? But he went on, and paused before the garish marble dedicated to the memory of Laura Sarrelle, with the two laurel boughs in low bas-relief, one either side her name. He looked up, too, at the funeral hatchment, the complicated quarterings with the arms of the Sarrelles, and with, as it seemed to him, their foolish motto, "One like another".

No, there was no Madam Avershaw buried there. But this concern with a local fable showed what the country did to a man's wits if he concerned himself with rustic chatter.

Leaving the humped churchyard on the slight slope, he took the path round the river and glanced down through the tangle of broken weeds, sodden flags, leafless alders and other trash to the edge of the grey water. According to Flasket's story, it was somewhere here that Laura had slipped in those thin shoes. The sexton and another man—the vicar's gardener, was it not?—had taken her out. . . . Poor child, with her mad fits. . . . Everything she did was unusual, almost unnatural. When he had first heard that she was working at distilling, making her essences and pomades, it had seemed to him a fitting occupation for a young gentlewoman, but when he had seen the room in which she spent her time the whole affair had become blurred and crooked in his mind, distasteful and unpleasant.

He thought: 'I ought to be master of this situation—that peevish young scholar; that wild girl; Mrs. Sylk, a paid dependant; the rest, servants; this old parson; that doctor, a most mediocre man, in Warwick. Who is there round here whom I can't deal with?'

As he walked home across the sodden fields he had to confess he could not deal with Sir Theo. He could not persuade the young man to leave Leppard Hall and come to London. That would be the first step—to get him away from the place.

Mr. Mostyn paused in the midst of the parkland and looked up at the Hall. It seemed always so much larger than it really was, as if it loomed and blotted out the winter sky. A cloud of rooks rose in the winter air behind it and disappeared with a
harsh cawing sound into the bare woods at the edge of the parkland, the woods where the mausoleum stood.

As he entered the house the servant who went down to the village every day to fetch the post-bag was bringing this into the hall.

Mr. Mostyn waited. Sir Theo had the key and always unlocked the bag himself as befitted the master of Leppard, and Mr. Mostyn wished to get his correspondence as soon as possible; he knew that a good many of the letters he received would be bills, or worse than bills; some of them would be peremptory demands for money. And he did not wish to pay away any more money than he could help at present. He needed all of his income that he could command to keep up an appearance.

So he went into the library, where the servant took the bag. Sir Theo was there and unlocked it, and laid the letters out upon the table. Before he had had time to sort or look at them, Hensloe, the accountant from Warwick, entered the room punctual to his appointment and Sir Theo turned to him. He had asked the man to wait on him that morning, as he wished, in a sudden access of business exactitude, to examine the accounts himself. It was, indeed, Mr. Mostyn who had urged him to do this; he was by no means unwilling to see in exact figures the revenue of the estate.

While these two were talking Mr. Mostyn was turning over his letters. There were three for Laura Sarelle, and he glanced at them with the frank intention of discovering if any was written from Ireland. But no, all had the London postmark. So, as he never missed an opportunity of doing a little service for the girl or of putting himself in a pleasant attitude towards her, he took up the three letters with his own and went to the withdrawing-room, where he believed she would be, in order to give them to her personally.

He found her there, sitting in the window-place with an open book on her knees, in a musing mood. He was rather vexed with her constant idleness, for she never seemed to have an occupation save when she was busy in her distillery. But he reminded himself what could a girl do in the country, save run round the cottages with baskets of fruit or bowls of soup? And it was quite unnecessary for her in a village where everyone seemed to be comfortably off to spend her time in ostentatious acts of charity.

He gave her the letters and she took them, glancing at
them with impassive eyes, then she leaned back in the chair and clasped her hands behind her head.

"They are nothing," she said readily; "two from a mantua-maker and the third from a friend I had nearly forgotten. Are we going to ride this afternoon? The mist has cleared a little."

"If you please," he agreed at once, willing to be of service, and glad, too, to leave the house.

"And have you been able to persuade Theo to leave Leppard Hall?"

"I am not able to persuade Theo to anything. You must do something now, Laura. He is an obstinate fellow, your brother. You must tell him that we want to be married soon. You’d like to see Venice, wouldn’t you? Why, there’s no winter, hardly at all, in Italy. In the middle of January, the flowers are now coming out, the cyclamen and the violets."

"Your cyclamen and violets and your Italian sun don’t tempt me as they once might have done," said Laura with a slow smile. Her lids had drooped over her eyes and there was such a gleam in them that the man, inexperienced as he was, felt startled. He remembered Flasket’s hint of lunacy in the family. He turned very uneasily to the fireplace.

"Well, I’ll see what I can do with your brother. He’s got the accountant, Hensloe, in the library. I think he wants my help—I’m acting as steward, you know."

"You’ll be glad to see how much money we have," said Laura, rising to her feet. "That’s not a genteel thing to say, but it’s true."

"Of course," said he, with a grave air of not understanding her, but with inner vexation, "I shall be glad to know what money you have, dear Laura. It will be my duty to look after your fortune. A hundred thousand pounds is a great deal of money, but the rest is no concern of mine," he added prudently. "Your brother is a very young man and may marry. It is not likely that I shall outlive him. But you, as a widow, will be well provided for."

With this speech, that was precise and not according to his nature, Mr. Mostyn left Laura. Although he was hardly conscious of it himself, he did not linger long in her company.

As soon as Laura was alone she allowed two of the letters to slip to the floor and clutched the third to her breast. She
had known the handwriting at once; it was from Lucius De-
launay. What a chance, what an extraordinary chance, as if
indeed there had been some good angel looking after her!
Harry Mostyn, of course, did not know the writing, but it was
very familiar to her . . . how often had she seen it on those
manuscripts that she used to handle when she was allowed
into the library to help the two men at their work! Those had
been the happiest hours of her life. Yes, if Sir Theo had seen
that graceful hand she never would have had her letter.

He had written, after so long! Years it seemed, but only a
year and a half . . . yet another six months would have to pass
before the second summer since his departure would arrive.

She rose, not able now the moment had come to break the
seal. But at last she did this and read the few hurried lines.
He called her his dearest, his dear heart! He said that he had
written to her several times but did not suppose that she had
received his letters.

He seemed to write with great agitation and excitement of
spirit. He said that there had been the cholera in Antrim and
that his uncle and two cousins had died of it and he had him-
self been ill, almost to the death, but he had recovered and
come into the estate. He was now Belmont. The title was poor,
there was not much to offer her, but such as it was, would she
have it, and him? He could at least take her away from Lepp-
ard Hall.

He would come in person to ask her brother again. He
would confront anything, any insult, and peril of quarrel or
distress, if she would give him the encouragement. He wrote
from London—an hotel.

Laura did not pause a moment. All her natural duplicity,
her hardly acquired craft and guile, left her; she acted on
pure impulse as she thrust the letter into the bosom of her
dark, prune-coloured silk dress and ran from the drawing-
room into the library, closing the door impetuously as she
paused to face her brother.

The three men turned, startled, at her sudden entrance.

"Theo, I must speak to you, at once, and alone."

Mr. Mostyn made a protest. Whatever had happened—and
he at once thought of those three letters—perhaps one after all
was from the damned Irishman, Delaunay—he had the right
to be present at her interview with her brother.

But Laura was insistent, and Theo, alarmed and angry, at
last gave way. And when brother and sister were alone she
poured out her tale, at first incoherent, so that he had to beg her to repeat it.

"Theo! I tell you! He has the title now! He’s the Earl—Lord Belmont, you understand!"

"It’s an extraordinary chance," muttered Theo.

"Yes, but it has happened. The cholera. They died, those two young men and his uncle. You know there was always a chance he would have the title. Theo, he always loved me. I suppose he has written so many times?"

"Yes, he’s written to you, and to me, too. And I’ve destroyed the letters."

"You kept them back? You should have let me have my letters." Laura paused for a moment, struggling for control. "It does not matter now! He’s coming for me, or I’m going to him."

"Laura! You are talking nonsense. I’d like to use a stronger word, but in speaking to you one must employ childish terms. What does it matter to me if Lucius Delaunay has got a beggarly Irish title or not? Your marriage is arranged. You are promised to Harry Mostyn."

"In what way is he to be preferred to Lucius, who is of a better family and now in a better position?"

"An Irish title is nothing to me. Harry Mostyn is willing to take the name of Sarelle."

Laura was drawn up short. She pulled her hands sharply to her heart. She had never thought of that. Of course, that was what weighed with Theo, that was the prize. Harry would take the name, carry on the accursed estate, the accursed Hall.

"I cannot marry Harry Mostyn. Lucius always loved me. You have got to understand that."

"I understand this—it will be another six months before you’re twenty-one. If you marry before then without my consent you’ll not have a penny."

"Lucius would not care."

"Nor you either, I suppose? You wild, unmannerly creature! But I tell you," cried the young baronet, "that I’ll refuse my consent! There won’t be a parson in the country who would dare to marry you!"

"Then I’ll wait until I am twenty-one."

"And even then I’ll cut you off without a penny! But I have been talking foolishly and at random. The matter is not even in discussion between us. You are promised to Harry Mostyn. I like him, I respect him, in every way he is suited to my
plans. I'll hear of nothing else, and neither will he. Your engagement has been publicly announced, you will be disgraced and degraded if it is broken off, if this old foolish love story is brought up again. Lucius is behaving in a most contemptible way in writing to you."

"I don't suppose he knows about Harry." The words that her brother used, "degraded", "disgraced", stunned her. . . . Was she bound to Harry Mostyn? With the reaction from her intense, fierce emotion, a cloud of depression, almost of lethargy, fell over her mind.

She sank into a chair, staring down at the pattern on the carpet and even allowed her brother to pull the crumpled letter out of her hand, for she had drawn it from her breast and was holding it slackly.

He read it and cast it back into her lap with a gesture of contempt.

"A man of straw," he said. "Did you think it would mean anything to me? Why, it puts him further away! Are the Sarelles to be sunk in the Belmonts, this estate sold to bolster his fortune? Most of it you might sell—there is not much of it entailed after all—to help to improve some starved acres in Ireland. Do not let Harry Mostyn hear of this, Laura, do not speak of it again. By what unfortunate chance did you get hold of that letter?"

"Does it matter? I'm sorry, I made a mistake. I spoke on an impulse."

She would not explain herself further, but left the room and went with a dragging step upstairs to the chamber where Mrs. Sylk sat over the fire embroidering a bell-pull in a design of cherries.

Laura went to her, sank on the stool at her feet and stammered out her story. She had to repeat it two or three times before Mrs. Sylk understood. Then the girl vehemently, and clasping and unclasping her hands, demanded the elder woman's advice.

"Could I go to him, Mrs. Sylk? I wouldn't care what I took with me! I'd leave everything!"

Mrs. Sylk was horrified, and showed as much.

"You couldn't, my darling! It's a wild fancy. He should not have written to you. But then, I suppose, as you say, with three sudden deaths in the family and the horror of the plague and himself ill, he did not know."

"He may come to me, he may want to take me away."
Mrs. Sylk gathered her forces and recovered from the shock that this news had given her. She gave it as her opinion that Laura was completely pledged to Harry Mostyn and that Lord Belmont's offer had come a great deal too late.

"That was Theo's fault, Theo kept the letters back—destroyed them. He stood between us before, when I had that illness. I don't rightly remember what happened then, but Lucius went away."

"You mustn't try to remember," said Mrs. Sylk hastily. "It is all over. You might not even like him if you saw him again. Girls have these fancies, they come and go. You must not think of it. I suppose it has become a fixed thing in your mind. I tell you that Mr. Mostyn is a very amiable and pleasant gentleman. He will make a better husband for you. He'll take you abroad, into London life. I don't think that Lord Belmont will have much money, it's a poor Irish estate, he said so himself."

"Where's my letter!" exclaimed Laura suddenly. Then her face grew strained and pallid. She remembered that it was in her lap. "I'm stupid sometimes, as if I didn't know what I was doing, as if I had a kind of fit. Do you really think I should be disgraced and degraded if I broke off with Harry and went to Lucius?"

"Yes, I do. And I think if Lord Belmont knew of your engagement he would not come forward himself. He would withdraw his offer, he would wish you to honour your pledge. Laura, you must use some common sense. It's no good being so romantic and high-flown. You can't be sure that you love this young man. It's quite a while ago."

Mrs. Sylk preached on, very much against her own heart and instincts, giving the conventional, the well-bred, advice.

And the girl's thoughts went quickly round and round in her mind, revolving a means of escape, a way out.

She saw, first of all, the point that Mrs. Sylk had made, that when Lucius Delaunay heard of her pledge he would withdraw his offer. She knew that it was considered degrading for a girl to break an engagement of marriage, she knew what she would have to face both from Harry Mostyn and her brother if she tried to go back on her pledge. She could see no friend, no support, and her lover was across the sea.

A sense of despair fell over her, almost withering her youth and bloom. As Mrs. Sylk anxiously looked at her she saw that her face looked peaked, small and deadlike, making even her
hands seem shrivelled as she raised them to press against her cheeks, making her shoulders hunched as she drew them together.

'God help me!' thought the poor woman. 'Am I doing right or wrong? Maybe I should encourage her to elope with this lover of hers. But surely no good ever came from a woman's doing a wild, stupid thing, obeying her heart instead of her head. Besides,' thought Mrs. Sylk dismally, 'these two men will never let her go. They have arranged everything between them, the taking of the name and money and all. And then there was that wretched quarrel. If Lucius Delaunay was to offer to take her without a halfpenny, Theo wouldn't let her go now, because of hatred.'

"I must answer that letter," said Laura suddenly, "and you must contrive to get it posted, take it into Warwick, or have it sent somehow."

"Yes, I'll do that for you," agreed Mrs. Sylk, "if you'll let me see the letter first."

But the poor plans of the women were as nothing, for in the library Sir Theodosius and Harry Mostyn were composing a letter to Lord Belmont, in which his proposal was refused in almost insulting terms and he was forbidden to hold any communication whatever with Miss Laura Sarelle, now happily betrothed and soon to be happily married to Harry Mostyn.

The young baronet considered himself a man of scrupulous honour, but he did not hesitate to put in his letter: *I write in my sister's name. She has received all your letters, but did not reply to them because she disdained their contents. The change in your position, my lord, has made no difference to her feelings or mine. She implores you not to molest her with your attentions.*

That evening, in a stern interview, Sir Theodosius told Mrs. Sylk of this letter; the intimidated woman believed that she was acting in the girl's interest, and turned traitress too, and tore up and threw into the sluggish river at twilight, with tears of shame, that other letter to Lord Belmont which Laura had entrusted to her to post in Warwick.

... ...

So the winter days went on and no other letter came from Lord Belmont, though Sir Theodosius made a point now of
unlocking the postbag in front of Laura and spreading the correspondence out on the long shining dining-room table. No letter from Lord Belmont either in reply to Sir Theodosius or for Laura Sarelle.

Lucius Delaunay, Lord Belmont, did not altogether believe in the epistle he had received from Leppard Hall, and was shrewd enough to see that it had been composed by the two men, very likely without the girl's knowledge. But he could not quite credit that if she had wished to send him some message of loyalty or affection or appeal for help she could not have found some means of doing so. He remembered that she was allowed to go into Warwick, he remembered that Mrs. Sylk was very friendlily disposed towards her. He thought that there must be some maid or servant who would convey a letter to the post in some secret fashion. He knew that Laura was a girl of spirit and it was quite possible, he thought, for her to get up to London herself on some excuse or another and arrange a meeting with him. He had given her the address of the furnished house he had hired in Golden Square, as well as that of the Covent Garden hotel from which he had written.

But as nothing came at all he did begin to believe, much as he distrusted that letter from Sir Theodosius, that the girl was really engaged to Harry Mostyn of her own free choice. The news of her betrothal had come to him as an unpleasant shock. He had counted on Laura's loyalty, although no reply had ever come to his letters, but they had been such as contained no definite proposals and perhaps required no definite answers. He had told her, always, that his fortune was not such that he could for the moment offer her anything. He could only hope that she would wait until the prospect was clearer.

Now there had come this tragedy that had opened a far brighter prospect for them. He had hastened to inform her of it and still was met by this silence.

Soon after he had sent her the letter, which had been written impulsively and from a generous and magnanimous heart, he had heard of her engagement to a wealthy, well-considered man-about-town who was a distant relative of hers. The match seemed suitable and Lord Belmont's inquiries found out nothing positively to the discredit of Mr. Harry
Mostyn. But the man was a widower, nearly twenty years her senior, and it had seemed to Lord Belmont in every way a strange choice, until he heard, after a visit to Mr. Spryce, of the new suitor’s willingness to adopt the name of Sarelle. He remembered the stern family pride of Sir Theodosius, the fact that he considered himself a born celibate, that he wished his sister to inherit the Hall and estates.

‘Is she, then, never to be free of that gloomy place?’ thought the young man. He was bitterly struck; he believed that he loved the girl with a romantic passion, a delicate devotion that a long separation had only heightened. He knew that when he was with her, even when he was thinking of her, life went to a different and richer measure.

He believed that if he could have won her for his life-long companion everything would have been pleasant for him, even troubles and misfortunes would be gilded by their mutual love.

He had cherished this as a dream and waited from post to post and day to day for letters from her. Even when none had come he had not been much discouraged, remembering always that peevish brother. He had felt more scornful than offended when he received no answer from the letters he had sent Sir Theo himself. It was an ugly thing to discover in one whom he had cherished as a friend, though he had never much liked him, a great deal that was petty and even malignant.

He had thought that the change in his position, his accession to an old and and honourable title, even though the estates were small and poor, would change Sir Theo’s views towards him. He had not reckoned with the bribe the other man could offer, the willingness to accept the name that Sir Theo regarded with an almost fanatic admiration and devotion.

‘There is no struggling with obsession,’ thought the young man wearily. ‘Theo cares for nothing but the Hall, the estate and the name. I suppose he’'ll live and die at Leppard. And Laura, she has been sacrificed, or has she forgotten me?’

After all, it had been nothing much of a love affair. There had been no amorous passages between them, only that one conversation when they had walked by the bank of the river between the clumps of thyme and wild parsley, cresses, and the flags.

His sudden proposal for her hand had been because of the
emotion he had felt when he had heard that she, in her yellow
dress, had been drawn out of that same river. He had
thought then she was likely to die because of it, but perhaps
all had been a folly, the kind of folly that he should have
grown out of. He was a man nearly thirty years of age and
had had some experiences. With her, romantic passion was
natural enough, she was little more than a child and knew
nothing save dreams.
So this particular dream Lucius Delaunay put behind him
and returned to Ireland, after he had waited some weeks in
London, resolved never to think again of Laura Sarelle. She,
though only a few miles away, was as if in a prison, so shut
apart was she from him and all news of him. And very firmly
did those two jailers, her betrothed lover and brother, hold
her in bondage.

. . . .

After that first outbreak Laura betrayed nothing of her
feeling, even to Hetty Sylk, and devoted herself to her old
pastime of distilling. But all her thoughts and her dreams
were turned inwards. She became very silent and laughed
very little and no longer importuned her brother to take her
to London, though it had been agreed, more or less casually
between them, that by February they should all go to the
capital, returning to Leppard Hall in the summer.
Harry Mostyn was ill-pleased at the turn events had taken;
he did not like the episode of the letter or the quarrel that had
followed between brother and sister, or even Laura’s sub-
mission, which seemed to him unnatural.
He mistrusted, too, the silence into which Mrs. Sylk had
retreated, and the increased gloom over the household. The
situation was, indeed, for a man of his temperament and
habits almost intolerable. He had to remind himself again
and again of the advantages to be gained by patience and
prudence in order to enable him to endure a prolonged resi-
dence in Leppard Hall under such circumstances.

It was true that he had persuaded Sir Theodosius to remove
himself and his sister eventually to town, but Mr. Mostyn had
little hope that his plan, so urgently desired by himself, would
be put into practice. He tried to break the spell, as he termed
it to himself, of the accursed place, for that also was his name
in his private thoughts for Leppard Hall, by calling on the various gentry in the neighbourhood round Warwick and Rugby and by suggesting to Sir Theodosius that he invite other friends to stay with them.

He tried with all the tact and arts in his power, and he was gifted in these directions, to induce Laura to fall into his schemes, representing to her how much more agreeable her life would be if she had other young people staying at Leppard Hall and how she could show herself off in the neighbouring houses, attending such festivities as might be offered in the county town and in Rugby.

But he found all these efforts were largely vain. He could not induce Sir Theodosius to go with him on the visits to such people as he discovered were in riding or driving distance from Leppard Hall; Laura seemed both sullen and indifferent towards his suggestion, only saying when pressed: "Too late now, too late for that!"

And even Mrs. Sylk, when he tried to enlist her services, replied in some confusion: "Neither brother nor sister cares for society. It is useless to try to force their inclinations."

Mr. Mostyn then, like a wary general who is repulsed in one direction, began to consider how he might achieve his ends by other means.

He went himself up to town and consulted his attorneys, to whom he gave a very frank explanation of the situation, discussed with them his financial affairs, which were in a slightly worse state than he had thought, and was bound to agree to their advice, to marry the heiress as soon as might be before the fanciful girl or her uncertain tempered brother changed their minds for good.

After an absence of about a week he returned to Leppard Hall determined to put up with whatever discomforts or inconveniences he might have to undergo rather than run the risk of losing the hand of Laura Sarelle.

While in London he made inquiries about Lord Belmont, who had been in the capital for a short while but who had recently returned to his estate in Ireland. As he could discover nothing to the discredit of that gentleman he felt his uneasiness increase. He knew perfectly well, and he was conscious of the baseness of his own action in abetting Sir Theodosius, that the girl had been, by foul means, separated from her lover. He knew that a false message had been sent to Lord Belmont and that his letters to Laura had been suppressed.
It was a common enough sort of business, but one that Mr. Mostyn did not greatly relish.

And he had this further grievance, as it were, against Leppard Hall and its atmosphere: that since he had been there he had been drawn into more disreputable behaviour than he had ever countenanced in himself before. It was true that he had been from the first moment that he had seen Laura Sarelle a fortune-hunter determined to better his own damaged affairs by marriage with an heiress, that he had done all in his power to win both brother and sister without in the least caring for either, but ever since he had gone to Leppard Hall he had been conscious of the meanness and trickery of his own behaviour. He had always more or less felt that he was a man of honour. But since his last visit to Warwickshire he felt he could no longer do so. He was conscious that he was acting, in a way, a villain's part. This was one reason for his intention to marry Laura. He thought that once she was his wife he could, in a way, make up to her for the trick that he had played on her. It surely would not be difficult, once they were married, for a man of his experience to induce a girl of her age and cloistered life to fall in love with what he could offer, even if she did not with his person.

Laura in Paris, Vienna, Venice; Laura indulged in her taste for clothes and a fine equipage, with a smart Parisian chambermaid; Laura taken to the Opera, to the theatre, balls and concerts, would surely blossom into a different kind of girl, and one who would turn to him as the means of obtaining all these pleasures with gratitude.

It was in this mood that Harry Mostyn returned to Leppard Hall. It was then the end of February and there were but few signs of springtime in the water-meadows, the woods, the parklands, the river and the church, which had by now become to him too familiar, though it was not many months ago since he had seen them for the first time.

He brought with him Flasket—who, indeed, never left him—but no other servant. He was forced to economize, though he would have liked to have a considerable train of his own to impress Sir Theodosius and his household.

But Mr. Mostyn was determined to keep up his spirits, though these were quenched as he once again turned into the drive between the stone piers of the gate crowned by the formal goshawks carved in stone holding the familiar shields
with the escutcheons of the Sarelles on them, and looked with reluctant curiosity at the flat façade of Leppard Hall.

But the melancholy caused by the sight of the bleak, gloomy mansion was soon dissipated by the welcome given him by Sir Theodosius. The young man seemed very glad to see him, to turn with almost piteous pleasure towards the company and support the elder man offered him.

'Why the devil doesn't he,' thought Harry Mostyn, 'leave this place? He seems glad enough for a little human companionship, for some other interest besides those musty books.'

And he tried once more to persuade the young man to leave the country and take a house in town. But when this turn was given to the conversation the young baronet became again impatient. He seemed to consider that his entire life was bound up in Leppard Hall. As for the gloom or sombreness of the place, he refused to see it; and, aware that he had struck a wrong note, Harry Mostyn quickly turned the conversation and began to urge an early marriage for himself and Laura.

Sir Theodosius seemed to consider this proposal not unfavourably, and Mr. Mostyn, with his insinuating tact, soon discovered the reason. Sir Theodosius was anxious to get rid of his sister, put the responsibility of her well-being into what he hoped were more capable hands.

The girl, it seemed, was being more than difficult, and Sir Theodosius was now anxious that she go abroad and see some company. He had himself instructed Mrs. Sylk to write cards of invitation to neighbouring ladies to call and amuse his sister.

But Laura, when one or two of these neighbouring gentlefolk had driven up in their carriages and pairs, had refused to see them, and of course there had been no second visit.

"I fear," said the young baronet with a sour smile, "that we have already a reputation for eccentricity. That was inevitable. I am a scholar, something of a student. Neither my father nor my grandfather lived here much, and the Hall was long shut up. And the gentlefolk of the county got out of the way of paying social visits."

He went on rapidly, excusing himself, and Mr. Mostyn observed him with close scrutiny. His health was certainly not improved. There was a hectic flush in his cheeks, which were unnaturally hollowed under the bones. His eyes were very brilliant and he had taken to wearing glasses. And the thick dark hair that he wore brushed back from his forehead
was damp with sweat at the roots. He coughed in a choking manner and continuously had his handkerchief pressed to his lips. He seemed alternately chilled and flushed with fever.

While he was in London Mr. Mostyn had given no thought to the future beyond the date of his wedding day. He had considered nothing save putting his hands on the hundred thousand pounds that would relieve him of all his difficulties and free him of all immediate anxieties. But now, in this dark gloom of Leppard Hall, where the lamps and candles had just been lit and the grey February twilight still lay in pools of shadow in the library, the thought came into his mind, sharply and unbidden, as it had come when he sat at dinner that evening staring up at the two portraits, 'How soon shall I be master here? Of all of it?'

A tempting prize. He moistened his lower lip. He had seen the rent rolls, and had had a shrewd guess, although Sir Theodosius was always reticent about his affairs, of the capital, the result of the economies of the lifetime of two wealthy men and the sale of this Jamaica estate.

He exerted himself to throw off these reflections and said aloud, on a note of forced gaiety:

"Let me take Laura off your hands, I dare say I can manage her. I'm not a bookish man like you. I shall have plenty of time."

"And more experience, too," said the young baronet, still with his thin, sour smile, leaning back wearily in the heavy padded chair. "She wants to get away from Leppard Hall."

"You've heard nothing more of Lord Belmont, I suppose?"

"Nothing whatever. I suppose that was only a girlish caprice on her part, and a damned impertinence on his."

"It was not an impertinent offer, you know," said Mr. Mostyn quietly. "I made some inquiries about him in London."

"A beggarly Irish estate, a beggarly Irish title." Sir Theodosius repeated the two taunts that he had used against his 'former friend ever since he had sent that letter to Laura. "Besides, that would be the end of the Sarelles, would it not? All swallowed up in Belmont."

Mr. Mostyn kept his face impassive. Thus was clearly revealed his real hold over the man: his offer to take the name. He was not so eager as he had once been to fulfil this promise. At one time it seemed to matter nothing at all what his name was; he had no great family pride, he had no estates or tradi-
tions to keep up. Sarelle was a famous old name, one of the oldest Norman names in the kingdom, but now—there came before his mind those funeral escutcheons in the church, the flat white marble that bore the name of that other Laura Sarelle. He remembered for the first time that his wife would never change her name, she would always be Laura Sarelle, and he Harry Sarelle, that there would be an end, of course, to the baronetcy.

'This place certainly confuses my wits,' he thought. 'Why, in London the change of names seemed a bagatelle, but here it seems important.'

And he had to argue with himself that the taking of this name would not mean that the place would absorb him, engulf him, keep him. . . . No, he would get away. And to steady himself he said again, aloud, looking across the lights and shadows, for the lamp had been set on the far corner of the desk and Sir Theodosius sat in obscurity:

"I want to take Laura away. I think that would be good for her health. I promised her Paris and Venice, you know."

"But you'll come back, of course?" urged Theodosius, peering at him. "You'll live here? That's part of the marriage contract. She's to be the mistress of Leppard Hall. We're to begin the family again, you know. You will be—when I'm gone—"

"Don't talk like that," said Harry Mostyn quickly. "You're a far younger man than I am. Why, I was almost going to say I was old enough to be your father. Laura and I will live here, of course."

Could he endure to live with a wife like Laura and brother-in-law like Theo at Leppard Hall? He would have to, for a while, at least, until he could get his hands on as much money as possible. Then, if he couldn't get the girl away he would have to go himself, on the quiet long visits—this was more a devil of a business than he had ever thought it would be.

Sir Theodosius was looking at him with bright eyes.

"My health's rather better than I expected," he said. "Dr. Selby seems to think I'm improving. It's mere nonsense to say that this low-lying country is affecting my lungs. Besides, I mean to stay here."

'It is an obsession,' thought the older man. 'I suppose he was brought up with that one idea in his mind, that one day he would be master here. Now the place has got him.'

He made some polite inquiries about the young man's work
and learnt that he had tried a secretary, who had come in from Rugby, but who had been but a poor success and who had left again.

"I do very well alone," added Sir Theo quickly. "And as for Laura, you must not think that she's been difficult. Indeed, she is very quiet, and Mrs. Sylk seems to think that that's unnatural in her age. For myself, I have no experience."

"She has a perverse dislike for Society," said Mr. Mostyn, "that's why I want to marry her. Everything will be easier when she is my wife. I have friends of my own in every large city in Europe. She will be admired, fêtèd."

"Not too much of that," said Sir Theodosius, "or she will not want to come back. As I said before, her home is here, and there is nothing that anyone could find fault with in Leppard Hall, is there, Mostyn?"

Feeling his way cautiously, Mr. Mostyn agreed that the mansion was splendid, the estate well kept. Then he suggested in a casual, self-deprecating way:

"You would not consider, I suppose, modernizing some of the rooms, throwing out wings or pavilions, something perhaps in the Gothic style?"

The look on the young man's face showed him at once his mistake. Theodosius exclaimed vehemently that he would not have the Hall touched, and he added—at random, the other man thought:

"I have always considered myself above the superstitions of mankind, I am not going to give in to them now."

Laura's first interview with her betrothed passed off pleasantly enough. The girl seemed confused but amiable. She was still interested in the little room with the still and told Mr. Mostyn that she was waiting for the flowers to bloom as she had a recipe for making an essence of roses, but meanwhile she was practising on evergreens.

"Do they," he asked, trying to cover his indifference to the dullness of the topic, "make any kind of perfume or unguent that is of the least use?"

"I don't know," said Laura, with rather a stupid look. "I'm merely experimenting. I told you before, when I took you up to the little closet, that I was trying to find something. I have not yet, but sometimes I feel very close."
She put her hand on his arm and took him into the music-
room, which was seldom used now, and, though kept spot-
lessly clean, everything shining and polished and dusted, had
a very sombre air. A fire had not been lit, the atmosphere
was chilly. The spinet and the harp had linen covers drawn
over them and a bag of muslin concealed the chandelier
hanging from the painted ceiling.

Laura was not dressed with her usual care, her gown of a
dull green colour was carelessly knotted with cherry-coloured
ribbons on her breast, and over all she wore a little cashmere
shawl. She shivered as if very cold.

Mr. Mostyn tried to induce her to go into one of the other
rooms where a fire burnt.

"It seems like the spring in London, but mid-winter down
here," he said, and found it difficult to conceal his impatience
with these obstinate, difficult people. But he had to remember
that it was the rôle of lover and suitor that he must play. Be-
fore she had time to chatter any more of her nonsense about
her foolish pastimes or to speak to him in the rambling way to
which he had grown accustomed and that he always disliked,
he asked her when she would marry him.

"Don't you want to come away from all this, Laura? I
think May, we might be married in May, and then we could
go to Paris and Italy. If we wait any longer the weather will
be too hot, the capitals will be empty, and so will the big
towns."

He was talking at random and not with his customary ease,
for he was wondering whether it would be possible for him by
May to have got his affairs into some such order as to pass
the eager, zealous scrutiny of Mr. Spryte. How unfortunate it
would be if he rushed his fences and found that the lawyer at
the last minute advised Sir Theodosius against the match!
But no, he believed he had his firm hold on both brother and
sister.

Laura seemed at first pleased and excited, or so he thought.
Some strong emotion certainly flushed her face and made her
eyes sparkle, and she smiled, lifting her lips back from her
teeth in an unpleasant way she had, making her, he thought,
look rather like a little vixen.

"May? Will it be as soon as that? And I suppose whatever
I say won't make any difference? But you know, whatever it
is I'm looking for, I'd like to find it first."

He found it difficult to restrain himself from rebuking the
girl. If she talked like that in front of other people they would think her half-witted. He wished he dared speak to Mrs. Sylk and tell her to school the girl in more genteel ways. He controlled himself and patted her hand and asked if she would not set about buying her trousseau and ordering her marriage dress. And he thought: 'My God! What sort of a wedding will it be? And who is to arrange it? I suppose it will have to be here, a hole-and-corner business.'

Harry Mostyn was surprised at his own distaste at the thought of being married in that church, by the Reverend Nathaniel Mist, with the funeral escutcheons of the Sarelles fixed upon the walls, and the mechanical endearments that he gave Laura were uttered in a stammering tongue and his eye was vacant, his accent vague.

Laura endured his speech with a dull look that seemed to give assent to all he said, at least by her silence. She broke from him as soon as she could with decency and ran upstairs to her own chamber, where Mrs. Sylk was waiting for her, for the poor woman knew that this would be a difficult time when Harry Mostyn returned from London. The girl seemed so reserved, shut up in herself, but surely when her so-called lover returned she would make some sign of emotion. Nor was Mrs. Sylk proved wrong, for the girl ran into the room and threw herself into the arms of her one friend, whispering as she pressed her close:

"I'm to be married in May! Whatever I'm looking for I must find before then. Who can tell me? Who can show me the way? Mrs. Sylk, I hate both of them! I hate them! Do you understand? I read somewhere that hate consumes, like love. Don't you think that's true?"

"I think you have a good many foolish and wicked fancies for so young a girl," said Mrs. Sylk, almost reduced to tears of desperation. She had tried to talk to Sir Theodosius in her kind, stumbling, humble way about "the state of Laura's heart", and the young baronet had harshly silenced her. But now she did not know what to do. Soothing the girl as best she could, she drew her to her favourite place, the large chair by the fire, and made her sit on the stool at her feet. And after a while Laura, who had been talking incoherently, was silent, and rested her head on her friend's lap.

"My dear lamb, my poor darling! I'd do what I could for you, but I'm helpless. I have no money, I have nothing at all, only a few savings. And now, if, as you so often beg me, I was
to take you away from Leppard Hall, if we were to go together, what could we do? There's no place in the world for two gentlewomen who've run away from their home and their shelter. Don't you understand that, Laura?"

"There must," whispered the girl passionately, "be somewhere. Why doesn't Lucius come? You remember, I used to call him Luce—why doesn't he come?"

Again Mrs. Sylk explained to the girl the worldly part of the affair, the position that Lord Belmont was in...

"It is possible, too, my dear, that he never got your letter."

"That's what I think. And I think that perhaps he's written again and I didn't get those letters either. It was only by chance, Mr. Mostyn himself bringing me that letter which I lost. Wasn't it a strange chance that I should have got that one letter of all that were sent?"

The girl thrust her fingers through her hair, disarranging the curls that Mrs. Sylk had arranged with loving tenderness, and sat staring into the fire while the poor woman brought out her little hoard of worldly maxims. After all, she believed she was doing the girl the best turn that love and friendship could do her by advising her to marry Mr. Mostyn and thus escape from Leppard Hall.

The other match, the romantic love match, was obviously hopeless. Besides, even if Laura liked to wait until she was twenty-one, it was doubtful if the young man would take her against her brother's wish and at the cost of her losing all her rights—one of the finest fortunes in England.

Laura listened in what seemed a dutiful silence, only to say again:

"There must be some way out."

She seemed so restless and agitated that Mrs. Sylk feared an attack of fever and went downstairs to the housekeeper's room to ask if Mrs. Marston had one of Sir Theodosius' sleeping-draughts. Dr. Selby had ordered these, for the young baronet had not been able to sleep lately because of his cough, and the medicine had been given to the housekeeper; she had been told to send it upstairs to Sir Theo's room every evening with the carafe and glass.

She at once gave Mrs. Sylk a little of the powder in a small box. She was a good-humoured woman and would willingly have championed Miss Laura, but Mrs. Sylk always kept her at arm's length. She was not quite sure she was a gentle-
woman, and all poor Hetty Sylk's instinct revolted against having Laura's affairs talked over in the servants' hall.

So she thanked Mrs. Marston and took the draught upstairs and offered it to Laura, who was then lying down, fully clothed, upon her bed. It was useless, Mrs. Sylk knew, when the girl was in this mood to ask her to undress herself, so she mixed the medicine and offered it to her. Laura took it with a listless hand, asking what it was.

"Well, it's just a sleeping-draught, dear. Quite a harmless powder. You know you had some when you were sick before."

The poor woman stumbled over her words, afraid that she might remind Laura of the accident, as it was termed, when she had been drawn out of the Avon in the fading yellow dress.

"And now Dr. Selby has ordered these powders for Sir Theo. They're kept in the housekeeper's room."

"Oh, I'll drink it, if it makes me sleep!"

"Think of pleasant things, my child." Hetty Sylk sat down in the brocade chair by the bed and drew back the long curtains of pale silk. The room was very handsomely furnished, everything in this chamber had been very well kept. All the embroidered hangings, bed furniture, curtains, carpets were of considerable antiquity, yet had a perfect bloom and freshness.

Laura had often asked who had used this room in the old days, but no one could tell her. Someone suggested that it had been her namesake who, as the lady of the house, would surely have had this, the finest set of apartments after those across the landing, the great chamber and closet, but Laura had always thought that it was not that woman but another who had lived here.

Now Mrs. Sylk tried to make her think of pleasant subjects, tried to extol the good qualities, amiability, and kindness of Mr. Mostyn.

"And you'll have to consider your wedding, dear. There is not a young girl born that wasn't interested in her wedding-gown and all the new clothes she has—you've always liked the fashions, haven't you, Laura? We shall have to go up to London and buy—I know not how many things. And May, why that's far too soon! You won't be ready till August."

"It doesn't matter," said Laura, "May or August. They've got their excuses. Theo wants to be rid of me, and Harry wants the money, I suppose. He quite as good as told me that, you know—that he was after my money."
“You mustn’t think such things, dear.”

But Mrs. Sylko’s futile protests were unheard by Laura. She put the glass to her lips and drank the draught. Mrs. Sylko watched her as she fell into a drugged sleep.

* * *

In the morning Laura Sarelle went down to the vicarage, the third person to go on the same quest to this place.

She gave a curious glance at the path with the broken flags, the weeds, thyme and mint now growing up freshly for another year. She could remember very little of that night when she had broken from Lucius Delaunay, only a coldness, and the dark. She looked up the avenue set with flagstones that led to the church porch and across the vicarage garden where the snowdrops were showing above the newly turned soil, and where faint small tufts of green showed on the currant and gooseberry bushes.

The little maid Agnes received her with a deep if sly reverence, but the parson was abroad. . . . He had been summoned to an old man who was dying in the village.

Laura was turning away with a deep sensation of disappointment when there was a tapping, violent and excited, on the window above the porch, and looking up she saw the pallid face of Madam Mist.

“She wants to speak to you,” said the little servant-girl, doubtfully, coming out on to the stone flagged path and looking up. She was familiar with her mistress’ methods of signalling.

“Will you go up, my lady?”

“Oh yes, I’ll go up.” Laura thought: ‘Perhaps she can tell me better than her husband could. He’s always slow and difficult.’

And it was with a light and almost eager step that she went up the shallow stairs to the old woman’s sick-room.

Madam Mist was neat and tidy in her grey linsey-woolsey gown and white shawl and her mob cap of clear starched muslin. In her personal habits she was inclined to be slovenly, but she had lately had a visitor in the shape of a niece, who had taken a pleasure in setting the old lady off prettily and daintily. But the more pleasing surroundings did not much move the parson’s wife; she was interested in other matters, in human beings, in queer stories and wild doings. She liked to collect what she could in the way of both human
and superhuman material, and when she could get no other audience she would entertain the servant girl Agnes or any villager who came round for a pie or a bowl of soup with some ghost story or fable of the neighbourhood. Of late her illness had increased and she did not believe that she had long to live.

The invalid now looked with great gratification at Laura, trim and slender in her dark pelisse and a bonnet without a veil tied under her chin, and put a good many quick questions about her approaching marriage, and where it was to be, and who were to be the bridesmaids, and such-like details. Madam Mist thought it a very strange thing that these matters had not been plainly arranged and openly published long before. She thought that the people at the Hall were strange, eccentric folk and she wondered that Mr. Mostyn had not some friends and relatives to come down and settle matters for him. Laura put all this by with such indifference, as if indeed it had nothing to do with herself, that Madam Mist after a while had to give up her quest for information. And then Laura put her questions.

"I came here to ask your husband something. I don't know why I never thought of it before. Something about the past. Do you suppose he knows?"

"We've been here forty years," grinned Madam Mist. "He knows a great deal."

"He collects stories about the neighbourhood, Mam, doesn't he?"

"Oh, that!" The parson's wife drew her pale lips together with a grin of satisfaction. Her hands, knotted and flaccid from age and disease, grasped the arms of her chair and she stared into the fire. Her husband had told her that Lucius Delaunay, the steward, who had left in such scandalous haste, and Mr. Mostyn himself, Laura Sarelle's promised husband, had both come to him, nosing round, as he put it, about that old scandal. And now here was the girl herself. That was what they got for making a mystery . . .

"Why do you want to know?" she said. She knew that she was bound both by interest and by honour to say nothing of the secret that she was one of the few people to possess, but she was finding it very hard to resist being the first to enlighten Laura Sarelle as to that tragic incident in her own family history. What did prudence matter now, after all? She was old and in a few weeks might be dead.
"I don't know," mused Laura, as if pondering to herself over the reasons why she had not come here before to learn what it was she wanted to know.

"You've been here three and a half years, haven't you?" probed the vicar's wife. "You've been visiting me often enough like the kind young lady you are, but you've never said anything about this . . ."

"Theo didn't want me to ask questions about the past. And then there's the matter of the portraits. I can't tell you. Do you believe in the dreams of the dead?"

"The dreams of the dead?" repeated the old woman faintly.

"Yes, I mean the theory that when people die they go on dreaming and their dreams come abroad as spectres and apparitions, seize hold of the living and even enter into them."

"I shouldn't like to say what I do believe, but those are strange fancies for a young girl. And what are the portraits you were talking of, Miss Laura?"

The girl described them.

"It's twenty years," answered the parson's wife, "since I got further than the garden, ten years that I've been up in this room. I'm paralysed, you know. But I can remember going to the Hall—oh, yes, often enough. Sir John was seldom there, but when he came we used to wait on him. And I remember the portraits. One is your namesake, Laura Sarelle, who is buried in the church."

"Yes, I know, it was her dress I found, the day that I fell into the river."

"The day that you fell into the Avon, yes," said Madam Mist. "Why don't you leave Leppard Hall? Won't he let you, your brother? It's all a very queer story. If you ask me, I don't think it was fair to give you both the same name."

"Yes, that other Laura had a brother named Theodosius?"

"Yes."

"I wonder if I've got her room?" Laura described her apartments opposite those that had been locked until she began to use them for her domestic arts.

"No, I don't think so. You see, it would be Lady Sarelle who would have that. That would be the mother."

"Lady Sarelle!" Laura repeated the name. This was a new character in the imaginary drama that she was acting in; she was excited, and leaned towards the sick woman.

"You never thought of a mother. She is buried in the mauso-
leum,” said Madam Mist, peering at her visitor closely, “along with her son. She went away from the place after they were both dead, and died abroad—in Florence, I think—but they brought her back here. She would not live with her daughter after what had happened.”

“An inquest, wasn’t there?” whispered Laura. “Can you tell me anything about it?”

Madam Mist made an effort over her own evil inclination. She tried, as Mrs. Sylk had so often tried, to give the girl some conventionally good advice such as looking to the future and leaving the past alone, and being happy in a good marriage that had been arranged for her, and so forth.

But after she had talked for several minutes, which had been ticked off by the clock with the wreaths of flowers painted on it that hung by the window, she saw that the girl was not listening at all.

Then the sick woman leaned forward, obeying a sudden and, as she afterwards felt, devilish impulse and rang the bell, and when the little maid Agnes came asked her to bring the small brown book with yellow mottled insets on the cover that stood on the shelf in the library, and she very precisely indicated the place where it might be found.

Laura, as if she had not heard a word the elder woman had said, now began to talk about the second portrait.

“It was as if he were sitting at the table and as master of us all, the portrait hanging at the end of the room, you know. I’d like to know who it is. It’s not a Sarelle, they say.”

“No, it’s not a Sarelle,” broke in Madam Mist, “that you can be sure of. . . .”

“Who is it, some friend?”

“Some enemy, rather.”

The girl came in with the book and the parson’s wife took it as the maid lingered curiously.

“I don’t see why you shouldn’t know. Making all this mystery! Why, the affair’s over and done with generations ago. If you don’t hear about it by word of mouth, why, you’ll get to know of it in other ways. It is all printed here. Pray leave us, Agnes. I always thought the Hall should have been destroyed, as they say she wished it to be.”

“She wished it?” said Laura quickly, leaning forward. “Who did?”

Madam Mist waited until the servant-girl had gone before she replied:
“Laura Sarelle. The last of the main line, you know. She wanted the Hall razed to the ground. I know that, I heard Sir John tell my husband so when I was quite a young woman and we first went there. My husband was saying what a large place it was and what a deal it needed to keep up, and wouldn't it be better perhaps to have it modernized. . . . And then Sir John said he was—what did he call it?—a stoic philosopher, and that he was not intending to listen to any superstitions, and that just because a stupid hysterical woman had ordered the Hall to be razed to the ground he was going to keep it as it was, even to every detail of furniture. And that,” said the old woman, sighing with exhaustion after this long speech, “was, in my opinion, a stupid thing to do.”

She was turning over the old book with shaking fingers; the pages stuck together, but at last she found what she wanted and held up before Laura, in ill-executed copper-plate, the portrait of a man at which Lucius Delaunay had looked and which to him had seemed faintly familiar on the day he had visited the vicarage.

“Is that the man? Is that your portrait?”

“Yes, that is he. Who is it?”

“That’s Captain Edward Avershaw.”

“I knew! I knew! It was the name I found inside the gold laced hat. Who was he?”

“He was the husband of Laura Sarelle, but she took her own name again, and his was never to be mentioned. And how is it that they’ve got his portrait hanging up there? I don’t think Sir Theodosius can know who it is.”

“Laura Sarelle was married, then.” The girl’s face was puzzled, startled, tense in its interest, all her features sharp, her lips pale, her nostrils flared.

Madam Mist was now lost to everything but relish in the old drama that she had so often turned over in her idle mind.

“I’ve kept quiet about this for a long lifetime. I don’t see why you shouldn’t know. It will be a shock, but it will be like a thunderstorm clearing the air. You’ve every right to know. These men, they don’t understand. The dead do walk.”

“I’ve seen her,” said Laura simply. “But no matter about that. There are things that frighten me more—what is happening to myself? If I am part of her dream—” she checked herself. “Tell me why she would not keep her husband’s name. And she so young, and he so handsome.”
Madam Mist lowered her voice and leant forward in her well-padded but shabby invalid’s chair.

“Captain Avershaw was hanged at Warwick for murdering Sir Theodosius, his brother-in-law. That’s why she would not keep his name.”

The parson’s wife was alarmed at the effect of this sentence on Laura Sarelle. She had expected some display of violent emotion, perhaps hysterics, but the girl remained still in terrifying tranquillity. Only a slow smile disturbed her upper lip and drew it back from her small white teeth.

“Tell me the story,” she commanded.

“It is here in this book,” muttered the old woman quickly, looking over her shoulder at the door. “I don’t know what my husband would say if he knew I had told you. He will keep this book. He says nobody ever thinks of looking there in his old library. All the other copies were called in, I believe. You must remember how powerful the Sarelles were—they wanted to hush it up, to live it down.”

“Why did he do it? The murder?”

“Well, it’s the old story. He met the girl at Bath. She was with her mother, and was a great fool, as I think. He married her. Theodosius was even then a sickly boy, vicious too. They all lived together at Leppard Hall and there was quarrelling all the time—the two women, the mother and the daughter, the boy and the son-in-law. Avershaw was an adventurer, he married her for her money. He had been turned out of the Army—cashiered, don’t they call it?—a gambler and a spendthrift; he wanted to be master here. It was a big fortune even then, though nothing like what it is now. He took the boy about with him to cock-fights, boxing-matches, encouraging him in his bad, evil ways. He tried to murder him that way.”

“But he wouldn’t die? The boy wouldn’t die?” questioned Laura with great eagerness.

“No, instead his constitution strengthened. They didn’t understand things in those days. The boy had been lolling on a sofa, and when he was taken about in the fresh-air life, why, it improved him. And then Captain Avershaw thought he would have to do something else. He was taking sleeping-draughts, the doctor used to come in from Rugby to see him. There was nothing much the matter with him.”

“Theo’s taking sleeping-draughts now. . . .”

“Well, it’s common enough,” said the parson’s wife. “Let
me finish my story, we may be interrupted. I should have asked you to swear I hadn't told it you."

"I promise that. Tell me everything, all you know."

"There's a closet in Leppard Hall with a still, isn't there?" said the parson's wife. "It's fitted up as a little distillery?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well, that was Captain Avershaw's room, next the big chamber he shared with his wife. He took a liking for chemistry and used to make essences, essence of roses. His servant used to prepare everything for him and then he would go in and work there. The room next to it was where his wife slept. The big room above, the one I suppose you have now, was where Lady Sarelle slept. Sir Theo had the rooms below."

"Yes, yes, that's where Theo sleeps now, and Harry opposite."

"Well, it was an easy matter, or so Edward Avershaw thought. He just changed the medicine in the bottle, and one night when Theo took his sleeping-draught he took the poison. He was dead within a few minutes. Then Avershaw tried to put it down to a chill. He said the baronet was imprudent, got his feet wet fishing. That passed too. Of course, they were great people and no one liked to say anything. And Theo was buried. And then one of the servants began to talk and the doctor was alarmed.

"There was a Sir Martin Ford, who was the boy's guardian. It was on his twentieth birthday he died, and Sir Martin was guardian until he was twenty-one. He didn't like the story. You see, the penniless adventurer, the sudden death, and the heir—she, that Laura—she had everything, and of course it all came to her husband.

"Well, the long and short of it was that Avershaw was arrested and put on his trial. There was a big doctor came down from London, Theo's body was exhumed. They tried to make out that he died in a fit, but they brought it in as murder and Avershaw was hanged that day. He went off gaily, as the book says, with a flower in his mouth, and his hair curled. And he was hanged and buried in the graveyard of the jail, the Castle, you know, at Warwick. She went home, and she died the next winter. I've seen her will. Of course there wasn't much she had in her power to do."

"She went back to Leppard Hall after that!"

"Yes, nothing could get her away. Her mother went to Italy, as I say, and left her there alone, she was that ob-
stinate. But she would not have his name. She said that she was Laura Sarelle and nothing else. She was not to be buried in the mausoleum with her brother, but in the church. And I think it was by her wish that those boughs of laurel were put there."

"And Edward Avershaw," whispered Laura, "did he confess?"

"No, he always said he wasn't guilty. They put another prisoner in the cell with him, the way they had in those days and in order that they should talk freely. He swore to this man that he hadn't done it, and tried to put it on to his mother-in-law. It was an unlikely story and no one believed him. The mother gave evidence against him, she caught him rinsing out the glass."

"And the sister—what was her part?"

"No one knew." Madam Mist stretched out a cold hand and took hold of Laura's slim cold wrist. "You see, people thought she had a hand in it, she'd at least stood by, known of her husband's intentions. That was the story that went round, but she was so proud she came back here to live it down."

"She loved her husband," whispered Laura, as if trying to puzzle out something familiar yet difficult. "But no, it wasn't that. It wasn't that, Madam Mist, was it?"

"What made you say that?" asked the parson's wife with a chuckle. "No, it wasn't that. He ill-treated her, he wasn't faithful to her. She knew he married her just for her money. No, she fell in love with someone else and she wanted both of them out of the way—the brother so that she could get the money, the husband so that she would be free to marry again. That's why she edged him on to poison her brother, and that's why she whispered about it among the servants and started suspicions, as they say she did. And that's why she bore evidence against him. Yes, along with her mother she bore evidence against him. It isn't law, you know, for a wife to do that against her husband. But she was witness on some other excuse, and then turned round, said she believed he'd done it—"

Agnes entered clumsily, pushing the door open with her foot, and carrying a tea service on a lacquer tray; Madam Mist paused abruptly while the little maid placed the tray on the table near the two ladies, then sharply ordered her out of the room; neither the vicar's wife nor Laura took any notice of the interruption, the tea and the cakes were untouched, and
the girl leaned forward as the door closed and asked eagerly the question that she had held suspended:

"Why didn’t she marry the other man?"

"No one knows. The story breaks off there. I think he was abroad, in France or somewhere. It was a sickly family and Laura seemed to have a consumption of the lungs the same as her brother. She may have been waiting for him to come home. He may have disliked the scandal."

"She was weak, she was foolish. Imagine risking all that, bringing two men to their end and then not having the reward of it. Was not she a fool, Madam Mist?"

"Who is to judge, who is to say? It’s an old story now." There was a trace of uneasiness on the pallid face of the vicar’s wife. "Perhaps I should not have told it to you. Most people would blame me, I suppose. But I don’t see why you shouldn’t know, it’s a long while ago. But she thought the Hall ought to be razed to the ground. Yes, I can understand that."

"That’s what one hears now, the whispers in the corners, the echoes of those old quarrels, mother and son, husband and wife, all quarrelling, in that place. And after he was dead—the boy, I mean—the three of them living there. Can you imagine it, Madam Mist? How they would have looked at one another, and how she cast suspicion on him. The servants probably had their doubts already, she confirmed them with a word here and a word there. The mother, too, spiteful . . ."

"You mustn’t think of it like that," said Madam Mist rather uneasily. "That’s not what I meant. I wanted you to get it out of your mind by telling you. I say it is all over. And she didn’t," said the parson’s wife, feeling that a moral ought to be drawn, "get the reward of her infamous conduct. She never married her lover. Oh no, she had to live there alone for those last awful months. They must have been as bad as the weeks that Captain Avershaw spent in Warwick Jail. Everybody knowing what had happened, believing she was guilty too, and riding to her brother’s grave in the park—she looked on his face when they unscrewed his coffin. It says there in that book he was so horrible to look on that the physicians felt sick. But she gazed at him unmoved."

"What was the use of all that courage if she didn’t get her heart’s desire? I’m sorry for her, Madam Mist, she was trapped, was she not, by those two men? The man who married her for her money, and the brother, I suppose, who had no thought for her. And the mother, I can’t see her clearly at
all. I suppose she was selfish and foolish. And so she came back here too to lie in the mausoleum. Will you give me the book?"

But the parson's wife slipped it behind her back.

"No! I've said enough! There's nothing else there, just the evidence, and it's dully put down. I don't see why you should read it," she said defiantly, "but I don't want you to be seen leaving the house with it. Perhaps another time. But now you go away and forget it. You know all this story that they make such a monstrous secret about, and maybe when you do become the mistress of Leppard Hall you can have it pulled down. I think it would be a good thing to do. I never liked it, though I used to be there only for a few half-hours at a time."

"I found his hat in that room," said Laura. "There was 'Avershaw' in gold-lettering inside the rim, a little faded yet scarcely soiled. Does my brother know all this?" she asked.

"Of course Sir Theodosius knows the story. My husband knows it and I know it, and one or two old people in the village know it. But there was a great to-do to keep it quiet. They kept changing the servants at the Hall—ay, and the tenants if they could, though Tampion, the miller, knows it well enough. Maybe Paul Tomkins, your brother's man, knows a little."

The old woman rambled on with some satisfaction in relating the number of people who were in possession of the Sarelle secret.

"Of course, in Warwick it is well known enough, but anyone who hoped for patronage or custom from the Sarelles, or help in any way—and they're a big people in the neighbourhood—kept it quiet. Then when Miss Laura died—Miss Laura, I find myself calling her, but she was Mrs. Avershaw, of course—it went to your distant branch that came from Jamaica. And they, as I say, were these hard-headed men who weren't going to have this nonsense about this superstition and were going to keep on the Hall and all that was in it. And so they did, but neither of them lived here very much. Your brother must have been told when he was quite a lad, but of course he kept silent about it too. It was a queer defiance to give you two the same name. But now, my pretty young miss," continued the old invalid, "the mystery is solved and you should not worry your head about it."

Laura's face became blank under the old woman's anxious gaze; it was as if all expression had been wiped off it. She
drew her handkerchief out of her reticule and pressed it to her brow and her lips. Then she said in a flat, controlled voice:

"Well, I'm glad to know this old story. As you said, it's a long time ago and it doesn't affect any of us now. It's stupid to make a mystery about such a thing. It should have been openly talked about and then it would have been forgotten. It was kind of you and I'll not betray you, though really the matter's of no consequence."

"I'm glad you take it like that, my dear," said Madam Mist, much relieved. "I'm old, and I'm here alone, and I've a liking for all ancient fables, tales—ay, and I suppose bits of scandal and gossip too. Sometimes when it's a moonlit night I make them take me to the window and I look out. I can, you know, by putting my head out of the casement, see the churchyard, and sometimes I fancy I can see Laura Sarelle walking along the path by the river."

"Oh yes, she walks," nodded Laura slyly, then she quickly caught herself up. "I mean, that is the story. Do not let us talk of it any more. I must think of the future, as you say, Madam Mist. I must think of my wedding, it is to be here, in your husband's church. There is a good deal to be done."

Laura paused, and then made further inquiries about Paul Tomkins, who had been mentioned just now by Madam Mist as possibly in possession of this old story; he was, she said, an efficient servant, but a dull and effaced personality, and he had only just returned to Leppard Hall, after being absent because of a long illness.

"I wondered why Theo had him again, and why he seems to hold him in regard—is it because he knows something, do you suppose?"

The vicar's wife was rather uneasy because Laura had returned to this subject, after saying "Do not let us talk of it any more," and she replied that she believed that Tomkins had been in the service of Sir John, and with him on his travels, but she was not quite sure, but that if this was so, he was the only servant of the late baronet now at Leppard Hall, and that, very likely, he knew very little.

Laura seemed impatient with this rambling talk, she remarked how odd it was that one who had seemed to her so stupid, just part of the furniture, might after all prove to be quite important; then, without giving Madam Mist time to reply, she went on talking smoothly and easily of village
matters, and the parson’s wife was considerably pleased at her taking the old tale so lightly: she had been led, almost against her own will, to relate it, and she had felt that in doing so she was acting treacherously, almost monstrously, betraying to the young heiress of the Sarelles the secret they too jealously kept. But after all she had made too great fuss about it. Modern young ladies were not likely to lose their heads over tragedies of sixty years before. Perhaps, indeed, the vicar’s wife comforted herself that she had been the means of laying an ancient ghost. She had always understood that Laura Sarelle was a moody, difficult girl who brooded much over the past, and perhaps in a way she had, as it were, lanced an abscess and let the poison escape.

And so she tried to console herself, though before her visitor took her leave she pressed her hand in her own bony fingers and eagerly besought her never to let anyone, especially Sir Theodosius, know that she had explained the story of Edward Avershaw to her, his wife’s namesake.

“You can be sure of that,” smiled Laura. At the door she paused, and with an indifferent air added:
“What poison did he use?”

Madam Mist had hoped the story forgotten, but could not resist satisfying what seemed a harmless curiosity.
“It was laurel-water, my dear.”

“Ah, laurel!” She smiled secretly. “I never thought of that. It’s just what I was looking for—the laurel beneath my window—”

“What you were looking for?”

“I mean—when you told the story,” said Laura smoothly. “I was wondering—I mean looking for what it was—but he used, you said, a distillery.”

“Well, it was laurel-water he distilled. He found it used in the stables as a horse-drench, and he learnt from the stableman that it was poison. So he thought he would distil some himself on the pretence of making essence of roses.”

“Queer it should be laurel when her name was Laura.”

“Well, I suppose that’s how it came about. The mother was a foolish kind of woman, and she had some of the Italian laurel—that’s very poisonous, you know, with beautiful berries—planted underneath the window of Laura’s bedroom.”

“The bushes are there still. I’ve noticed them.”

“I believe there is some Italian poetry written on laurel bushes and the name Laura,” said the vicar’s wife. “So it all
came together and brought it into his mind. And those who considered she was a guilty woman thought that she suggested it to him. But he was loyal to her; at least, he never brought her into it, though he tried to fix the matter on his mother-in-law."

"Well, I shan't think of it again," smiled Laura. "It's an old tale, as I said before, and you said, Madam Mist. And now I must return home, they'll be wondering where I have been so long. There's no need to inform your husband that I waited on him. I've nothing to see him about now."

"No, dear, you came to pay me a visit."

The two women exchanged a look of feminine understanding.

"Why should there be any questions asked, or any curiosity aroused?" smiled the old woman.

"One thing more," asked Laura, still standing erect by the door. "Do you suppose Sir Theo knows who the portrait is?"

"No, I don't for a moment, my dear. I expect it was taken down at once and put up in the attic somewhere and then brought out because it was a fine piece, as far as I can remember. It's not very like the engraving," she said dubiously.

"No, it is not. I dare say some people would not recognize it. I did at once."

"Avershaw was a painter himself, you know. He did that for a pastime. They say he did some quite fine drawings on his cell with some black cherries sent him. That other picture is by him. It looks amateurish compared with his own portrait, but that's one he painted of his wife soon after they were married. She is wearing the yellow dress, you know, dear. Sir John told us."

Madam Mist felt this reference was cruel, but could not resist it. Laura seemed so cool, so calm, so controlled, that she found it quite easy to talk to her of these things in an unembarrassed way. This reference to what had undoubtedly been an attempted suicide was received with the greatest indifference. Laura began to talk of other things, some gifts she said she would send Madam Mist from the Hall.

"You send me too much," said the vicar's wife. "It is your company I like, talks like this." She put her hand behind the cushion supporting her back and touched the book. "Tell Agnes to come up, this must go back in its place before it's missed. Another time you may, if you will, read it."
"I think I know enough. Let us forget that you ever told me."

Laura returned to the Hall so absorbed in thought that she noticed nothing of what was about her, and a woodman who passed her on the way stared after her; so vacant and fixed was her look that it attracted even his dull attention.

When she reached her own room she wrote two letters which she bade Mrs. Sylk give immediately to her brother and Mr. Mostyn. These begged the two gentlemen to wait on her that afternoon in the music-room and were couched in peremptory terms, and Mrs. Sylk, whom she had asked to read them, thought that the cool summons would not be obeyed.

But when, soon after the clock struck four, Laura Sarelle went to the music-room, both Sir Theodosius and Mr. Mostyn were there. The elder man, under his usual affability, was considerably ill at ease, expecting some startling move on the part of the wilful girl. Sir Theodosius looked sickly and irritated. He was by the fire that Laura had ordered to be lit, and glanced round with distaste at the room, with the covers over the spinet and harp, the muslin bag over the chandelier.

"Why this apartment of all others, my dear Laura?" he demanded. "You become more tiresome every day. What important business do you wish to see me on?"

"Oh, it's an old matter," said Laura, "and one very quickly decided." She glanced from one man to the other; she was standing in the centre of the room on the space of empty greenish carpet, a long dark-red dress with dark-blue fringed shawl showing sombrely against the pale colours of the room with the elegant furniture, the French style of decorations.

Mr. Mostyn was at the window-place; the rain was slashing down, pouring in rivulets against the glass so that the prospect of the water-meadows, the river and the trees lightly hazed with the first green, were all blurred and grey. Such a sombre melancholy invaded his soul that he found it difficult to preserve his usual air of worldly gaiety.

"I want to ask you both if you will release me from my engagement?" said Laura. She spoke without any feeling or emotion. First she addressed her brother: "I do not think it is a great deal to you, Theo, whom I marry. You can have no
objection against Lucius save that you quarrelled with him. I have those feelings for him that I do not wish to name here. Only women, I believe, understand. I want you to let me leave this house. I feel as if I were in great danger. I want you to let me and Hetty Sylk go to London and live anywhere—in a hotel, in a hired apartment, what you will, while Lucius comes from Ireland for me. And I want you to allow us to be married immediately. I shall not ask a penny from you, either now or ever; whatever Lucius has is sufficient for me. Please, pray, do not answer.” She held up her hand as her brother began to rise from the chair, violent words trembling on his lips. She turned to Harry Mostyn.

“I ask you to release me from my engagement, to make it as easy for me as possible, so that there is not any of what Mrs. Sylk calls disgrace and degradation. I do not want Lucius to be ashamed of me. I believe you only wanted to marry me because of my fortune. You cannot possibly care for me, we are different in everything and you are so much older and more experienced. If I were mistress of my own fortune I would give it to you, the hundred thousand that is supposed to be my dowry—I would give it to you for my release. But I am not mistress of it, and I suppose, being a gentleman, you would not take it if I had it. Now, please, will you answer me? You speak first, Theo.”

“I utterly and completely refuse,” said Theodosius viciously. “We have been over this ground again and again——”

“Please, Theo,” interrupted his sister, “say what you have to say in a few words, make it short and clear as I did.”

“Well, then, I refuse.”

“Your reasons?” asked Laura.

“I’ve given them to you before, I’ll give them to you again; I will make it, as you say, short and clear. Lucius betrayed me. When he was here in my employment he made love to you behind my back.”

“His behaviour to me was absolutely honoured,” said Laura quietly, “and you know it, Theo.”

“Honourable perhaps in a worldly sense,” sneered the brother, “but he seduced your mind and spirit, made you what you are now—rebellious, vindictive. He had the impertinence to come to me with a proposal for your hand, and he in my employment—he knew what designs I had for you, what hopes for the future. I tell you, I consider it a betrayal. It was impertinent, too. It is true he has now an Irish title and
a small estate, both once forfeited and still beggared, but that in one way of speaking puts the proposal even more out of court. How many more times am I to tell you, Laura, that you are to marry a man who is willing to take the name of Sarelle? Belmont couldn't do that even if he wished. Besides, I dislike the fellow. I feel he deceived me, laughed in his sleeve at me, made a fool of me. Why, I thought you were like brother and sister together. I trusted him with you, and all the while there was this romantic trash going on."

"I suppose it is useless to tell you," said Laura wearily, "that nothing was passing between us. It was I who spoke to him. Never mind. That is your answer, Theo—you won't consider it? I tell you, I am in peril."

"What peril?" he asked shortly. "You talk like an imbecile, Laura. No girl could be more carefully guarded and protected than you are."

"It's not a peril you'd understand," said Laura. She turned to the other man. "What is your answer?"

"My dear girl! My dear child! What a position you put me in! Something has upset you, surely. This is not your natural self, Laura."

She tapped with her foot impatiently, checking his shocked protestations.

"That's what you do, Mr. Mostyn, you make words and escape under the cloud of them, like that creature we read of, the cuttlefish. I want a plain answer—will you release me? If you refuse to marry me, my brother cannot force us together."

But Harry Mostyn continued to make words. The diversion was for his sake more than for her own. Behind this his mind was darting to and fro quickly. Should he seize this opportunity of being rid of both of them, of leaving Leppard Hall for ever, of facing his own difficulties in some other way? One part of him wanted to do this, the direct, the honourable, the manly thing; but the other part of him thought: 'Why should I take notice of a foolish girl's hysterics? I think she is a little disordered in her intellect. This will make the brother more pleased than ever to get rid of her. I'll seize the chance and press for an immediate marriage.'

Laura broke in impatiently on his excuses, and demanded once again that he should answer plainly and tell her the truth.

"Yes, tell her the truth, Mostyn," cried Sir Theo. "Tell her
that she's a little fool and we'll have no more of this non-
sense."

"I shouldn't put it as harshly as that, Theo," protested Mr. Mostyn, flushed and uneasy, "but, darling Laura, you cannot expect me to resign you as easily as this. Belmont is out of the question. Don't you see, my dear, he doesn't even come forward."

"He wrote to me," said Laura. She glanced towards her brother. "You took the letter out of my hand that day in the library. I wrote to him. I gave the letter to Hetty Sylk, who promised to post it in Warwick."

"And of course she did post it," said Mr. Mostyn, soothingly. "But your brother wrote pointing out to Lord Belmont how impossible the match was, that you were already betrothed to me. He didn't know that when he wrote to you. Can't you understand, my dear child, the position you put him in? Naturally, when he discovered that you were betrothed, that it had already been announced in the London news-sheets, he would withdraw."

"I wonder, I wonder. I'm like a prisoner here, I can't be sure of getting my letters. Many times before they've been kept back. Theo said so. But now I'm doing what I accused you of doing—using words. So you won't let me go, Harry?"

"My dear, for your own sake—I'm very fond of you. I know I'm much older—I know, perhaps, that you don't care for me—but I do think for your own sake, Laura, that you should marry me and let me take you away from Leppard Hall"—he approached her as he spoke and his voice and his look were lover-like—"to the places that I promised you, Laura."

She raised her hand and let it fall.

"Don't try to bribe me. That's all I wanted to know, Harry. Very well, then, I've no more to say, now, on this subject."

She left the room, her head drooping. Mr. Mostyn had feared some emotional outburst, and her quiet did not altogether reassure him. He was alarmed to see a slight smile upon her lips.

When he closed behind her the door that he had opened for her, he stood dubiously where she had stood in the centre of the green carpet fingering his chin. Even now he was tempted to give up the whole business.

But Sir Theo rose and with great impatience exclaimed:

"Take her away, Mostyn, for God's sake! Marry Laura and take her away. Perhaps when she comes back as a married
woman she will be sane. A most spoilt and petulant creature, bringing us here for this! That man Delaunay must have bewitched her..."

At this opening all Harry Mostyn's instincts of self-interest rose and he said quickly:

"This thing can't be done helter-skelter style. There's the settlement to make, I want it all fair and square. You don't know all of my affairs—"

Theo waved his hand impatiently:

"What's it matter about your affairs? I've money enough for both of us. It's the family and the name I'm thinking of. Can't you take the girl away and train her, make her more like an ordinary gentlewoman? Her moods, her sulks, her sullenness and her temper, and then her imperious manners, sending for us here. My God, if it had been fifty years ago Delaunay and I would have crossed swords."

"I'm willing to agree to anything that you suggest, Theo," said Harry Mostyn. "I don't like the present situation. I'd rather Laura was my wife. Perhaps I could manage her better. I've not failed with women. Yet, you mustn't attach too much importance to these moods of a young, unbroken girl. Why, she knows nothing, she's been nowhere. Let her get distracted with a little society, a little pleasure, a few friends of her own age."

"I'll write to Spryce to-night," said Theo. "I'll have everything arranged."

"Had we not better go to town?" Mr. Mostyn saw a chance of making another point. He would have given a good deal at that moment to be away from Leppard Hall. He kept his back to the window, he could scarcely endure to look at the rain-swept casement, the blurred view of river and church, trees and fields and park.

But on this point Sir Theo became obstinate. He was correcting the proofs of his book and did not wish to move his papers till that labour was finished. Laura might go up and begin to choose her dresses with Mrs. Sylk whenever she wished, but he desired that Harry would stay with him, he must have some company.

The florid gentleman almost groaned aloud at this prospect, but finally wrung out of the baronet permission to go up to town himself for a few days in order to see his own lawyers. He would be busy, there would be a great deal to be done. He would have somehow to put a decent appearance on his
affairs, even at the cost of a little dishonesty. A hundred thousand pounds in a few months' time—he must think of that. He made himself as amiable and ingratiating and interesting as possible.

Before the two men left the music-room the date of Laura's marriage was fixed for the middle of June.

. . . .

But Mr. Mostyn's nice plans were entirely upset twenty-four hours later by a message brought by Mrs. Sylk saying that Laura wished to see him, not in the music-room this time but in her own apartment.

Fearful of another appeal to his better feelings, the unhappy gentleman steeled himself for the interview, and his heart sank when he saw Mrs. Sylk discreetly leaving him and Laura Sarelle together. He was summoning up all his worldly wits and social acumen to meet this embarrassing situation, when Laura completely surprised him by turning on him a smiling face and saying:

"My request yesterday was only to test you, Harry. I should have despised you if you had given me up. Of course, I've forgotten Lucius Delaunay a long while ago. That letter from him the other day only amused me. I'm rather sorry for him, he's an amiable fellow. But you are the man I've chosen for my husband. Oh, I don't say," she hurried on, as he coloured with pleasure and moved closer towards her, "that I'm in love with you or anything like that, but I want to get away from Leppard Hall, and you promised me that, didn't you? I think Theo's tyrannical. I want to get away from him. You understand, don't you?"

"Indeed, my dear girl, I understand perfectly. I think it's a most unnatural life for a young lady to live. You know what I propose," and he began to run over the usual baits—Paris, Italy. She hushed him and said with a brilliant smile:

"Why shouldn't we run away and be married secretly? You can go to town and I have permission too. It can all be arranged with perfect discretion."

"Laura! I am most deeply flattered. But your reason? Allow me to collect myself."

"Oh, my reasons!" She gave them to him.

Harry Mostyn had an alert mind, was used to dealing with a crisis, and was very much alive to his own interests. He
therefore contrived enough control to murmur flattering commonplaces to Laura while deciding what his course should be.

Her proposal at first had seemed to him so startling as to support his suspicion that she might be touched by insanity, but when he came to turn it over he saw that it was consistent both with the circumstances and her late behaviour. Of course, all along, what she had wanted to do was to escape from Leppard Hall, so melancholy and uncongenial, and the tyranny of her peevish, ailing brother. It was because of this she had betrothed herself to him, Harry Mostyn; because of that, no doubt, she had been eager to accept the proposal of Lord Belmont that offered, she thought, an instant escape from her surroundings and her master. Finding that attempt had come to nothing, she was turning again to him, reaffirming her wish to have him as her husband, but urging him to take her away immediately and secretly.

The proposal was not so crazy; indeed, it had some points in its favour. While he was murmuring protestations of being entirely at her service and only wishing to act for her own good, Mr. Mostyn was coming to the conclusion that her suggestion would be very convenient for himself. He would secure immediately, without any question or disclosure of his own damaged resources, a fortune of a hundred thousand pounds. This Sir Theodosius would have to pay on his marriage, whether he was exasperated by the duplicity or not. He could not, as Mr. Mostyn quickly calculated, say that the marriage had taken place without his knowledge, for the announcement of it had already been put in the Press. It was known to all their friends and acquaintances.

Of course it might be a little difficult and might even be a little scandalous to explain why he and Laura had married so suddenly and without any ceremony, but he thought that it was a thing that might be glossed over. People could be told that the girl was shy, retiring, and disliked ceremony and wished to disappoint expectations of the gossips who had hoped to see the great heiress make a pompous display at her marriage; friends could be told, too, in the most discreet manner possible, something of the truth: Laura had been anxious to escape from the tutelage of her brother and the dreary surroundings of Leppard Hall.

There were, of course, his future relationships with Sir Theodosius to be thought of. Would the baronet, outraged by the elopement and secret marriage, cut his sister and brother-
in-law off from the estate, leave them nothing in his will? Mr. Mostyn did not think so, because there was the great bribe of the name-change. If Sir Theodosius refused to make his sister his heiress—and Mr. Mostyn was not quite sure that he had the power to do so, he believed that Laura must inevitably succeed to the Leppard Hall estate—but if by any trick or twist of the law he did try to cut her out, then Harry Mostyn would be able to wound the young baronet on his tenderest point by refusing to adopt the name and arms of Sarelle.

At this point in his calculations that accompanied his running murmur of soothing conversation with Laura he was pulled up short again by realizing that he had assumed that he was likely to be the heir of a man young enough to be his son, or at any rate considerably younger than himself.

He tried to steady these rather wild speculations by repeating to himself that, for all his appearance of delicacy, Sir Theodosius was probably in extremely good health and might marry and have a family of his own.

At any rate there would be the hundred thousand pounds, and there would be other pickings also, for Sir Theodosius might make him a sufficient allowance if he expected him to live at Leppard Hall and keep up the establishment.

Mr. Mostyn was caught up in the middle of his reflections by Laura saying clearly:

"Do you agree, or do you not, Harry?"

She leaned forward and put her hand over his, and looked straight into his eyes. He had tried to think at first, as a man will whenever a woman says anything original or startling, that she was hysterical, or half crazy, but he had to admit now that she appeared very cool and reasonable. She had argued out her position very clearly before she had put it into words. Begging him to hush his compliments, to which she paid little attention, she further explained herself, and in her explanation she confirmed much of what he had already thought out for himself.

Her main desire was to escape from Leppard Hall and the life she led there, and the constant supervision of her brother. And she argued that Sir Theodosius was capricious and whimsical and likely to delay her marriage from month to month, and that the only way to bring him to a point would be for the two of them to go away and get married secretly, then to return and face him with the accomplished fact.

"He may rage and be angry," she said with a cool smile,
"but he'll have to accept it, won't he? And he can't, as I understand from Mr. Spryce, withhold my dowry. That must be mine unless he has actually forbidden the marriage. And, of course, he has given his consent publicly and privately, everyone knows that."

These were Harry Mostyn's own thoughts as he murmured acquiescence in her plans, but for appearance' sake he thought it would be better to speak with Sir Theodosius once again, try to persuade him to agree to an early marriage, say in a month or six weeks, when his sister could be properly provided.

Harry Mostyn said this to flatter her feminine vanity, but Laura lifted her thin shoulders and declared that she had enough clothes to last her for a twelvemonth. It seemed to him out of character, as he knew her to be vain and very fond of finery.

She spoke again with the same tranquil easiness and told him that she had arranged everything. Theodosius was perfectly willing that she should go to town, on some of these mantua-maker visits, she said, and had even arranged rooms for her with Mrs. Sylk and some servants in Queen Street, that was off Holborn. And she could slip away one day—"There is such a thing as special licence, is there not?" she said. "Or if the banns must be put up, well, we can wait a few weeks. Do you agree, Harry? I ask you once again."

"I don't want to do anything hole-and-corner," he replied, "or to annoy your brother by anything that seems disrespectful to you. You know, for the rest, my dear, I'm entirely at your service."

To this Laura replied suddenly:

"Marry me as soon as may be and say nothing of it to Theo until I give you the word. Come," she added, raising her head and looking at him sideways, "this suits your plans, does it not? You have not to disclose your affairs, there need be no formal visits to lawyers, no drawing-up of deeds or contracts. I have been to Mr. Spryce and know how my affairs stand. You will automatically come into possession of my dowry."

Mr. Mostyn, accomplished man of the world as he was, was taken aback, startled, and almost embarrassed by her clear reading of his mind. 'She is an extraordinary woman,' he thought; 'at one minute a wild, wilful girl, at the other moment shrewd and experienced.'

"Meet me half-way," she urged. "If you don’t please me in
this, Harry, I swear you'll lose all. I'll go to Theo and, whatever the disgrace, I'll declare I won't marry you."

He believed she was capable of that, and he saw that she was in no mood to be played with, so he agreed, though with some inner dismay, to her extraordinary proposal that in many ways was distasteful to him. He was not of a romantic temperament or of a romantic age, he did not wish to make a fool of himself by a clandestine marriage. On the other hand, there were more serious matters to consider than the possibility of his being made to look a fool.

Laura was right when she said that Theo was eccentric and difficult to the point of being impossible to deal with. He might easily, under one excuse or another, as the caprice took him, put off the marriage from month to month. He might also, when he saw the account of Harry Mostyn's affairs, refuse altogether to consent to it. No, it would be better to do the audacious thing, even perhaps the rash thing, and marry Laura. If he was her husband, Harry Mostyn felt that he would be in a much stronger position, able to dictate terms to her brother if he played his cards properly.

He believed, too, that he could marry Laura privately without offending Theo. He could always tell him that the girl had been so difficult, whimsical and fanciful that that was the only way to obtain a mastery over her...

But there was something base about his part in the whole affair that irked him. He never could stay for more than a few hours in Leppard Hall without having this sense of his own ill-behaviour, almost his own villainy, come over him. He did not care to deceive a man who was his host, he did not care to be made the tool of a girl's caprice, or whatever it was that was influencing Laura.

But self-interest overruled all these other considerations. Harry Mostyn made up his mind to take Laura and her large dowry while he could get her. He kept his own counsel and made his own plans.

Before he left Leppard Hall the next day he had assured Laura, in a private interview snatched in the music-room, that he agreed to the secret marriage and would make all preparations.

Laura came down to the pilastered porch to see him depart. It was a clear, cool day, for spring was late and chilly. Laura wore a little quilted jacket of dark velvet, a purple so dense in shade as almost to be black, that set off very becomingly,
Mr. Mostyn thought, the delicate fairness of her skin, the lustre of her dark curls.

Before he and Flasket stepped into the carriage she begged him to pick for her a spray of the laurel that grew in front of the house against the lower window to the left. It was that graceful variety of the shrub known as the "Poet's Laurel", with long, fine-pointed leaves. Laura told him that it had been placed there by her namesake many years ago, and indeed the trunk of the tree was thick and gnarled.

"The stems are very tough," she added. "I have great difficulty in plucking them myself."

Harry Mostyn pulled down two of the smaller and more easily reached sprays, the small leaves showing against the darker, and gave them to her. This was one of her whims, of course, this play upon her name and the laurel bush. . . . He remembered that sprig held by the girl in the yellow dress in the portrait, the two sculptured boughs in the church, and the association was not very pleasant to him, though he did not quite know why. . . . Laura smiled at him innocently.

"I think it is a charming plant. It looks well with those hot-house flowers I have in my room."

She then held up her face for his kiss, and he thought that after all she was a seductive and charming creature and that once these difficulties and embarrassments were over he might be quite content with her as his wife, and that apart from her golden dowry.

Mrs. Sylko was standing in the porch, shivering in the cold air. Laura had asked her to come down; Mr. Mostyn wondered why; the elder lady had arrived only in time to see the carriage drive down the long avenue and to meet Laura returning with the laurel sprays.

"Why, you are determined to look like the portrait," said she uneasily, for she did not care to see anything that might remind both Laura and herself of the unhappy day when the girl had worn the yellow silk dress that had belonged to the other Laura Sarelle.

"Oh no!" Laura shook her head. "It was not my idea at all. Why, we've been here nearly three years now, and I never thought to pick the laurel before. No, Harry Mostyn told me he would like me"—she paused and looked down at the glossy, pointed leaves with the hard, small white flowers in her hand—"to distil these leaves for him. He said they made a
potent essence, a perfume that he was very fond of. But I wasn't to tell anybody, that it was to be a secret."

Mrs. Sylk paid very little attention to these words; she thought that Mr. Mostyn was humouring some whim of the girl, who seemed always to have some fanciful desire to associate herself with laurels and her dead namesake. She was glad to see the two betrothed people on such apparently good terms and to feel that the episode with Lucius Delaunay had been forgotten by Laura already and therefore could never have been of much importance.

So she said vaguely:

"Essence of laurel leaves? I never heard of it. . . ."

"Well, Harry has. But pray don't tell anybody I told you, Mrs. Sylk, will you? Especially Theo. It is to be a secret. It is supposed to be a most wonderful essence for both colour and scent."

"Indeed no, I shall not mention it to your brother. Why should I?" smiled Mrs. Sylk, "He never asks about your pastimes, Laura. I don't think he even knows that you work in the distillery. It is just sufficient, if he ever does ask after you, to say that you are engaged on household tasks. He is perfectly satisfied, so long as you live at Leppard Hall and make no trouble for him, my dear."

"So this is my little secret and Harry's," smiled Laura. "Once more, pray don't mention it to anyone. I'm curious myself to see what this experiment results in. If you don't see much of me for the next few days you will know what I am doing—distilling the essence for my beloved."

"Your beloved!" repeated Mrs. Sylk lightly, as the two women went up the wide, shallow, graceful stairs. "I'm pleased to hear you call him that. . . ."

"Anyone would be my beloved who would take me away from Leppard Hall," smiled Laura, "and he has promised to do that quite soon."

That evening Laura left Leppard Hall as the dusk was falling for her now customary walk along the banks of the Avon; she usually stopped short at the churchyard and turned back across the fields and the parkland. Sometimes Mrs. Sylk accompanied her on this excursion, sometimes one of the maids,
but to-night she was alone. She had been in such good spirits of late that Mrs. Sylk had ceased to watch her so anxiously as she had done in the past; still, it was not very easy for her to slip away unobserved, and she hastened lest she might be followed and brought back before she had accomplished what she had set out to do.

She had undertaken something that might have proved difficult, tiresome, or impossible, but by sheer chance was extremely easy. Passing the churchyard, and never glancing at the graves or the spire, but keeping her eyes on the footpath by the river, she turned in at the little wooden gate of the parsonage, passed through the garden, where the air was now heavy with the scent of pinks and night stocks, and opened the door, cautiously raising the latch. She had no fear of meeting the Reverend Nathaniel Mist because she knew that he was in Warwick, where he had gone to visit a relative and consult Dr. Selby about his swollen legs.

She had to be very careful about the sharp ears of Madam Mist; Agnes, the maid, too, might come out into the passage at any moment. Of course it would not matter very much, she would be able to give quite a good excuse for her intrusion, but it would cause a little comment if she had been seen coming thus unceremoniously into the parsonage. It might be remembered afterwards.

She paused in the hall; here it was quite dark, for no lamps or candles had been lit. She had noted the faint light in Madam Mist’s room; no doubt the little servant was up with the invalid woman settling her bed, or reading the Bible, or coaxing her to drink her posset.

Laura opened the little door on the right, slipped into the parson’s library, where everything was neat and tidy, the desk locked, the worn armchair in place.

There was still sufficient light for her to discern the bookcase, for a pearly glow of late evening fell through the wide window, the curtains not yet having been drawn.

She found the book she wanted, that which contained the account of the trial of Captain Edward Avershaw, placed it in the folds of her shawl and glided again out of the room, down the passage, out of the gate, and along the garden path.

At the gate she paused, looking up at the window from which came the faint blur of light. She felt elated with her own silence and cleverness. No one had heard her, it was clear, or Madam Mist would have sent the girl to go rapping
at the window and ask her business and to beg her to come up for a gossip.

The parson’s lady had been most uneasy in her mind since she had given her dreadful confidences to Laura, and had sent her up one or two little notes that contained only formal wording, but were, Laura knew, the result of desperation, begging the girl to come and see her. Laura knew that she wanted to beseech her again and again to preserve complete secrecy. But she did not intend to expose herself to the entreaties of the sick woman, whom she heartily disliked. She had, therefore, replied politely to these letters in terms that anybody might read but that she hoped would assuage some of the anxiety of Madam Mist, and prevent her from sending some letter or message that might fall into the hands of her brother.

She had heard that the vicar’s lady’s illness had taken on a more serious turn and that it was partly on her account that the Reverend Nathaniel had gone to Warwick.

‘Distress of mind,’ thought Laura. ‘She had her enjoyment. She greatly relished telling me that tale, now she must pay for it.’

The girl smiled to herself to think how successful she had been. Really, it was quite easy to do what seemed an outrageous or a difficult action if you only had the courage and deftness. She hastened back to the Hall, anxious to use the last light, and met Mrs. Sylk in the avenue, searching for her with some concern. Laura laughed quite loudly and tucked her hand in the crook of the elder woman’s arm.

Lying readily, she said she had been down to the Mill, where Tampion’s little daughter was ill, “but recovering, and I have promised to-morrow to take her some books—some of those old picture-books that I had, you know, when I was a child.”

Laura laughed again, pressed the thin volume tightly in her shawl.

“Your picture-books?” said Mrs. Sylk, slightly frowning.

“Oh, I forgot, I have not got them any longer. My childish things were destroyed, weren’t they, when I came here, when Aunt Tollis died. No, I’ve nothing at all, have I—nothing of those pleasant days?”

Laura still seemed in high spirits; she was indeed pretty well satisfied with her own achievements, which she brought to a successful conclusion before she went to bed by hiding
the book under a pile of thick silken skirts in a tall chest of tulipwood, locking it, and placing the key in the little reticule of black velvet embroidered with beads which she was now careful never to leave out of her sight.
PART THREE

Lord Belmont, after all, could not accept without a struggle the dismissal given him in the letter written by Sir Theodosius. He much suspected that Laura’s hand had not been in this, nor in her announced marriage to Harry Mostyn, and his suspicions were confirmed when he had come to London, being unable to remain in Ireland, and had had a short conversation with Mr. Spryce, who showed himself friendly and even warm towards the young peer.

The lawyer was half inclined to confide in Lord Belmont, tell him the whole history of the Sarelles, the ugly story and scandal that had ended the main line, and even the direction in the other Laura Sarelle’s will, that Leppard Hall should be razed to the ground. But natural prudence prevailed and he decided not to give away a secret that was not his. He did, however, try to convey to Lord Belmont that he thought Sir Theodosius was exceedingly eccentric, that it was not wise for Laura to remain at Leppard Hall, and that he, Lord Belmont, her first suitor, was far more suitable as her husband than Mr. Mostyn, of whom, though he had no definite charge against him, Mr. Spryce had no very good opinion.

Having learnt from the lawyer some details of his rival—that Mr. Mostyn was much older than Laura, a widower, known for his extravagant habits and as a frequenter of gambling-hells and racecourses—hearing, too, from Mr. Spryce that the great bribe had been the offer of the change of name, Lord Belmont decided to make an effort to see Laura herself before, as he put it, “it is too late for both of us”.

He had been told that she was in town and had been given her address by Mr. Spryce, and now he waited before the neat, plain brick house without any pretensions where the two women, Mrs. Sylk and Laura, lodged. It was off Bond Street in a select and genteel neighbourhood, but it had no ostentation about it. Indeed, it seemed to Lord Belmont to have a slightly clandestine air; everything that the Sarelles
did was out of the way; all the trouble had started from the austere kind of life they lived at Leppard Hall. . . . He remembered that now, frowning, as he pulled the bell. How had he endured it for two years? He had had, certainly, the rhythm of his own duties, his own activities, his own pleasures, yet he looked back on it as a fixed, dreadful scene in his mind—the water-meadows, the twisting river that raced at the mill, the dark and sombre—nay, awful—façade of Leppard Hall.

He recalled Laura; her picture was often in his mind: Laura in the antique yellow dress standing on the path beside the river speaking to him so earnestly, and what had followed, and his own expulsion from Leppard Hall. Surely she had been sincere?

He could not believe that in so short a time she had given her affections to another man, but rather that she was being wrought upon by her eccentric, cruel brother, and an adventurer, greedy for her fortune. Lord Belmont had scarcely hoped that he would be able to see her without difficulty, but the maidservant showed him without demur into a coldly furnished parlour, comfortable but conventional, before he had time to give his name.

And there was Laura, standing in a rigid attitude by a small round table as if she were alert and expectant.

Lord Belmont saw immediately that he had been mistaken for somebody else. No doubt it was Harry Mostyn for whom she had been waiting. She gave him, indeed, a dreadful look, not what he had expected, not surprise only, but terror. She put her fingers to her lips as if to hush a scream.

"Laura! I have startled you! I did not mean to do so. There was hardly time for me to write to you, and our letters, I fear, have been tampered with."

"Never fear," she said; she still looked at him more as if she spoke to a spectre than to a living man, "we shall come together. I have arranged everything."

"Laura! Tell me your affairs, don’t look so wild, dear girl. What has happened since I left you last? Could you have found no means of communicating with me?"

"I have been like a prisoner, you know that. You must not stay here now. Oh, why did you ever go away!" she suddenly exclaimed, with a warmer note in her voice. "It was not fair—nay, it was cruel—to leave me alone in that place. Now I’ve planned everything."

"Laura, you must explain yourself. As you said just now,
we may have very little time together. I am willing to do any-
thing you wish. Do you desire me to wait on your brother
again, to try to persuade him? I was his friend once, surely
he will listen to reason?"

"No, Lucius, he won't. I'm to marry Harry Mostyn because
he will take the name of Sarelle."

"Who is this man? I don't wish to say anything against one
whom you have accepted as your future husband, Laura."

"Don't say anything!" Again she made that curious, half-
sly gesture of her finger to her lips. "How strange that you
should come to London to-day!"

"I've been in London a day or two, Laura, but I waited on
Mr. Spryce. I didn't even know that you were in town. I was
prepared to go to Leppard Hall."

"You must never go there! That is a place that we must
never visit!"

He was bewildered by her manner and by her look, her
gesture, that finger on the lips. Coming close to her, he asked
earnestly:

"Laura, have you any regard for me still? We have been
separated so long, perhaps I'm a fool to think that you still
care."

"It is you, and no one else," she said in a hurried whisper,
as if giving a confidence; "it is you and no one else, always,
Lucius. But now is not the time. And if you were found here
it might spoil everything."

"You cannot go on with this marriage—this other man must
be told. Do you not see how foolish, how wrong, it is, Laura?
I do not want your money; I'll forgo any claim on the Sarelle
estate. If the taking of the name is the bribe your brother
wants, perhaps something can be done about that."

Laura shook her head, murmuring vehemently:

"No! No!"

Then the door was hastily opened and Mrs. Sylk entered
the room. She was in such a state of violent, barely con-
trolled agitation that Lord Belmont felt his heart chill as if
he had stepped into the midst of some ugly tragedy. What was
the matter with these two women?

He said, almost against his own volition, for he was prudent
and usually controlled himself:

"Laura, let me take you away from this house, from all
thought of Leppard Hall and your brother."

She moved across the room, touched Mrs. Sylk on the arm
and murmured, "Remember, this is secret!" and left the two
together.

"For God's sake," said the young man, not in any violence
but with deep meaning, "tell me what has happened."

"Yes, I think I'd better tell you," sighed Mrs. Sylk, looking
at him fixedly. He thought that she had been weeping, her
eyes were blurred, the lids wrinkled. "Because you must go
away. Who would have thought that to-day, of all days, you
would have come here! Sometimes I do think Fate dogs this
wretched family. And now I'm talking like a silly old gossip-
ing wife."

Lord Belmont took the distracted woman, so she seemed
to him, by the arm, and led her to the chair in the window-
place.

"I have been away too long, I'm afraid," he said quietly,
"but tell me as calmly as you can what has happened. I think
it is simple enough—Laura was overruled by her brother to
marry this man, who was a connection, and he is to take the
name. Is not that it?"

"Yes, that's part of it." Mrs. Sylk dabbed her face, already
damp with tears, with a handkerchief that she pulled out of
the pocket of her girdle. "And another part of it is that he,
though I'm saying nothing against him, though he's too old
for her, is anxious for her fortune and is willing to put up with
her whims, as no doubt he calls them. Yes, that's another of
it, too, sir," said Mrs. Sylk. "I know it all, I've been beside
them all the time. Sir Theodosius becomes more eccentric
every week. They're both, I believe, a little unsettled in their
wits."

"I should have seen it before," said Lord Belmont bitterly.
"I blame myself for letting it happen. It was as if I were under
an enchantment, but she was very young, and I was in her
brother's employment. But now you must help me to take her
away; she tells me you have been her true friend—this mar-
riage is absurd."

"If only you had come a day or two ago!" whimpered Mrs.
Sylk, beginning to sob out loud. "Something might have been
done! But now it's too late! And I can't endure any more, I
can't really!"

"But, Mrs. Sylk," insisted the young man earnestly, "she
cares for me, she told me so just now. They have been tam-
pering with our letters, everything possible has been put
between us. I've had my misfortunes too, the cholera, mourning for my relatives, an illness of my own——"

"Hush," implored Mrs. Sylk. She rose and crossed the room and glanced between the straight muslin curtains. "He'll be here any moment—Mr. Mostyn, I mean. I suppose that's how you were shown in. They knew we were expecting him and thought you were he. Oh, the confusion of it all! But I'm not supposed to tell you. It's a secret, and I was sworn to keep it."

"Very well," said Lord Belmont gently, "don't tell me anything that you've sworn to keep secret, Mrs. Sylk. I shall go down to Leppard Hall to-day or to-morrow, as it's too late now. Or perhaps first I'll wait on Mr. Mostyn."

"No, that you mustn't do!" cried the distracted woman. She turned round again with a look of stark terror. "I shall have to tell you, or maybe there'll be murder. Laura married Harry Mostyn this morning."

As she spoke she turned away so that she might not see her hearer's face, and hurried on:

"It was done secretly. I don't know at whose instance, whether he pressed her or she wished it. I can't get anything coherent out of her. She went willingly, and seemed eager too. She confided in me. I was there at the church. They had the banns called secretly. No one is to know anything about it."

Lord Belmont walked up and down the room; Mrs. Sylk was still keeping her anxious watch at the window. When he spoke it was in a very quiet, colourless tone:

"This marriage might be annulled if she has been forced into it."

"But I tell you she seemed willing, even eager."

"But what's the excuse for it, a secret marriage when they are betrothed?"

"The excuse is that Sir Theo kept making delays, he doesn't want to leave Leppard Hall. He puts off the arrangements. He can't be bothered or concerned with any society or ceremony. And she's half mad to get away from the place, and Mr. Mostyn, I suppose, wants her money, and so they have contrived it between them."

"She's not to live with him as his wife?"

"No. I don't think she knows anything of what that means even. She's to live in the same way with me, calling herself Laura Sarelle. Still, what they think, or she or he thinks, I don't know. I tell you I have not the right of it even now—I
don't know when she'll consider it the moment to tell Theo, and I suppose it will be on the first quarrel," hurried on Mrs. Sylk. "She will be able to turn round and say, 'I'm a married woman. I'm going off with Mr. Mostyn,' and he wouldn't be able to withhold the dowry since he has given public consent to the marriage. And now you can see why you can go, sir."

"She could never have cared for me after all, then," mused the young man, speaking as if to himself and as if he had forgotten anyone else was present, "and yet I can scarcely believe it. There's something behind all this. Theo must be, after all, a fool, at least in worldly matters, and this other man is a scoundrel."

"I don't think so. He's amiable and affable and seems kind to her. Perhaps she truly likes him, even loves him, sir, I don't know. What was her manner to you just now?"

"Strange, I couldn't take her meaning. She seemed anxious for me to go. Laura married! It's hardly credible! I always thought she'd wait for me till she was her own mistress."

Then, in the midst of his own distress and bewilderment, Lord Belmont remembered the agitation he was causing this unfortunate distracted woman, who was, he knew, a true friend to Laura, so he pressed her hand and said: "I certainly will go. I can do no good here. If I stay it might provoke a quarrel. I believe I could scarcely contain myself either if I saw this man or Sir Theo. Well, she's another man's wife now. Mrs. Sylk, be her friend and do what you can for her. You know where I am; if any trouble or difficulty arises, send for me immediately."

He could say no more, his fine face was haggard and his beautiful voice harsh with emotion. Mrs. Sylk gave him a piteous look as if she could scarcely bear to let him go, although she was anxious to avoid his meeting Harry Mostyn. She shook her head from side to side, saying stupidly:

"I don't know what to make of it! I don't know what to make of it!"

"Be as kind to her as you can," urged Lord Belmont. "Say that I uttered nothing in the way of reproaches, that I was not even offended. Give her nothing but kindness."

He was gone, not able to say anything more. And Mrs. Sylk thought: 'He fears, as I do, that her intellect is disordered.' She hurried again to the window and watched him hastening, like a man bemused, up the narrow street. She remembered
then with a pang that she had omitted to exact a promise of secrecy from him, but she was soon satisfied. He would never betray Laura, she believed that he was 'a true lover as well as an honourable man'; those were the simple words her simple mind employed.

From an upper window Laura Sarelle also watched Lord Belmont hastening down the street. Her face took on a tender expression, and her lips, which lately had been firmly compressed, became soft and smiling. She did not look regretful or remorseful, but rather pleased and triumphant.

"He loves me," she murmured to herself, "he loves me! And they shall not separate us for long."

She heard the bell ring again after she had stood there for a while. No doubt that was Mr. Mostyn, her husband; she was Laura Mostyn now. The two men must have passed in the street. Well, he could wait a while.

She sat down at the small table with the muslin flounces where her papers were spread out and pulled out of the bosom of the grey gown that was her wedding-dress the gold ring that he had put on her hand, and she stared at it, and a sly smile touched her lips. It seemed to stretch and widen until from a band of gold it had turned into a collar of hemp.

Harry Mostyn accompanied the two ladies on their return to Leppard Hall with mingled feelings of satisfaction, almost amounting to triumph, and uneasiness almost amounting to humiliation. On the one hand, he had secured the Sarelle heiress and her hundred thousand pounds, together with the reversion of her very considerable estate; on the other hand, he had certainly been the subject of what seemed a rather meaningless caprice on the part of a spoilt girl. He would have to reverse their rôles when they were married, he thought. And then he remembered that they were married already. When they lived together as man and wife, he corrected himself.

So far she had proved wild and shy, refusing even a kiss, and he himself was so little attracted towards her that he found this rather a relief than a deprivation. He was willing
to put off as long as possible the day when he would have to play the lover to Laura Sarelle.

He had felt discomfited, almost shamed, when he made the arrangements for the secret marriage, and humbled in the presence of Mrs. Sylk, who had been in the confidence of the whole intrigue. Nor was he pleased to be about to enter Leppard Hall, that odious residence, again, and have to face Sir Theodosius, a man whom, however one might try to gloss it over, he had tricked and deceived.

He had tried, before they left London, to get, if he could, some sense out of Laura. How long did she want this comedy to be played? When was the marriage to be announced? She had put him off, saying that she would let him know her wishes soon enough.

The mortified bridegroom’s only consolation was that poor Mrs. Sylk commended him for his very gallant, affable and considerate behaviour to “the poor, wild girl”, as she put it in her agitated asides.

Mr. Mostyn’s uneasiness increased because he rather feared some melodramatic scene when they reached Leppard Hall. He thought that Laura might place her wedding-ring on her finger, rush to her brother’s library and announce her wedding, declaring that she meant at once to leave the house that she had always found hateful. For Mr. Mostyn could see no other possible reason for this wish for the clandestine marriage but an excuse to leave Leppard Hall at once.

To his surprise she did nothing of the kind, but settled into her own routine in the household as if she were not even a wife in name. She was very agreeable to him and encouraged him to come and help her in the distillery. He disliked this bare, cell-like room, as it seemed to him, in which she worked, but in order to humour her, and because there was not much else to do, he would sit there sometimes for an hour together as she moved about cleverly and prettily among her pots and jars.

More than once she sent him to pick laurel leaves from the large tree that grew in front of the house, but always in a secret kind of way, early in the morning or when the light was fading in the evening. She said she was preparing some essence that was to be a surprise for Theodosius.

Mr. Mostyn gave in to this woman’s foolery, as he called it, and took the opportunity in these solitary conversations with
Laura of endeavouring to induce her to give him some enlightenment about their future.

But she always put him off, saying they 'were very well as they were'. She hoped that in a few days, perhaps in a week or so, their affairs would come to a crisis.

"And then there will be a pretty scene with your brother, my dear Laura," he said. "I can't see that we've done ourselves much good. I hope you and Mrs. Sylk will both do me the justice to say that I was not the originator of this scheme and I only gave in to it to please you."

When he said this Laura gave him a queer, sidelong look.

"Oh, everything will be explained to Theo," she smiled. "No need to concern yourself about that, Harry. And, of course, he must be told very soon. I don't intend to stay in Leppard Hall," she added with a touch of wildness, "an hour longer than I can help. Do you like that gold-flecked Venetian glass I gave you for your chamber? I think that it is very handsome."

A short while after this return of Laura, Mrs. Sylk, and Harry Mostyn to Leppard Hall, Madam Mist, the parson's wife, died suddenly—of a stroke, Dr. Selby said—and when news was brought to the Hall Laura, showed such signs of excitement and even pleasure that Mrs. Sylk was further alarmed for her state of mind.

'Surely,' thought the anxious woman, 'her wits are deranged. What had Madam Mist ever done to her? Why, they can't have met for weeks, months. When was it she last called at the parsonage?—I know she was always reluctant to go there and cared nothing, I thought, for the old dame, yet one would think her worst enemy had been taken off the earth.'

But Laura soon recovered the calm and tranquil spirits that she had shown since the last London visit. She gave no one any difficulty. She never complained any more of the two portraits. Indeed, Mrs. Sylk had noticed her glancing at them when they sat at their meals, the four of them, as if she approved of them and regarded them with secret satisfaction. Sometimes—or was Mrs. Sylk imagining this?—the girl seemed to raise her glass and touch her lips to it at the same time as she glanced at the portrait of Laura Sarelle and the unknown man. Sometimes, too, she smiled in a secretive way
and her lips seemed to move as if she was whispering a conversation with those two painted figures.

Neither Sir Theo nor Mr. Mostyn noticed these delicate, almost imperceptible movements and glances on the part of Laura, and Mrs. Sylk told herself that she was becoming fanciful and imagining all kinds of nonsense herself.

The good lady had many excuses for her own secret agita-
tion. The situation was so strange, the Hall even on these early summer days so gloomy, Sir Theo's health gave rise to such continued anxiety, he often had to leave the table shaken by a fit of coughing or prostrated by an attack of faintness. Then there was always the fear, on Mrs. Sylk's part, that the secret marriage might come out in some undesirable way, that they might have been spied on, might have been betrayed, that Lord Belmont might lose patience and arrive at Leppard Hall and demand an explanation from Sir Theo, or from Laura herself.

But none of these things had happened. The days had slipped by in the monotonous routine of country-life days, and Laura took her walks, sewed her embroidery, and worked at what Sir Theo sneeringly called her "housewifely arts", and Mr. Mostyn rode and went into Rugby and Warwick and picked up what friends he could in the neighbouring houses, and mustered what patience he could, and now and then, with all the affable tact at his command, tried to bring the subject of his marriage up with the young baronet.

And it was just as Laura had said it would be: Sir Theo put the date off. They must wait until his health recovered; better to let the summer go by and they could be married in the autumn. Perhaps he would go abroad and spend the winter and spring in a milder climate.

Laura nodded at Harry Mostyn and said: "You see how it is; now we hold the winning card. We can trump his hand whenever we will."

'It's got to be soon, my dear,' thought Mr. Mostyn, considering his own debts. He did not dare tell his creditors that he was already the husband of Laura Sarelle, but he longed to put his hands on her dowry. The farce, as he termed it, could not be kept up much longer. If the girl did not see some kind of reason soon, he would go up to London and beg Mr. Spryce himself to get the lawyer to tell Sir Theo of his sister's marriage.

He tried to persuade Laura and Mrs. Sylk also to come
up to town again, to pay a visit to some friends, anything to
break the monotony of these gloomy days—for gloomy they
seemed to him, though the sun shone brightly and sparkled in
the river, clouds curdled in the sky and flowers bloomed.

But Laura said she had changed her opinion about the coun-
try and about Leppard Hall and that she was very happy there
and she did not wish to go to London again. Nor was she to
be tempted by any suggestions that she should buy clothes
or finery for her trousseau. She seemed indifferent to every-
thing but her small daily duties, as she termed her distilling,
her music-playing and her embroidery, and her small daily
pleasures, as she termed her walks and her rides and her
saunterings in the garden.

Together with her brother, Mr. Mostyn, Mrs. Sylk and other
members of the large household at Leppard Hall, she at-
tended the funeral of Madam Mist, and as she walked away
with Hetty Sylk across the fields, that lady could not forbear
from asking why she smiled so beneath her mourning-veil.

“I know she was no friend of yours, Laura, but it is most
unbecoming to seem to rejoice at a death. The funeral seemed
to me so melancholic, I don’t know why,” the poor woman
hurried on, “but it was as if a pall had fallen over the whole
church. I suppose it’s thunder coming up over there, from the
left. But, Laura, tell me why you smiled.”

“Why shouldn’t I smile?” said Laura, pulling her veil close
under her chin. “It is beginning to rain, large drops are fall-
ing, and I hear the thunder rumbling, as you said, towards
the left. The parsonage is very close to the churchyard, is it
not? I wonder if Madam Mist died because a ghost came out
of its grave at night and climbed in at her window and stran-
gled her?”

“Laura! What a dreadful thought! And why should anyone
want to strangle poor Madam Mist?”

“She might have known something. It might have been the
best way of making her keep a secret.” Laura laughed in a
low tone and slipped her arm through the crook of Mrs. Sylk’s
elbow. “Let us hasten, or we shall be drenched. Besides, I
want to finish my essence of roses to-night before the light
goes. I am so skilful now, you know.”

“I thought you were still trying to make up laurel essence?”
asked Mrs. Sylk, glad to change the subject, but shuddering
instinctively as she glanced at the black clouds piling up be-
The Crime of Laura Sarelle

hind the wood. The green of the trees looked livid against this stormy background.

"The laurel essence?" said Laura. She threw back her veil and looked fixedly at Mrs. Sylk. "Oh, I've never done anything with that. That was Harry Mostyn's idea from the first. He comes up and works at that; he has his own still and retort and everything else. You see, there's very little for him to do down here, I suppose, and he's become quite interested. I'm making nothing but rose essence."

"I see," said Mrs. Sylk vaguely. She thought that distilling it was a strange pastime for a hearty, florid, accomplished gentleman like Mr. Harry Mostyn to go in for, but no doubt he wanted as much time alone as possible with this strange girl who was his secret wife, for Mrs. Sylk did not think he had advanced very far in his intimacy with Laura Sarelle. She was rather sorry for him in a way, he had always seemed very agreeable to her. She wished the false situation would end, the nervous tension was becoming unbearable... A pall over the church, a storm over Leppard Hall—that was it, better thunder and lightning, however alarming, than this air of horrible expectancy.

... ...

The storm broke with great violence the night of Madam Mist's funeral, but passed away in the direction of Warwick after an hour or so, leaving the sky bright and clear and the atmosphere cool.

Sir Theodosius had felt himself very unwell; thunderstorms always affected him badly. He had been unable to work in his library or to see the accountant who had ridden over from the county town that morning. It had been an effort for him to attend the funeral, which seemed to depress him unduly.

He did not appear at the dinner-table that evening, but kept his chamber, and Mr. Mostyn suggested that it might be as well to send one of the servants over to Warwick for Dr. Selby. But Laura said no. She did not think Theo was worse than he often was, and that he hated having "a fuss" made over him. After dinner she asked Mr. Mostyn to go up to her laboratory, as she called it. They were closeted in there for half an hour or so, Mrs. Sylk moving about in the outer room, for Laura had said she wanted it refurnished, she had thought
of making it her bedchamber, therefore Hetty Sylk, somewhat
against her will, for she found the task rather distasteful, was
taking measurements of curtains and bedposts, for fenders
and for carpets.

She heard a low, droning conversation, both man and
woman sounding dull and bored, coming from behind the door
of the laboratory. Laura had shut the door because she said
their work was causing fumes which might inconvenience
Mrs. Sylk, and when she did at length come out—she had not
been there more than half an hour or so—Hetty Sylk had to
admit that some very acrid odour followed her into the dusty
atmosphere of the disused bedroom.

Mr. Mostyn remained behind in the laboratory and Hetty
Sylk had a glimpse of him through the half-open door, stand-
ing in the circle of lamplight, pouring some essence out of a
small greenish jar into a phial of pale glass.

"He is more interested in it now than I am," whispered
Laura. "I am getting tired of the whole business, but he in-
sists that I come up there with him. He wanted to insist on
another thing, too," said Laura, with an apprehensive glance
over her shoulder and lowering her voice still more—"that
Dr. Selby should be sent for. Do you think Theo is so ill to-
night?"

"I didn’t think him at all well, but I know he’s annoyed if
you have the doctor sent for. It would be best to wait until he
tells you to do so himself, Laura.‘Well, I’ve taken all the
measurements for this room and you can send the orders to
the upholsterers and you can choose from your pattern-book
as soon as you wish. Though I must say, I think it a dreary
place for anyone to sleep in."

A darkening fell over Laura’s lovely face, as if all her fea-
tures were tightened and wizened, but all she said was:

"Yes, perhaps it is dreary. I dare say I shall not come here
after all. I’m certainly tired of this distilling and my little
laboratory."

"Well, you are a strange girl. I wish you didn’t have so
many whims," sighed Mrs. Sylk.

"Let us come upstairs and leave Harry to his work." Laura
clutched Mrs. Sylk’s arm and led her from the chamber.

* * *

The household at Leppard Hall retired to bed early that
night. The ladies had made an effort at playing cribbage, then Laura had performed on the harp for a short time, but it seemed as if the heaviness induced by the thunderstorm and the illness of Theodosius weighed upon them all, and even Harry Mostyn was glad to retire to his apartment at an hour at which, in London, he was used to beginning his evening's entertainment.

Yet he could not sleep, or even rest. He dismissed Flasket, who slept in the adjoining closet, and walked up and down his handsome room by the light of the candles on the dressing-table, turning over in his mind the peculiar and, as he thought, harassing situation, trying to come to some resolve as to the future. It was quite impossible to go on living in this fashion, at the mercy of a girl's caprices.

His senses, as is common with one who is both tired and thoughtful, were very alert, and as he walked to and fro he noted that there was an additional book among the few volumes on his bedside table. He seldom read, save works on sports and games, but a few of these, and a prayer-book, were always piously arranged on the cabinet beside the bed. To-night there was another among them.

Who had been concerning himself about his reading? Was it a volume of love-stories from the fair Laura? he thought ironically.

In another mood and at another hour he would have taken no notice of this, but the night was heavy about him, his mind was restless and his spirit unquiet, so he picked the book up and found it an old shabby tome of no particular interest. Local history, he supposed. Flasket, perhaps, had borrowed it from one of the servants, had been reading it and left it there. An impertinence, the fellow must be told about it; at the same time he observed that Laura's one gift to him, the Venetian glass flecked with gold that she had brought up from the china-closet herself, was missing.

Who could have come into his room? So far as he knew, Sir Theo had never entered his guest's apartments since he had come to Leppard Hall; a careless maid, an impudence on the part of Flasket?—yet both seemed unlikely.

He put the book back without opening it and, going to the closet, called his servant; the man woke at once and opened his door with a tapper in his hand; at the same moment there was a quick rap at the outer door. Mr. Mostyn, always on the
alert for anything alarming or suspicious in this house, went at once to the door and opened it quickly.

Laura Sarelle crouched without in a long dark chamber-robe and a white cap tied under her chin. She held her candle, in an elaborate heavy silver stick with a small shade that turned it into a kind of lamp, with one hand, and in the other the tall gold-flecked glass that Mr. Mostyn had just missed.

She had put the candle on the floor while she knocked and was just stooping to pick it up when Mr. Mostyn opened the door, so that her attitude was odd and huddled.

“Oh, pray come at once, Harry! Theo is very ill! Will you send someone for a doctor? I’ve been down to the housekeeper’s room for this sleeping-draught.”

“Why, is there no one else to do such work? How can I help you, Laura? Come, don’t be so alarmed. I expect it is just one of his usual attacks.”

Yet he felt, as he spoke, a strange and horrible sensation pass over him as if he had been struck by some diabolical power, and unbidden came the words into his mind: ‘How soon shall I be master here? How soon?”

“This is his sleeping-draught. Pray take it, my hand is shaking so much I shall spill some. I said that before, didn’t I, the sleeping-draught that I got from the housekeeper’s room.”

“Well, Mrs. Marston might have come up and given it. And where’s his bodyservant? That fellow Tomkins?”

“Oh, I don’t know. But Theo doesn’t like anyone but me to come near him. Or Mrs. Sylk; I’ll call her. But first let us go and give him this draught.”

“But whom have you sent for the doctor if you haven’t roused anyone?” asked Mr. Mostyn. “Shall I dress? Or will you excuse this disorder?”

“Did I say I’d sent anyone for the doctor? I don’t know.” Laura put her now free hand to her brow and pushed back the dark curls that hung disordered inside the muslin cap. “I asked you to do it, Harry. Don’t stay to put on your clothes—pray send for Dr. Selby.”

“Why, certainly I’ll do it.” He stepped back into the room and pulled the embroidered bell-rope, calling at the same time for Flasket, who had remained at the door of the inner closet.

The man obeyed at once. His master told him to put on
his clothes, go down to the stables and see if there was a
groom who could ride at once into Warwick for Dr. Selby.

"Sir Theodosius has been taken very ill," he said. "Now,
Laura, what do you want me to do? Why have you my glass?"

"Come with me into Theo's room, I have to give him this
draught. Your glass? Why, I don't know. I suppose one of the
maids took it downstairs by mistake. Pray take it from me,
so that I can have a hand free."

Mr. Mostyn's apartments were exactly opposite those of
Theodosius, only the wide landing lit by a tall window divided
them; the stairs, up and down, were lit only by the hooded
light. He took from her the lovely glass that had been her odd
gift to him.

"You weren't abed," whispered Laura slyly, as she opened
her brother's door with a firm, cautious hand.

"No, I was restless. The storm, I think, and anxiety for our
future, Laura."

He lowered his voice as she turned the handle; she beckoned
and he followed across the threshold.

To Mr. Mostyn's surprise the large chamber that matched
his own was in darkness save for a broad beam of moonlight
that fell from the unshuttered window. As Theo had difficulty
with his breathing and liked light and air even at night, the
top part of the window was open and the cool breeze that had
risen after the storm flowed into the handsome room.

"Why did you leave him like this, without a light? He doesn't
seem as if he's been disturbed——"

Harry Mostyn hastened to the bedside, and dragged further
apart the silk curtains of the tester.

Sir Theo was lying in what seemed an uneasy sleep, his dark
hair escaping from his nightcap, his forehead damp with
sweat, his lips looked dry and parched, his chest was heaving
unnaturally; but he did not seem to Mr. Mostyn to be a very
sick man, only one in a fevered sleep; he was propped up on a
pile of cushions.

The man who gazed down at the sleeper was puzzled by
the sequence of events that Laura had related.

"Did he call you, Laura? But he's asleep, as if we had but
just now half roused him."

"Oh no," said the girl, setting her candle on the bright
table, "he pulled his bell. There's one that rings in my room,
you know. And I came down at once. And he told me that he
was in great pain and that he must have the doctor and his sleeping-draught. Be careful—you will spill it—"

"I wonder he doesn't keep it near him, by his bedside, so he could take it himself," whispered Mr. Mostyn, who still held the gold-flecked glass in his hand.

"He does sometimes, but he thought he was making too much of a habit of it, and so gave it up."

She bent suddenly over her brother and shook him by the thin shoulder.

"He has fallen asleep. I hope he is not in a fit, or dead—"

"Of course not, dear child. Why, he looks to me to be slumbering quite naturally, not in the least to be in need of a sleeping-draught. Better not give it to him."

Laura said vehemently:

"No! No! He must have it! Don't you understand? It is all arranged! This is the time! The very night, the very hour!"

"Laura, you do speak wildly! I don't understand what you mean. We're not acting a play scene." Mr. Mostyn spoke with sharp impatience.

The young baronet had now waked and sat up in bed, leaning against his high-piled pillows, staring at them with eyes that appeared unseeing.

"Theo," said Laura in a coaxing voice, "Harry's brought you the sleeping-draught you were asking for."

"Was I?" he muttered. "A sleeping-draught! Am I to have one to-night? Well, give it me, then."

Harry Mostyn waited a second until the half-wakened man had a little more command of his senses and then asked:

"But you fell asleep naturally since Laura left you. Perhaps you don't require it."

"Since Laura left me!" repeated the young man stupidly.

"What are you doing here? What's happened?"

"Give him the draught," whispered Laura. "He'll be in one of his fits. You don't know what it's like, and they exhaust him so. He might spit blood as he did the other time——"

Thus urged, Harry Mostyn offered the gold-flecked glass to Sir Theo, who, like one used to receiving medicine, took it in his thin hands and drank down the contents immediately.

Laura at once ran out to the landing and called up the stairs:

"Mrs. Sylk! Mrs. Sylk! Mrs. Sylk! Pray come down at once, my brother is taken very ill!"

Mr. Mostyn followed her and caught her by the arm.
“There is no cause for such alarm, Laura; you may, indeed, go quietly back to your bed. The draught will surely keep Theo sleeping till the morning.”

“Till the morning!” whispered Laura, with a wild glance. “Till the morning! Don’t you see that he is mortally ill?”

Flasket now came out on to the landing. He had dressed himself hurriedly and looked sharply from his master to the young lady; he carried a small lamp.

“You’d better go for the doctor at once, Flasket,” said Laura; she began to laugh, clinging to Harry Mostyn’s arm.

Mrs. Sylk appeared through the shadows at the turn of the stairs in a hastily-caught-up bedgown.

“Theo is ill! Desperately ill! I don’t think he’s going to live!” cried Laura. “Flasket! Make haste, can’t you? Rouse the servants, bring up everybody! I doubt if there’ll be time to fetch the doctor! Ask Mrs. Marston to come, she knows something of medicine——”

“What’s all this alarm?” asked Mr. Mostyn, bewildered. To Mrs. Sylk he said: “Madam, pray don’t disturb yourself. I have just given Theo a sleeping-draught, he will do very well.” Then, turning to Flasket: “Get Dr. Selby, as I ordered you. I’ll take you upstairs, Laura, you look as if you were going to fall. Someone must go into Sir Theo’s room. We left the candle.”

“Why, what makes you so alarmed, Laura dear!” cried Mrs. Sylk, seizing the girl’s arm as she swayed towards her.

“But you should have seen his face, the way he looked when he took the drink that Harry gave him, the way he fell back upon the bed!”

Harry Mostyn stared at her in amazement, not understanding what she said. . . . Surely the girl was half out of her wits, babbling at random. Her whole tale had been strange, he could have sworn that that was the first time, when they entered the room together, that Sir Theo had been disturbed that night. . . . Nor had he noticed anything curious, though certainly the candlelight had been uncertain and fluctuating, about the manner in which Theo had taken the draught. He had turned back on his pillows quite naturally and laid himself down with a sigh, after replacing the glass by the candle.

“Mrs. Marston should be fetched—everyone!” cried Laura. “Oh, and the doctor is so far away!” She twisted her fingers together and hung back as if she did not wish to pass over the threshold of her brother’s chamber.
“This is extraordinary behaviour,” said Mr. Mostyn. He glanced at Mrs. Sylko. “I really think Laura is distracted tonight. Perhaps the thunder affected her nerves, too.”

The three of them, Mr. Mostyn now carrying the lamp he had taken from his servant, entered the young baronet’s bedroom. For a moment or two they saw nothing but shadows just broken by the light of the flame of the candle Laura had left by the bed, which had bent sideways and made a channel down the wax in the gust that blew from the open window; the hooded shade was towards the bed, so that the sleeper was in darkness.

Mrs. Sylko shivered. To her the scene had all the qualities of a phantasmagoria; she had been roused suddenly from a sleep of fatigue, and to her distorted vision Laura’s peaked and lovely features with the long disordered black curls falling over the dark pink gown, Mr. Mostyn’s face, thus seen suddenly at night, looking heavy, fleshy, and middle-aged, Flasket’s countenance sharp and inquisitive, and all the shadows that had run up the walls of the stairway and down the well of it, and this bedroom with the dark bed rising in the middle in a pool of shade—all confused the woman until she felt as if another step would cast her into a pit where she would fall headlong.

Then she heard Mr. Mostyn and Laura speaking together in tones of alarm and horror. She tried to put her evil fancies from her and came round the great bed, holding on to the post and then to the curtain. She looked up at Harry Mostyn’s face and saw it tense in an expression of anguished terror. Mrs. Sylko glanced at Laura, who was shrieking and pulling at the bell-rope that hung by the bedside. Then she looked down at the bed. The baronet was stretched on his back, his lips drawn back from his teeth, a froth showing at the corners of his mouth, and his tongue curled out and upwards towards his nostrils, while his eyes were turned in his head. Mrs. Sylko covered her sight from this spectacle, while in answer to the frantic ringing of the bell Mrs. Marston, the menservants, the maids, came hurrying, stumbling up the stairs with snatched-up candles, tapers, and lanterns.

“He died in a fit,” said Mr. Mostyn stupidly. “Is it possible in so short a time?”

“A fit!” said Laura. “Indeed, it was not possible! He was in good health until you gave him that draught, Harry.” She pointed to the Venetian glass that stood by the bedside.
“There’s some of the stuff in it still—let someone take it and keep it.”

“What do you mean?” cried Mr. Mostyn, staring at her with a glance of complete bewilderment. “I think the girl is raving. Mrs. Sylk, take her away.”

“The glass,” insisted Laura, with her hand over it, “someone should take that——”

“You mean,” said Mrs. Marston, coming through the crowd, and more self-possessed than any of them, “that there may have been a mistake, madam?”

“Yes,” said Laura, “there might have been a mistake. Look at my brother—dead.”

They stared, holding the curtain back with a horrid curiosity, gazing. Mr. Mostyn made an effort at control, to take command of the situation. He felt the young man’s pulse and brow, and he asked for a mirror to put before his lips, a feather. He knew, while he spoke, that all this was useless. Theodosius Sarelle was dead.

“What happened?” asked Mrs. Sylk. She began to babble in a stupid way, but Mrs. Marston put her aside and, taking the young lady kindly by the arm, said, as if she had been her mother:

“Tell us, my dear. This is a horrible thing and a terrible fright for you. How was it that Sir Theo came to die like this? Or you, sir?” She turned respectfully to Mr. Mostyn. “Perhaps you can tell us. But no one knows what to say or do, someone’s got to take the lead.” And she took the glass and handed it to Paul Tomkins.

Mr. Mostyn, for once in his life, was at a complete loss to find words. He was as bewildered as if the house had been turned upside down round him. But Laura spoke, and readily.

“I could not sleep to-night. You see, Mr. Mostyn and my brother had a quarrel in the library when we came back from our walk. I can’t tell you what it was about, but it frightened me and I couldn’t sleep for thinking of it. Then I heard them talking here and I thought they were going to quarrel again. So I came downstairs and listened, and their voices were angry. Then they hushed a little and I knocked on the door, thinking I might stay them from coming perhaps to some mischief.

“Having got no answer, I opened it, and Mr. Mostyn was giving my brother a drink out of that Venetian glass. He said to me over his shoulder, ‘It is a sleeping-draught.’ And as I
came up I saw Theo fall back and Mr. Mostyn took the glass and was going to throw it into the fireplace. He said the stuff smelt strong. But I took it from him quickly and set it down on the side table. And that's all I know."

"She's raving," said Mr. Mostyn firmly, but with a ghastly pallor and a heavy sweat wetting his forehead, for now he began to perceive something of the trap that had been set for him. "It was not so at all. She knocked on my door with the glass in her hand and bade me give it to her brother. She said she had fetched it from the housekeeper's room."

"That she did not, sir," declared Mrs. Marston. "No one has been into my room. There are no glasses of that kind down there."

"Where in the house are there such glasses?" demanded Laura. "I gave that—we have one only—to Mr. Mostyn. Have we any others, Mrs. Marston?"

The housekeeper shook her head.

"There are none downstairs. There are four something like them, of a fine Venetian glass. But there is only one with gold flecks, it has lately been kept in Mr. Mostyn's room."

"Yes," said Mr. Mostyn, striving for coolness, "I've had it as a gift. I don't know whether that is the same or not, I never thought. Perhaps there are several in the house. I missed mine to-night. But what are we talking about? It is as if I were defending myself. I can tell you all," he raised his voice and looked round the household, "I gave Sir Theodosius nothing but the draught that his sister put into my hand. I believed it was his sleeping-potion. What else could I think? I suppose," he added, gathering some strength from the sound of his own voice, which he contrived to keep tranquil, "that the unfortunate young man was far more sick than he knew and has died in a fit. The doctor will soon tell us. I sent my man Flasket for him."

"Why did you do that?" asked Laura. "If you thought there was nothing much amiss with my brother, why send for the doctor?"

"Because you asked me to. I tell you"—he turned to Hetty Sylko, "the girl's out of her mind, out of her senses, and has been this many a week. . . ." He checked himself.

"Yes, I suppose I am out of my senses," retorted Laura wildly. "I ought to have stopped you when you were quarrelling with Theo in the library to-night. He was well enough then."
"No ill words passed between me and Sir Theodosius tonight or any other night. I have never spoken to him harshly since I have been here, you know that, Laura."

"I know you were quarrelling," she insisted bitterly. "What should they be quarrelling about?" said Mrs. Sylk incredulously. "The gentlemen have always been on the best of terms. I think, Laura, you hardly know what you are saying. You'd best come out of the room. We can't do anything here till the doctor's been."

Mrs. Marston drew the curtains round the bed where the distorted body lay, and with her quiet air of authority motioned to the other servants to leave the room.

Tomkins kept firmly in his possession the gold-flecked glass, at the bottom of which was a small quantity of liquid.

"Stop!" said Laura, seeing that the servants, though with backward, curious and dreadful glances, were creeping from the chamber. "Stop!"

They paused, already engulfed in the shadows by the door, for the one candle with the glass hood had remained guttering on the table by the bed, and Flasket had gone with the lamp.

"You may as well know—the secret cannot be kept any longer. My brother and this gentleman were quarrelling because he is my husband. He persuaded me to marry him clandestinely in London when we were last there. He overawed me, he frightened me. I'm his wife. He's your master now, I suppose, and mine."

A broken murmur like so many hisses rose from the servants, who stood dumbfounded, still respectful.

Mr. Mostyn leant against the heavy bedpost gazing at the curtains that hid the body of Theodosius Sarelle.

"You damned vixen!" he sobbed under his breath. "What are you trying to do with me? What are you trying to do?" Then, rallying himself, he declared, turning on them all: "Well, if I'm master here I'd better play the part. I'll wait for Dr. Selby, I'll see that the mystery is cleared up. It is true that I was privately married to Laura Sarelle. But that's my business and hers, and not to be questioned by servants and dependants. Go, each of you, now, to your places, but stay up lest you be required before the morning."

"Won't you go to your own room, sir, and leave one of us on watch?" said Mrs. Marston.

He looked at the Venetian glass Tomkins still held. "I'll
stay here. I'm not frightened of hobgoblins." He turned to Tomkins. "Why are you keeping that glass so carefully, as if you think it might contain poison?"

"I don't know, sir. Miss Laura seemed to make a point of it. I beg your pardon—Mrs. Mostyn, I should say. It's confusing news, sir, heard at such a moment. You'll pardon us."

They crept away, severally.

Again the words passed through Harry Mostyn's mind: 'When shall I be master here? When?'

The moment had surely come... Laura was his wife, he had not only the dowry, but all the estates to which she was indubitably entitled now. But the knowledge brought him no pleasure, merely a shudder of terror and foreboding that he could scarcely control.

They had left him sitting by the curtained bed with the one guttering candle. He remined so a while turning over in his numbed mind the behaviour of Laura Sarelle. Then he rose and tried the door. He had a suspicion that they might have locked him in. But no, he was quite free.

He looked across the landing towards his own room. That door was half open and there was a light within. Two people were moving about, he heard voices, two of the menservants. Were they searching his possessions at Laura's command? The girl was obviously out of her mind.

What was she trying to do? There was some motive, but he could not fathom it. He returned to his vigil, hoping that she at least would not disturb him again. He felt physically sick as he stared with an air of nauseated loathing at the dark crimson damask curtains. He had never in his easy life been so shaken as he had been by the sudden death of this young man. Could a fit or a chill kill so suddenly? What, after all, had been in the Venetian glass that Laura had put into his hand?

He tried to keep his mind from such thoughts; native common sense and courage kept him resolute against the intangible peril that he felt was encompassing him; he snuffed the hooded candle and returned to the chair with arms that he had drawn close to the great curtained bed. Laura's behaviour he put aside from his speculations; either he had not got the key to it or she was mad.

In any case she was his wife; she had publicly avowed that herself, and he was lord of all her fortune. The voice that had
seemed to breathe into his ear—'How soon will you be master here?'—was answered now.

There would no longer be, for Harry Mostyn, any financial difficulties; to keep his mind from the present he tried to think of the future; there would be a few unpleasant days to pass through—then, by God, he would leave Leppard Hall for ever, and Laura would be taken away—or shut away.

This was a long night for Harry Mostyn; occasionally he shivered in his silk bedgown, and his feet were chilled in his slippers, but some fascination held him in that room; he would not return to his own chamber to procure his clothes. . . . How long it seemed to take Flasket to get the doctor from Warwick! . . . The man must have gone himself, or surely he would have come to see if his master required any service . . . it was natural for the others to keep away. . . .

He rose once to extinguish the candle, flaring to a finish, after lighting another that he found on the mantelshelf from that flaring flame. The moonlight had long since left the room and the darkness seemed to form a pit round Harry Mostyn's chair.

He wished that he could get Laura out of his mind—Laura as he had found her crouching at his door, picking up her light, carefully holding the yellow glass steadily with her other, raised, rigid hand, her hair dragged, her shoulders drawn up; he found now that he could hardly recall what she had said, her rapid, almost incoherent denunciations—of what?

And the trick with the Venetian glass, if trick it was? A drugged drowsiness invaded the anxious sentences of Harry Mostyn; yes, that was it, he felt drugged, by this fearful house, this dreadful event. He gave a long, reluctant look at the heavy bed-curtains and half put out his hand to draw them, but restrained himself in time—yes, in time, for he believed that if he were to come face to face with the dead man he would lose his control. He looked round the room to steady himself; books were everywhere, even in this bedchamber, on shelves, tables, and piled in the window-place—what had Theodosius Sarelle ever got out of his reading? Perhaps from this antique and musty folio had come all the gloomy miasma that had made the house so intolerable.

The first grey glow of dawn, without light or colour, and a chill wind invaded the chamber from the open window; the second candle blew out. Harry Mostyn could endure no more;
he rose stiffly, crossed the room, opened the door and gazed down the dark pit of the silent staircase.

Then he glanced up, and listened keenly, for he thought that he heard a low moan of laughter coming from the floor above where Laura would be with Mrs. Sylk, as he supposed, though the sound seemed rather to come from the great bedchamber opposite—the empty room with the closet that Laura used as her distillery; but he assured himself that it was no human utterance he had heard, but some rustle of drapery, caught in an open window by the breeze that ran before the dawn—or any of those soft noises that come in an old house in the silence of the night, and that need not be peered and pried into...

Harry Mostyn felt shrivelled, as if he had been touched by a flame; he could not return to the dead man's room, yet he still had the resolution to keep his vigil and remained at the door until he heard steps and voices below, and at last Dr. Selby, muffled from the night air, with tired eyes, came up the stairway, followed by Flasket and Tomkins, who must have been keeping vigil below; and another had been watching also, for, gliding softly on sandalled feet, Laura came down the stairs, still in her bedgown.

'The house was full of waiting people,' thought Harry Mostyn, 'and I felt so alone—'...

He tried to speak in a normal way to the doctor, but his explanations came first whispered, then too loud; he tried to put Laura back, but she slipped past him, into the death-chamber, and he had to follow, endeavouring to speak in a cool, rational way before the physician, the two servants, this crazed girl, through whom, he must remind himself, he held a fortune.

Mingled voices disturbed the quiet of the great room, now lit by the dreary light of dawn. Dr. Selby tried to hush them; all the details of the scene were impressed on Harry Mostyn's mind, as if he had seen them in a flash of lightning; then there was Mrs. Marston, with the gold-flecked glass in her hand; so they all had been waiting... for what?

Harry Mostyn contrived to say:

"What has brought all these people here, Dr. Selby—sheer curiosity? This is exceedingly painful for me—I might beg some privacy—"

The physician, his hand on the bed-curtains, glanced at him gravely, and Laura, close to Tomkins, who held the lamp, red in that grey light, exclaimed:
"No, no, I have something to say—let everyone hear it—"

Mr. Mostyn turned towards the fresher air by the window; he could not endure to see these curtains drawn; the sound of the rings running on the pole seemed to sear his mind.

* * *

Dr. Selby's examination was short; he turned round and said he could not tell what had caused the death of Sir Theodosius; he had died suddenly, "as through a stroke from heaven", added the physician gravely. He closed the curtains, and Laura, who, gliding like a shadow, had pressed in close behind him, began to speak, hushing the others with raised hand and voice, and gazing direct at Harry Mostyn in the window-place. That weary and bewildered man listened fascinated as the girl repeated, with great art and exactitude, the tale he had already heard her relate earlier in the evening; it was useless for him to contradict her here and make a railing scene, he thought. 'Selby will understand me when I tell him quietly what really occurred. I suppose she will have to be put away. Well, I shall be able to afford a mad wife now.'

Dr. Selby stood gravely silent while Laura spoke quietly and with a heavy reluctance, glancing continually at the man who she admitted was her husband, now and then clutching at Mrs. Sylk's arm.

"I'll see what was in the glass—with the sleeping-draught," said the doctor at length.

Mrs. Marston, who had it in readiness, brought it on a sign from Laura and gave it to the physician.

'She can do this with her brother lying there,' thought Harry Mostyn. 'She no more considers him than if he had been dead for a hundred years.'

He stared at the girl; she had told her story like someone who had learned a lesson. . . . He was so absorbed, almost spellbound, by her behaviour that he hardly thought any longer of himself or of his own possible peril. He saw the doctor cautiously smell the small amount of liquid that remained at the bottom of the glass, dip his finger in it, raise the wet finger and smell that.

"This is laurel-water," he said. "We use it as a horse-drench. It is very much valued in diluted quantities. This is an essence of it, it kills instantly. If your brother drank this,
Miss Laura, there's no need to look further for the cause of his death."

Then, as if apparently realizing what he said, he turned round and exclaimed:

"The second time? Is it possible?"

"There's been some mistake," stammered Laura heavily. "Don't listen to what I said just now, there's been some mistake. I don't know anything. This man is my husband indeed, I mustn't say anything more."

"Quiet, my dear young lady. Quiet, you poor, distracted creature," commanded Dr. Selby. "Mr. Mostyn, sir, can you give any explanation of any of this?"

"I?" said the unfortunate man, in a confused way. "Yes, I've an explanation. But I can't give it here before these women—the servants." He looked at Laura, Mrs. Marston and Mrs. Sylk, all staring at him, the two men behind. "I don't know that I ought to, either." He was thinking of the danger in which Laura might stand. Was she a criminal or a lunatic? One or the other, that was certain. He did not wish to make any accusation against her that it might be impossible afterwards to retract. "What did you mean, sir," he asked, with a desperate attempt to gain a diversion, "by saying 'the second time'?"

"Well," replied Dr. Selby, having now regained his composure, "the affair has been hushed up for a good number of years, though I always thought that rather foolish. But I suppose you all know that another Sir Theodosius Sarelle died from a drink of laurel poison?"

"It's the first I've heard of it," declared Mr. Mostyn, his trembling hand to his damp forehead.

"Oh, Harry!" cried Laura, throwing herself into Mrs. Sylk's arms. "Oh, would that were true!"

"Of course it's true, Laura. What do you think I know of your family history? Certainly when I first came down here I tried to find out something, but everyone was silent. But what did I care, after all?"

"I suppose you didn't," she flashed viciously from the other woman's shoulder, "you were thinking of the money."

"Whatever I was thinking of, it was not of some old tragedy of a hundred years ago or whatever it is. I never knew there had been a murder in this family. I suppose that's what's the matter with this house. I might have guessed. Did Theodosius know?"
"Yes, he knew," said Dr. Selby grimly. "He and Spryce, the lawyer, and myself, and Tampion, the miller—oh, quite a number of us. But of course it was hushed up. His father and his grandfather, they wanted to live it down, you know. Stoic philosophy, and all the rest of it. And this is what it ends in. Somebody's acted the ugly old drama over again. I wonder who?"

"I never knew of it," sobbed Laura, "I never knew! How could I?"

"I don't suppose you did, Miss Laura; I don't suppose you did," soothed Dr. Selby. "I know that your brother was most anxious to keep it from you. At times even he, poor fellow, with all his rationalism and hard-headedness, was affected by it—even he sometimes thought it wasn't wise to give you that name."

"I never knew," repeated Laura, sinking her head on Mrs. Sylk's shoulder. "Why didn't someone tell me? I never knew!"

"I did not know either," said Mr. Mostyn. "It seems like some diabolical contrivance——"

Here Mrs. Marston raised her eyebrows, pursed her lips, and turned to the doctor.

"Well, sir, I don't know about Mr. Mostyn—begging your pardon—not knowing, but Miss Laura thought we should search his room. Tomkins, that's Sir Theo's body servant, went in and looked. And there were some bottles of essence in the pocket of his coat. He'd been distilling laurel leaves, you know."

"Distilling laurel leaves!" interrupted Dr. Selby.

"Yes, that was you," stammered Laura, raising her head. "No, I mustn't say it." She put her fingers to her lips.

"You must say it, my love," cried Mrs. Sylk hastily, "of course she must say it. She doesn't want to defame one who's her husband—yes, he's her husband, Dr. Selby—it's true. And I can see, the poor child, how she's torn by rage over her brother's death, ay, rage and grief, and desire to shield this scoundrel here. And I've seen him picking the laurel leaves. And I know he was distilling them, though it's all been secret and hushed up. And now one can understand why."

"Hush, hush!" said Dr. Selby imperiously. "This is a serious matter; it will all have to be gone through gravely. Were you distilling laurel leaves, Mr. Mostyn?"

"No."

"There is a laurel bush that grows in front of the house; I
suppose you know? Well, it's an ill-fated tree, I should have thought you might have known that. Did you know that laurel essence, laurel-water, is a deadly poison?"

"No, I have knowledge of poisons whatever."

"Why were you concerned to make this particular essence?"

Mr. Mostyn was silent. . . . How to speak without incriminating Laura? She was looking at him, gazing sideways as she leaned on the other woman's breast, while he hesitated. Mrs. Sylk spoke in a noisy defence of her charge, repeating again that she had seen Mr. Mostyn pick the leaves, she knew he was distilling the laurel, but all was to be kept secret, that poor Miss Laura never distilled anything but roses——

"Why did Miss Laura suggest that his room should be searched?" asked the doctor, who had taken charge of the situation.

"Ah, why?" said Mr. Mostyn. "Why did you do that, Laura?"

"Don't ask me," she said obstinately.

"Of course she can't say, poor child. She's had her suspicions of him," said Mrs. Sylk. "And what do you think Tomkins found there besides the bottles of essence?—why, an old book with an account of that other affair in it. Mrs. Marnston has it—she took it downstairs, the butler saw it too. The leaves are turned down at the account of the old murder of Sir Theodosius Sarelle in 1780. It was hidden under his other books, but Tomkins found it——"

"I never saw any such book in my life," said Harry Mostyn. "Who was this murderer of this other Theodosius Sarelle?"

"Edward Avershaw," replied the doctor quietly. "He married Laura, the baronet's sister. He wanted the Sarelle money."

Harry Mostyn tried to speak, but his utterance began to thicken. Flasket stepped up to him.

"Give him some brandy," added Dr. Selby to the servant; "take him to his room."

"I am quite unprepared," stammered Harry Mostyn, leaning on his man's arm; he glanced round the group of people, all of them seemed to be looking at him with eyes of pricked steel; Laura, staring from the shoulder of Mrs. Sylk, who was weeping foolishly, lifted her lip at him . . . an ugly trick . . . he had always detested it; but what she said was:

"I shan't betray you, Harry, I shan't say another word."
PART FOUR

"It is some frightful error," said Dr. Selby. "Let us not raise an alarm until the matter is sifted to the bottom. That's why I sent for you, my dear sir, there is no one to undertake the responsibility of this dreadful house."

Mr. Spryce glanced about him at the handsome library. Strange words for a practical man like the physician to use, "this dreadful house".

"You're quite sure, Dr. Selby, that it was not a natural death?"

"My colleagues, Andrews from Rugby, and Morton from Warwick, came to open the body with me, you know. They say there is no doubt that he died from a large dose of that poison which we found in the bottom of the yellow glass, but it may have got there in error—nay, we feel sure that it got there in error."

"The case against Mr. Mostyn is, to my thinking, remarkably strong," said the lawyer definitely.

Dr. Selby looked down at the Persian carpet with an empty stare; both the men were sitting, perhaps unconsciously, so that they could not see the desk piled with books and manuscripts that Sir Theodosius had used to study so deeply; the blinds were drawn in all the front rooms of Leppard Hall, but the library was situated at the back, and the July sunshine streamed in through the unshuttered window, picking out the classic bust in crimson purple marble that stood between the bookcases.

The handsome chamber had already an unlived-in air and seemed gloomy and dismal. A bee buzzed on the window-pane.

"The case is pretty remarkable," commented the doctor, still with that vacant look at the carpet; "there is no one to take charge, and I have no right here at all, you know. I am staying in the house under the excuse of looking after Miss
Laura—Ah, I can't help keep calling her that—Mrs. Mostyn, I should say."

"There's no possible denial of the marriage, I suppose?"

"None. They both admit it. Mrs. Sylk was a witness, too."

"Mostyn? And how has he been behaving himself? No attempt to escape. He's really the master here. It is, as you say, an extraordinary position."

"No, he has not made the least attempt to escape. He said he would welcome a complete investigation."

"But who is to investigate? I don't wish to call in the police, there's talk enough as it is. I've spoken to one or two of the servants, the housekeeper and Tomkins, who are to be trusted. Mrs. Sylk has opened her heart to me. Of course, she thinks—well, to put it plainly," the lawyer concluded the sentence, "Mrs. Sylk thinks, I suppose, that Harry Mostyn murdered Sir Theodosius."

"She does. She thinks that he has been using Laura's absorption in her pastime of distillery to make an essence of laurel leaves, that he gave it to Sir Theodosius instead of the sleeping-draught. She swears that Laura was coerced into that secret marriage, that her heart was entirely given to Lucius Delaunay—Lord Belmont that is. Laura's confided to her that he frightened her—Mostyn, I mean—by threatening to have her shut up as a madwoman if she didn't agree."

"Do you know why he wished for this secret marriage?" urged the physician, suddenly raising tired eyes.

"I think I do, sir. He is much embarrassed in his affairs. He carried it off with a high hand with me, but he never made a full statement. It is quite likely that Sir Theodosius was holding off, perhaps cooling off even, and this man wanted to secure the girl and the money while he could."

"She," said the doctor wearily, "practically accused him of murder before the whole household. And now she will not say anything, says she lost her head, did not know what she was saying. There's the glass, you know, the gold-flecked glass of Venetian ware that was in his room only—her present—and there is the book they found in his room which shows he did know about the other 'laurel-water tragedy', as they call it."

"Where did he get the book?"

"He says he does not know, he never had it before in his possession, someone must have put it in his room; but he saw it at the parsonage one day he went up there. He opened it, but saw nothing to arouse his curiosity, and shut it again
because the reverend gentleman came in on him. Then he did see it that night, on his bed-table, but did not recognize it, though he does so now."

"Well, of course, he pocketed it then, when at the parsonage," said Mr. Spryce. "But why leave it about where people could see it? Who knew the significance of the book? Why were they searching his room?"

"Because Laura asked them to. She particularly asked Tomkins, who was her brother’s bodyservant and a fit person to choose, to search Mr. Mostyn’s room. She would not say why at the time, but afterwards she told Mrs. Sylk, who informed me, that she was afraid there was a weapon there. She said that he, that is Harry Mostyn, had been threatening her with a pistol. A pistol was found afterwards among his possessions. Tomkins found the old book. Tomkins does know something, but not all, of the story. He knew that when he first came to Leppard Hall his master, Sir Theodosius, had a copy of that book and locked it away. He found the keys and looked in the case over there"—he nodded towards the corner—"and found that that copy was still there."

"So this is another copy, corrected, of course," said the lawyer.

"He has been seen, too, picking the laurel leaves, and he has been shut up a good deal in the distillery. He made a great secret and mystery over it; why, I don’t know. Laura said she was tired long since of the whole business."

"Well, he had the motive and the opportunity. He wanted the girl’s money, he did not want any questions asked about his own fortune, and there was this old story putting the scheme into his hands. But at the same time the details were exceedingly clumsy—using a glass that was conspicuous, leaving the book lying about in his room."

"But you must remember that Miss Laura—I can’t call her anything else—disturbed him. She thought she heard sounds of quarrelling, she was in an excited and agitated state. He would have disposed of the glass, I have no doubt, have hidden or destroyed the book had he had time, but she was upon him, raising the household. She took the glass from him and set it aside. She said at the time that he had made an effort to throw it into the grate. She had already sent for me, fearing some violence from Mostyn."

"So she made a formal accusation of murder against him," remarked the lawyer thoughtfully, fingering his loose chin.
“Well, sir, you could not call it formal—the girl was wild, hysterical. But now she will not say anything, she tries even to defend him.”

“Has the parson, this man Mist, been up here?”

“Yes, he came on a formal visit of condolence. He seemed much shocked, he had just lost his own wife. We did not know that the book had been his then, so we could not question him.”

“I shall go and wait on him presently, find out if his copy is still in his possession. How is Miss Laura’s health?”

“She seems well enough, cool in a way, I cannot make her out. She sits in her room with Mrs. Sylk, who is hotly, of course, in her favour. She says that her charge has been imposed on, first by her brother and then by Harry Mostyn, that it is a wonder she has still got her wits. Laura’s foremost idea was always to get away from the Hall.”

“Well, she will be able to now,” said Mr. Spryce, with a dull smile, “she must be mistress of a very considerable fortune.”

“You forget, sir, that she is Harry Mostyn’s wife.”

“Yes, I believe I had forgotten that. The man is, of course, an adventurer, a base scoundrel. He may be a murderer, why not? The plan doesn’t sound clever, but then, it may have gone wrong. Laura heard them quarrelling. I expect Theodosius intended to withdraw his consent to the marriage, and then Mostyn told him that he was married already. That probably upset the young man, he was certainly ill that evening, everyone was witness to that—”

“My God, Spryce! What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know, sir. There seem to be no relations, none whom we can get hold of in a hurry. If there is an inquest there’ll be a pretty ugly story coming out—talk and scandal that will tear the skins off both of them. What does Mostyn say himself?”

“Why, very little now. At first he was quite vehement, but now seems to have withdrawn himself; to begin with, he said that such accusations were absurd, but he could not deny, of course, the clandestine marriage, nor, if put to it, that he is only a fortune-hunter. What, sir, are we going to do?” added the doctor, with an uncertain look.

“Sir, I do not know. It’s a case for a guardian or a relative. There seems to be none. I don’t know if Mostyn intends to keep his promise and take the name. He seems scarcely likely to now—tell me, what is his version of what actually took
place the night itself? What was he doing in Sir Theo's room with the glass and the sleeping-draught? I cannot get the matter clear."

"Mostyn has no explanation of that now at all. He merely says that Sir Theo was taken suddenly ill, the whole household was roused, he doesn't quite know by whom, that servants had been sent for the doctor, and he and his man Flasket came out on to the stairhead and someone, he doesn't know who, put the glass into his hand. Sir Theo was calling out for help and that he gave him the drink. He said he had nothing to do with mixing it, and that he knows nothing of the essence of laurel-water that was found in his pocket, that he did not even know the stuff was poisonous. That he knew nothing whatever of the old tale. He adds that if he had, he wouldn't have been such a fool as to try the same thing twice."

"There's sound sense in that," conceded Mr. Spryce with a grim smile. "But it can't all have been an accident—this distilling, the glass, the book, the quarrel, the secret marriage. But he may have thought that the idea of the same thing happening twice in one family was so preposterous that nobody would accuse him of it—it may have been a stroke like that. And if he had not been actually discovered in the sick man's room with the glass in his hand—why, who could have brought it home to him? You would never have suspected poison, would you, Dr. Selby?"

"No, I certainly should not. I should have supposed that Sir Theo died in a fit, perhaps. He had convulsions occasionally and was in a poor state of health. I had not liked the look of him for some time."

"Well, then," sighed Mr. Spryce, "it may have been the bold endeavour of a desperate man." He added, rising, "This is a sad way for Miss Laura to find out the history of her family. I suppose she knew nothing whatever about it before?"

"Nothing. Everyone around here was silent, I'm sure of that. A great number of them don't know. In the house there is only Tomkins, with perhaps a garbled version in his mind. He knew that his master had locked the book up. And an old fellow, Peach, who helps in the stable. Then there's Tampion, the miller, who got it from his grandfather; and the Mists knew, I suppose, through having that book. Or at least, he did—I doubt if the old lady troubled her head with such affairs or was allowed to."
Dr. Selby rose also and began to pace up and down the rich room that smelt of dust and death.

"A pity," remarked the lawyer, with a sour look on his square, plain face as he glanced at the table at which Sir Theodosius would never sit again, "that the will of Laura Sarelle, the first of that name, I mean, was not carried out, and the Hall razed to the ground. It has been nothing but a curse for everyone who lived in it since."

"Eh! What's that?" exclaimed the doctor, pausing. "I did not know. This house was to have been razed to the ground?"

"Yes, but the will was looked upon as the whim of a half-crazed woman and no one took any notice. It was a well-built house, and a great deal of it new then. You know," he added abruptly, "young Belmont is in the village. Let us talk sanely of sane things."

"Yes, I saw Belmont this morning. He came here and wanted to see Miss Laura. She sent down a message by Mrs. Sylk that 'he had come too soon and that he was to return later'. He told me frankly that though he had no right here he could not stay away—he saw the account of Sir Theo's sudden death in the London papers. She ought to have married him," added the doctor; "everything has gone wrong."

The heavy carved door opened and, with a slow step that he tried to make firm, Mr. Harry Mostyn entered, and stopped in a constrained position on the threshold.

"Well, gentlemen, have you discussed the case and the situation?" he asked, not without dignity.

The other two men glanced at him, embarrassed, hostile, and yet a little ashamed of their own sense of shock at his sudden appearance.

Mr. Mostyn looked ill, more than his age. But he was neatly dressed and held himself erect as he advanced slowly; Dr. Selby turned away, muttering something about an error, but the lawyer faced the issue squarely.

"Yes, sir, Dr. Selby and I, the family lawyer and the family physician, you know, since no other friends or relatives are near, have been discussing the case, sir. It's a very strange affair. Dr. Selby and his colleagues are under no doubt whatever that Sir Theodosius died from a potent concoction of laurel-water."

Mr. Mostyn moved to the window-place and stood there in the bright sunshine, pulled out his handkerchief, pressed it to his lips, then said with the air of a man carefully choosing his
words and also making a great effort to retain complete self-
control:

"I knew nothing whatever of the properties of laurel-water. I've seen them used in the little distillery that Laura, my wife, had—I thought it was all a toy, a woman's pastime. I had heard that it was used for horses, nothing else."

"It is possible," conceded Mr. Spryce, "that a townsman would have no more knowledge than that, but it is difficult to believe, sir, that you have lived here, as you have lived for several months, on and off, as lover, and, as it appears, as husband of the heiress of Leppard Hall, and never knew about this laurel-water tragedy, as they call it."

"I knew nothing," replied Mr. Mostyn, still with his handkerchief pressed to his face and looking down at the floor. "I had some curiosity when I first came here and made some inquiries. I certainly heard something about an overdose of a sleeping-draught—some young man, a cousin, I believe, died here. Why should I concern myself about it? It was a long time ago, and I had my own matters to think of. I felt it was something best not disturbed. I was conscious of some—warning—a peril of the mind."

"The coincidence is, to say the least of it, curious," remarked the lawyer. "You must admit that, sir."

"I cannot prove what I say, of course," returned Mr. Mostyn harshly. "I cannot prove that I had never seen that book in my room before that night, save for a few moments in the parlour at the parsonage; I cannot prove that I never put those phials of essence into my pocket. You will have to take my word for it all, gentlemen, or blow the case open."

"I suppose," remarked Mr. Spryce slowly, "we shall have to do that—there will have to be an inquest, and the case will have to be blown open."

"Unless, sir," put in Dr. Selby anxiously, "you can give us a more coherent account of what happened on the night of Sir Theo's death, who it was that actually put that glass into your hand when you came out of your own chamber—why you were taking a sleeping-draught to the young man."

"I can tell you no more than I've told you already, sir," replied Mr. Mostyn, still in that hoarse, strained voice. "I do not think I really have the courage to go over it again. There was a great deal of confusion, a question of a sudden illness, lights, people running to and fro, the women, the housekeeper,
Laura's companion—I was the only man there except the servants, and I suppose they looked to me to take charge."

"I don't see why they should look to you, sir," remarked the doctor sharply, "to administer a sleeping-draught. Who mixed it?"

"I do not know. You must do as you please, I've no more to say."

"Is your wife," asked Mr. Spryce, with a cold emphasis on the words, "in a fit state for me to interview her, sir?"

"I could not tell you that," replied Harry Mostyn, looking at him straight. "I've not seen her since the day her brother died. Sir, there's a friend of hers staying in the village, the gentleman who used to be the steward here. He seems greatly attached to her and came to see her when he heard of her trouble. But she would not receive him."

"I suppose, for the time being," admitted Mr. Spryce, still with a cold, almost hostile air, "I must regard you, sir, as the master of the house. Have I permission to go upstairs and see if Mrs. Mostyn will receive me?"

"Certainly, if she's in a fit state. I understood from Mrs. Sylk and her maid that she has been very ill."

"Any young lady would be ill under such circumstances," the doctor said. "I consider that Mrs. Mostyn preserves her health very well. She should, of course, be taken away as soon as possible. But it will not be possible until after the funeral. Perhaps it will not be possible until after the inquest——"

Mr. Mostyn came out of the stream of sunlight full of damndotes and said firmly, his face ravaged, but his glance straight:

"I have no doubt that both you gentlemen consider me a scoundrel because I've married an heiress in a clandestine manner—probably you consider my affairs are more embarrassed than they really are.Appearances are considerably against me, I have not behaved in a way that I am proud of, but I'm not a murderer. I hadn't the least thought in my mind of destroying Theodosius. There is much I cannot explain."

They stood, awkwardly silent, considering the man. Mr. Mostyn sensed their doubts, perhaps their incredulity, and he added on a stronger note and in emphatic words:

"My God, gentlemen, do you think I should have been such a fool, if I'd wanted to murder that boy, as to copy an old crime of nearly a hundred years ago? Why, it is absurd, ghastly, that I should be asked to answer such charges!"
"We've made none, sir," said Mr. Spryce, looking at him keenly. "The situation is baffling. For your own sake, you will not try to leave the Hall?"

"No," said Mr. Mostyn, "I'm here to answer anything that may be said. I'm willing to allow young Belmont here if you wish. Though I know something of that story."

"Sir, I shall go upstairs and see if I can talk to Miss Laura. Come, Dr. Selby, you must be with me."

The two men went slowly up the wide, shallow stairs, neither caring to speak to the other lest they might be overheard. Dr. Selby knocked at the door of Laura's apartment and Mrs. Sylk admitted them both instantly. Laura, to the surprise of both the men, was sitting at the window shrouded by the linen blind and seemed calm, almost placid.

"She's much better, dear child," whispered Mrs. Sylk, "and keeping up her spirits wonderfully."

Laura Sarelle welcomed Mr. Spryce warmly and bade him be seated on the little chair opposite her. She answered Dr. Selby's inquiries after her health with a docile air. In her heavy bombazine mourning, her little black lace cap, she looked delicate as a lily of the valley; she glanced down herself at her heavy weeds, which were like those of a widow, and said:

"This is a gown that I wore for my Aunt Tollis. I didn't think I should be wearing it again so soon, and for poor Theo."

"You know," said Dr. Selby, taking her hand kindly, "that Lord Belmont is in the village? He wished to see you, and I think you were wise, Laura, to send him away. If I were you I should write a note telling him you have no need of his services, though you thank him very, very warmly for his offer."

"You think it might compromise him?" asked Laura quickly. "You think people here might know that he wanted to marry me once? Yes, he had better go. It's too soon. I told him that. I said, 'It's too soon, but come again later.'"

"Come again later, Laura?" said Mr. Spryce. "I beg your pardon—I should say Mrs. Mostyn. Come again later? What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Laura, "when they've taken Mr. Mostyn away and when I'm quite free."
“For God’s sake, child, what are you saying? When they take him away?” asked the doctor.

Laura glanced aside and smiled slyly, then looked up and whispered:

“I ought not to speak like that. Horrible, isn’t it? But of course he’s my husband, and I won’t say a word against him, not a word.”

“Then why do you talk like that—‘take him away’? Who is to take him away? He is your husband and the master here,” urged Dr. Selby, with his old face lined and anxious as he bent towards the girl, still firmly holding her little wrist.

“Yes, yes, I don’t know what I am saying. Of course Lucius must never come here again——”

“Laura,” put in Mr. Spryce, “you seem quite well and strong, you have borne this tragedy very bravely. Your brother did not suffer, you know, it was a quick and easy death, and he was not so enamoured of life—perhaps he would have much regretted to go like that, so it all must be taken in a stoic way. He prided himself on being a philosopher. But there are living people to think of. Can you tell us something of what happened that night? It is really important. Now, tell us quietly——”

Laura looked sly and frightened.

“No, I can’t. I’ve said all I can remember.”

“But you said some wild and terrible things, Laura. . . . Everyone heard them, all the servants—about Mr. Mostyn,” urged the doctor.

“I did not know what I was saying. I must not talk against him, must I? He’s my husband. And I could not give evidence against him, could I?”

“No, Laura,” said Mr. Spryce. “But you could help us now in getting at the truth of this disaster. You do not know anything about the book that Tomkins found in Mr. Mostyn’s room?”

“The book, no!”

“You do not know how it was that that yellow glass that belonged to Mr. Mostyn’s bedroom furniture was the one used for the draught? You do not know anything about the essences in his pocket?”

“How should I know? I tell you I came downstairs and I heard them quarrelling, then when I opened the door I could see him standing there with the gold glass I gave him in his hand. That is all I know. I won’t say another word, my lips
are locked. I sent for Dr. Selby because I was frightened—Theo seemed so ill—and Harry—"

"Do not press her," put in the doctor, "it may bring on a nervous attack."

"She won't speak," said Mrs. Sylk, suddenly breaking into the conversation, "she's too loyal, poor child. And Mr. Mostyn has ruined her—"

"Hush, Mrs. Sylk, we won't have any of that talk, if you please. We'll leave you now, my dear, you're well looked after here. Keep yourself quiet until after the funeral and then we will try and make arrangements for you to go away. Afterwards, you must try to tell us all you know."

"But what's going to happen," asked Laura, rising, "to—to my husband? Don't the words sound strange—'my husband'?"

"I can't tell you, dear," said Mr. Spryce kindly. "I'll send for my wife, if you like, to keep you company. We don't know what's going to happen in this house within the next few hours.... Remember to write that note to Lord Belmont. The case is bad enough as it is, we don't want more complications."

He obeyed a warning look from the doctor and moved towards the door; he could see now that Laura, who had seemed so serene when they entered the room, was much excited; she was even smiling to herself in the muted light (the sun being at the back of the house) that fell through the holland blind and gave her mourning garments a dingy, musty look. She appeared to be secretly listening, and the two men suddenly noticed that the air of the room seemed stagnant, as if it had been shut up all night, and, dry and cautious as they were, into the minds of both crept a warning—of what they did not know.

The doctor pulled at Mrs. Sylk's sleeve and whispered some words of advice; his mumbling tones irritated the lawyer, who went, with a clumsy slowness that was like a flight, out of the chamber.

Laura Sarelle's eyes darkened through the sudden dilation of her pupils; she rose with a stiff rustle of her bombazine gown and moved towards the closet; as the little door closed behind her she looked at her writing-desk and said, her finger to her lips: "I must write to Lucius and tell him not to come here until Harry is hanged."
The two men—the ugly, taciturn lawyer in his precise town clothes, and the stooping, elderly doctor in his country frieze—returned to the library, avoiding each other’s look.

And there in the window-place, full in the sunlight, that had taken on the warm tint of evening, sat Harry Mostyn, with his face twisted, talking rapidly, thickly, spreading out his hands as he spoke.

His companion was Lord Belmont, the man who to the two gentlemen now entering was still the steward of Leppard Hall.

Holding his hat and cane, he stood by the case where he had so often worked with Sir Theo; his bright good looks, which moved all who looked at him in his favour, were clouded; he seemed to muse as he listened, and yet to be keenly conscious of every accent, every word used by the other man, as if he were endeavouring to follow the workings of the other man’s mind. Harry Mostyn paused as the door was opened and stopped short with a great sigh.

Regarding him gravely, the other man spoke, as doctor and lawyer moved slowly into the room that even that last sunlight of the summer day did not seem able to warm, or even to brighten.

“You think this an intrusion, sirs, and so it is, but I cannot stay away. I was an intimate in this house for two years, and though there was a breach, I will not say quarrel, between Theo and myself, we had been friends at college—Mr. Mostyn is a stranger to me, but he has accepted my services.”

“You services, sir?” repeated Mr. Spryce sharply.

“I am a stranger here,” said Harry Mostyn slowly; “I’m glad of any offer, even of companionship. I feel my situation to be very disagreeable. You may, if you will, gentlemen, ask my lord to help you in any way that he will be good enough to offer to do so.”

“Sir, I do not see any way in which he can help us,” said Dr. Selby. “But it was good of you, my lord, to come, and under the circumstances.”

“I know how he can help me,” said Mr. Mostyn, “for I tell you I’m damned glad of a friendly face—I thought that Lord Belmont, when he came in just now, did look as if he was likely to understand——”

“And so, sir, you have been telling him the tale?” asked Mr. Spryce of Harry Mostyn, who replied, “Yes.”
"I waited on the vicar this morning," put in the young earl. "I heard a good deal from him—the servants, you will understand—well, the village talks of nothing else—"

Mr. Mostyn rose.

"I think my lord to be just—I have to trust someone, and I hope that he'll act fairly for Laura's sake as well as for common humanity. I have told him—all I can tell anyone. I have asked him to come on an errand with me now. You'll excuse us?"

"Why, sir," asked Mr. Spryce, "should you confide in Lord Belmont, rather than in us?—his lordship is a stranger!"

"My reason hardly matters. This is not a matter for professional men. Your place, sir, is rather here—with Laura, with my wife. Oh," he added quickly, "I'll not try to escape. Pray credit me with not being a fool."

"Sir, I shall answer for you. Mr. Spryce, I beg you to remain at Leppard Hall until we return."

As soon as the two men were in the avenue Mr. Mostyn broke out:

"I want you to come with me to the vicarage; I don't think that the parson has been questioned yet about the book. And I want to be the first to do so."

"Some such volume I had once in my own hands—out of curiosity. I saw a print of Edward Avershaw's face, and made nothing of it, not recognizing the likeness to that—damnable portrait."

"I was warned," said Mr. Mostyn—"that day in Warwick—some peril of the mind—"

"You are holding something from me, of course—if it is to Laura's interest—very well. But I could help you better if I knew all—I fear that it is an infernal business—"

"I think, too, that the Devil had a hand in it," groaned Mr. Mostyn. "I thank you for your confidence in me, sir, but I cannot give my entire confidence to you—the story, as I fear it, goes beyond words—I dare not even say to myself what I begin to dread."

"One of the servants perhaps? How do we know the stories of all the people in that house, all the possible spites and malice? Theo was a difficult man and could be unjust and ill-tempered. If we could find who put that book in your
room, who chose that Venetian glass to put the poison in—who thrust it into your hand—"

Harry Mostyn broke out:

"Why do you believe in me? I’ve played a scoundrel’s part. I took her away from you and married her secretly. And it was all for the money; I never even liked Laura Sarelle."

"Believe in you? I do not know why I do—to that extent. Common sense, I suppose. I do not think you are a murderer, and I think you are sane. And this affair is insane."

They glanced at each other as they turned aside from the avenue across the parkland; the sunlight was rippling red in the river and edging the flowering rushes with light; a few fleecy clouds were dissolving into rosy vapour behind the grey church; the younger man felt as if he were in the presence of a dream, and of a dream that menaced sanity.

The little riverside path was empty to the physical eye only; Lucius Delaunay could clearly see the figure in the pale dress, hastening away from him towards the churchyard.

The evening light was very clear, he could mark the details of all the tiny flowers at his feet; everything was odd, changed, out of focus. "Well," he said, as if to himself, "the only thing that will help is the truth. We must have the truth—the facts."

"Yes," said Harry Mostyn harshly, "and not to save myself, mind you. I owe it to her—if it is as I think it is—to keep silence. I’ve spoken to Flasket. A scoundrel, but faithful—" Mr. Mostyn paused, as if taken suddenly ill, and put his hand to his side. "I deserved this," he muttered, then, lowering his voice still further: "How is this story to be hushed up?"

Then, save for a slight trembling of his lower lip, he recovered himself and walked firmly beside the younger man towards the vicarage.

... ... ...

The Reverend Nathaniel Mist received the two gentlemen instantly; he was much shaken both by the unexpected death of his wife, who had been dying for so long that he had begun to think of her as immortal, and by the tragedy at Leppard Hall, and looked old, shabby and dispirited.

Questioned by Lord Belmont about the book, he looked on his shelf, found his copy gone, and remarked that he had last seen it in Mr. Mostyn’s hands.
"You were putting it back in the case, sir, as I was entering the room. I hoped that you hadn't indulged your curiosity too far. I was supposed to keep that book locked up, but I'm careless about such things, I forgot it again. I never missed it. I've been preoccupied——"

"I replaced it," said Harry Mostyn, speaking with difficulty. "Who would have—borrowed—stolen it?"

"Why, sir, anyone. My door is left on the latch—I keep no close guard on my poor collection, and of late—since my wife—a lonely old man, sir." He turned his face, raddled with age, from one to the other; the room was full of shadow and a tendril of creeper tapped on the murky glass.

"Agnes, your little maid, might know something—perhaps she admitted someone in your absence," suggested Lord Belmont.

The vicar looked sadly at the two men who had come to invade his solitude, but pulled the bell-rope. Agnes appeared very quickly, her eyes sharp with curiosity, while her master questioned her about the missing book, showing her with shaking fingers the place on the shelf where it had stood for so long.

"Oh, Madam Mist sent me down for that book one day when Miss Laura was here. The ladies were looking at it together. When Miss Laura left, Madam put it down behind the cushion in her chair and told me to take it back secretly. I wasn't supposed to tell you, sir, but I don't suppose it matters now Madam is dead."

"No," said the parson vaguely, "no, it doesn't matter at all, my good girl. That will do. I dare say the book is somewhere about the house. I must look."

"Why, sir, you do look ill! Can I get you a glass of wine?" she exclaimed, staring at Lord Belmont, who had come forward.

"No, I'm not ill, Agnes. Can you tell me what the two ladies were talking about when you took the book up?"

"Don't ask her," said Harry Mostyn, pulling his sleeve, but the younger man replied: "We must know—pray, child, of what did they talk?"

The girl stared from one to the other, then slyly at her master, as she answered with a sly relish:

"Why, sir, about some old story, about another Laura Sarelle. They were very close about it, talking eagerly with their heads together. But it was all to be a secret. I was sent
away. Oh, sir! Have I done wrong in speaking? I heard some more when I brought the tea service in."

"No, no! You must tell me. What were the ladies saying as you went into the room with the book?" asked the young earl.

"Oh, I've always remembered it, sir. Madam had a strange way of speaking, so that you did remember what she said. The words were so queer, too. She was saying, 'The gossips tried to put it on to Laura Sarelle, because they thought that she was trying to make away with both of them, the brother and the husband, too, so that she could get the one she cared for'—or something like that, sir."

"It's an old tale, and best forgotten," said the vicar in a quavering voice, looking from one to the other with frightened eyes, his loose lower lip trembling.

"Come, Mr. Mostyn, sir, let us return to the Hall. There is no time to be lost."

"I've nothing to say," said the other with soft violence, "nothing whatever."

"Pray, gentlemen—can I be of any further service," asked the vicar, but without answering him they left the small, cramped and dark house.

The light still held; the landscape looked tranquil and remote; both men gazed ahead so as not to see either the churchyard or the river, and turned as quickly as they could across the parkland.

"I'll keep silence," said Harry Mostyn suddenly, harshly. "The evidence of the girl could be set aside. I might say I took it afterwards——"

A flight of heavy blackbirds winged overhead, and passed behind Leppard Hall, in the direction of the wood where the mausoleum that would be opened so soon to admit the body of the last male Sarelle stood.

"When is the inquest?" he added. "I suppose they have made up their minds to that? Or is there to be an arrest for murder at once? He is lying embalmed at Warwick, is he not? Well, I am ready and I deserve it——"

"Maybe," replied the young man sternly, "but that is not how—the end—can be evaded."

"What can we do? I feel hemmed in."

"She must be taken away. At once."

The evening was very quiet about them, as they turned into the avenue. Leppard Hall, blotted out by mist, seemed, by
that ugly trick that both men had noticed before, to blot out
the entire landscape.

"Here she is." Harry Mostyn clutched his companion's
arm as a pale figure slipped out of the trees of the avenue and
came towards them. "Laura!" he cried aloud.

"Hush," whispered the other, and they stood still as the girl
approached; she was wearing a clumsily made yellow dress.

"Oh, Lucius—oh, Harry! I put off the mourning and chose
this—I made it secretly, when Mrs. Sylk was not looking—"

"Laura," said Harry Mostyn, "how did you come here?
Come with us—at once—"

She turned from him.

"Lucius? Why don't you speak? I have run away. I shall
hide for a while. They are telling lies about me. Harry's man
went to Dr. Selby and said he had seen me come to Harry's
room with the gold-flecked glass."

"I forbade him—but how do you know this?"

"I listened at the door—Mrs. Sylk is asleep. She cried so
much! I was coming down to show my dress when I heard
them talking."

"Where will you go now, Laura?" interrupted Lucius in a
voice that startled her.

She shrank back and said:

"You should not be here. I was going to write to you—but
I forgot. You should not be here until Harry is hanged. Then I
shall be rich and free."

"Laura—you know what to do—" whispered Lucius. "We
have heard what Madam Mist told you—we know who put
that stuff in the glass—"

She shrieked and, turning as if about to fall, ran from them.

"The river," whispered Harry Mostyn, turning also.

"Yes," said Lucius, detaining him. "Why did they not see,
how she has been—this long while?"

Harry Mostyn shook him off and ran through the thickening
light towards the pale figure that like a petal before the
breeze hastened towards the grey river hidden behind the
sedgy banks. Lucius leaned against one of the trees and put
his hand before his eyes that he might not see Leppard Hall
—of all his thoughts one only was coherent: "Now they will
raze it to the ground."

The panting breath of the older man, his heavy dragging
step, made Lucius look through his fingers. Harry Mostyn
came stumbling through the dusk.
Lucius saw that he was alone, and that even in that light looked sick, exhausted and as if his spirit were huddled together in himself; he was changed as was the very darkening scene about him.

"You let her go?" whispered Lucius.

"I feel ill. Have you any brandy? I don't know what I am saying. Let her go? I had to let them go—there were two of them."
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