"What could I do? How could I save that beautiful, silent woman?" Page 94.

Frontispiece.

—A Woman in Grey.
CHAPTER I.

THE HOUSE OF FEAR.

Mists were rising from the river as the chill October twilight fell. A dim yellow band lay along the western horizon, where the sun had set, and above, the horns of a new moon shone red in a creamy haze. The smell of the water and of dying leaves came pungently to my nostrils as I stood leaning on the crumbling stone of the sundial.

Before me, fifty yards away, lay the river, deserted and silent at this hour and season, save for the occasional harsh cry of a belated corncrake.

To my right stood Lorn Abbey, known for many a year to the scattered neighborhood as the 'House of Fear.' Few buildings in England had weathered more centuries without falling into ruin.

An abbey it really had been in the days of Queen Mary, but during the reign of Elizabeth it had not only become the private property of a certain Lord Loveless and his family, but had had the honor of a visit from the maiden Queen.

It was queerly built rather than imposing, with a flat
front turned half away from the river, a great number of small windows, and a tower with a clock in it, which jutted with an arch over the principal entrance, a low, mean door of oak. But many generations of Amorys (Lord Loveless's descendants) had added on almost as many wings of all sorts and conditions of architecture, some of which had not withstood the wear and tear of time as bravely as had the old Abbey itself.

There was a legend of the secret room, all knowledge of which had perished; and so awful were the two best-known and most authentic ghost stories, which pertained first to the clock-tower and then to the rubbish-choked moat, that to this day the gossips in the village a mile away glanced fearfully over their shoulders as they repeated them.

This was the house—with its tangled wilderness of a garden, its weed-grown lawns, its broken statues and Italian flower-vases, and the few accompanying meadows which alone remained of a great estate—that my uncle, Sir Wilfrid Amory, Home Secretary under the late Tory Administration, wished to possess.

To be sure, Lorn Abbey had been the property of another and elder branch of our own family since the time of Queen Bess, but the days of its grandeur had long since departed. It had been the gloomy shelter of family poverty for half a century or more; and then, twenty years before the October night which found the river mists rising round me at the sundial, the place had been sold to a rich old woman, who, though once only a housekeeper in the Amory family, had come into a fortune through the death of a relative.

The most blood-curdling ghost story of the legion which clustered round the 'House of Fear' was the sole legacy left the Abbey by this old woman, who had been murdered one night, seven or eight years before, in the bedroom she had chosen up in the clock-tower. With the history of this tragedy, and the trial of the murderer, my uncle had been,
in his official capacity as Home Secretary, in some way more or less concerned. Exactly to what extent I scarcely knew, for at that period he had been nobly rounding off the education he had given me by sending me on a tour round the world.

Since the murder, however, Lorn Abbey had stood empty. There was not even a caretaker kept, for bold indeed must be the tramp who would seek to steal a lodging under that haunted roof. It was only lately that the house and remaining estates, which had passed into the hands of the murdered woman’s stepson, had been advertised for sale; but no sooner had this intelligence reached my uncle’s ears than he determined, if possible, to be the purchaser.

He had always regretted, he said, that the old place should pass away from the family, and though he had never been inside the Abbey doors, he had a vague, inherited affection for the strange and ancient house. Melancholy as must be the condition into which it had fallen, it could not be beyond repair, he had decided; and as a consequence of this decision (and some preliminary negotiations with the representatives of the owner, who was out of England), I had been sent down to spy and report upon the nakedness of the land.

I had no reason in the world for sadness, or even discontent, that mist-ridden evening. My uncle’s influence had made me prosperous. A very good appointment under Government had been secured for me, now that my uncle had retired from public life and I was about to cease my labors of love as his private secretary. I was not yet quite thirty; I had many friends and few enemies; I had perfect health, some pretension to good looks, and I was engaged to marry a beautiful woman—my cousin, Paula Wynne. It is true that I did not love Paula, as a man, when very youthful and romantic, hopes to love his future wife. But I cared for no one else, neither did she. The marriage would please our uncle, who had done everything for us both; we had known
each other all our lives, and believed that we should be able to rub on very contentedly together.

This was my agreeable outlook upon life. And yet, as I stood leaning on the pitiful remains of the old sundial, surveying the house which was yet to be explored (I had been delayed, and had come down from London rather late), an unreasonable yet poignant misery lay heavy upon me.

As I thus reflected, my eyes wandered, as though by some fascination, to the clock-tower. In that room underneath, so strangely selected for her own by the mistress of the house, a murder had been committed—there behind that shuttered window.

Suddenly, something just beyond the line of my vision seemed to move. I looked up quickly, and, to my surprise, saw that the two great gilt hands were traveling round the face of the silent clock.

Silent it had been, no doubt, for years; but now, as the long hand turned to twelve, the short one to five, it was silent no longer. Its cracked yet solemn voice boomed out the hour; then, with a low concluding grumble, subsided into its wonted stillness again.

I was amazed beyond measure, and knew not what to think.

Had the sunshine of morning flung its cheery radiance over the scene instead of the weird light of fading day and sinking moon, I should have decided without a moment of doubt that some mischievous person, regardless of ghost stories, had ventured boldly in and proceeded to wind up the clock. But as it was—I have no excuse to offer for myself—a little creeping chill wandered up the length of my spine.

I did not, however, hesitate as to what course of action I should pursue. If I had not previously quite made up my mind whether I should explore the house that night or the next morning, it was now made up in a flash. I walked quickly along the weed-grown drive to the front-door, which
I had been regarding with such distaste, and, after pushing against it once or twice with all my force, found myself able to enter.

I stood in a wide, shadowy space, more like a room than a modern entrance-hall. Its dimensions stretched away into darkness, but the twilight which penetrated the low, open door, and fell, with broken glints of color, through a stained-glass window on the landing of the stairs, showed me that the place still boasted a few remnants of furniture. Several doors opened into vistas of deeper gloom; and the smell might have been that of a sepulchre.

I stood holding the door open with my hand, and gazing up the broad oak stairway, with its worn, shallow steps faintly flecked here and there with light-red, purple, and yellow. But the stillness was deathlike, and the form which I had half expected to see coming downstairs or peeping at me from above did not appear.

Then, as suddenly as the voice of the old clock had spoken, a board or a door creaked somewhere above; and I went towards it, up the steps, which groaned out a warning of my approach. I passed the landing, with its seat in the recess of the window, and groped my way further on, for beyond all lay in the darkness of a closed and shuttered house.

I only knew when I had reached the top of the stairs by the feeling that my feet were on a level floor; but, putting up both hands until I touched a wall, I speedily arrived at a closed door, and opened it.

Grey twilight filtered through a couple of broken-paned, dusty windows, but it served to break the darkness, and by its poor assistance I discovered other doors along the passage, and flung them open, too. Thus I had light enough on my path to know where it led, and I slowly progressed in what I judged to be the direction of some other hidden stairway at the right, which must lead to the clock-tower and the bed-chamber of the murdered woman.

There was, I discovered, another shorter and narrower
passage, which led off the main one; and, avoiding a flight of stairs at the left, which would have doubtless taken me into another wing, I came upon a half-open door shutting away the stairs, which from this story wound up into the tower.

The rusty hinges creaked dismally as the door swung back, and once more, from the murder-haunted regions over head, came the sound of a furtive footstep on a loose board.

I went up the few steps, which brought me to another landing and a door. This I knew must open into the room where, a few years ago, the murder had taken place—a room never slept in, never lived in, from that day to this. It was not latched, and I pushed gently against it until it moved away from my hands and showed me the dim interior of a furnished chamber. There was the big canopied bed, its draperies rotting away from the frame, a chest of drawers, two or three chairs, and a large wardrobe set with a mirror in the door, which, being opposite a broken-shuttered window, caught a ghostly reflection from the dying light outside.

Behind a dark, torn curtain I could see a second door, which would lead out to the stairway on the other side, and so up to the works of the clock. As it appeared that the room was empty, I decided to carry my explorations above, where the elusive presence must have betaken itself; but as I walked across the thick carpet I was brought to a sudden standstill by the rush and rustle of something jumping from the bed to the floor.

I had stopped facing the mirror, and it was in its pallid depths that I saw reflected what sent the blood back upon my heart with a throb.

In a flash the story told by the landlady at the inn had come back to me: The spirit of the girl doomed every night to repeat the crime which had cost her her liberty, and at last (indirectly) her life—the wicked ghost which, having strangled its aged benefactress in the bed, leaped to the
floor, wringing its hand, bitten to the bone, and so, with moanings of remorse, fled down the tower stairs.

As I stared into the mirror, the curtains shrouded the bed and aught it might contain in ominous shadow; but the eerie light sifting through the shutters revealed the figure of a tall woman in grey, reflected, spirit-like, in the glass, as she stood behind me in the centre of the floor.
CHAPTER II.

A WOMAN IN GREY.

I stepped hastily to the window, and, throwing wide the shutters, looked at her as I had never looked at any woman in my life before. I felt no more hesitation in examining every feature, every distinctive peculiarity of her dress, than I would if she had been a picture or a statue.

She was very beautiful, surprisingly beautiful, with a strange, unearthly loveliness (if it were not the effect of the time and place) which might have belonged to Undine.

She was as slim as she was tall, and, as she stood fearlessly answering my gaze, she swayed a little, like a lily in the wind. Her face was pale and pure as the rich petals of a magnolia. Its only color lay in the lips, which gleamed out from the whiteness of her skin, moist and crimson as carnations after rain, and the long dark arch of the brows and the lashes. Whether her eyes were blue, or grey, or black, I could not tell; but her hair, tossed back from the low Greek forehead without the suspicion of a fringe, was palest amber rather than golden.

Her dress was of a light shade of pearl-grey cloth, or serge, made simply in modern fashion. A grey straw hat to match, with two or three soft plumes, I now observed that she held in one hand. It was the hand nearest the window, therefore more distinctly visible than it would otherwise have been, and was so curiously gloved that, even in that moment of bewilderment, I was additionally puzzled.

Though I had been guilty of much staring—as was but
natural, perhaps—it had somehow not, on the instant, occurred to me to speak. Drawing the hand with the hat in it quietly out of my sight, the Woman in Grey said:

‘I suppose you took me for a ghost?’

Her voice was a sweet, low contralto, of a curiously haunting and penetrating quality.

‘For a few minutes, I must confess,’ I returned, ‘you certainly had me at a disadvantage.’

‘And still you consider me mysterious?’ she went on.

‘Even more so than most women.’

‘Perhaps, if I feel inclined, I shall puzzle you still more. But I am not a tramp, I am not a thief, and I am not a ghost.’

‘I should scarcely have taken you for either of the former. But may I ask you one question, even though you may intend to remain a mystery? Did you wind the clock and cause it to strike a few minutes ago?’

‘I did.’

‘With any particular object?’

‘Naturally. But that I am not bound to explain.’

‘Perhaps I can guess it,’ I said, fascinated by her beauty, her unexpectedness, her odd yet dainty manner, into forgetting our gruesome surroundings.

‘I am sure you cannot. But I can guess what you would guess. You would fancy I had wound the clock out of pure mischief—a freak rather youthful for my years—for the sake of surprising and startling the superstitious villagers, who haven’t heard it strike for many years, perhaps.’

‘I confess something of the sort was in my mind.’

‘That is the second confession you have made to me in the last few minutes. And yet I can see that you’re a man of the world. I have accomplished my object in coming up here to this most sorrowful room, and now I shall go down. But perhaps your object is not yet accomplished?’

‘It is, in discovering the mystery of the winding of the clock.’
‘And in finding that it was only half the mystery. In that case, will you follow what remains of it?’

She went down the steps which led to the passage with many doors, and I followed, with a subtle fragrance of an unknown flower wafted back to me from her hair and from her draperies.

Some strange and indefinable magnetism seemed borne from her personality to me—an electricity which thrilled and startled me. At the foot of the stairs she paused.

‘You came here,’ she said, ‘to look over the house?’

‘Yes,’ I answered, rather surprised—if anything said by this woman could surprise me now; ‘but it is so dark that—’

‘You would fain leave it to the ghosts. You will come again to-morrow morning, then?’

‘Yes; it will be better. I shall stay at the inn in the village to-night.’

‘Ah!’—it was a breath rather than an exclamation—‘you will stay at the inn. I, too, am at the inn. I should be glad if we might walk there together, if you have no objection.’

‘If I had dared—’ I began, but she cut me short in a matter-of-fact manner assumed for the occasion.

‘Would you be very much astonished,’ she asked abruptly, ‘if I told you that I was a mind-reader?’

‘My power of being astonished has been slightly numbed for the present,’ I returned.

‘That is all the better; it saves trouble. Well then, I read your mind. I see why you have come to the “House of Fear,” and I can tell you your name. Do you believe that?’

I laughed courteously, evasively. And by this time we had reached the front-door, which I had left open when I entered.

‘Your name is Terence Darkmore.’

After all, I could still be astonished. My thoughts travelled to the village inn; but I had not told my name there,
and, so far as I was aware, no one knew me in the neighborhood.

'When you are not at your uncle's place in Essex, you are with him in London, at Portsmouth Square. I can even tell you the number. But now you see that I know you. I know that you are a gentleman, and that I can safely ask a favor of you.'

'A hundred,' I murmured, staring at her half dazed.

'One will be enough—for the moment. There is a grave somewhere near the house that I must find before I return to the village. Will you go with me?'

'A grave?' I echoed vaguely.

'Yes; on the Abbey land. I hope that won't put you off buying the place?'

I murmured something, and added that I would feel she had paid me an honor in allowing me to be her companion. But as for guiding her—

'I know you cannot do that,' she said. 'I ought to be able to find the spot. Not that I have ever seen it before, you know, but I have been told. And—here is a little plan of the house and grounds which may help me, I hope.'

We were standing in the melancholy drive which led to the entrance, damp and muddy under its weeds with the rain of yesterday.

It must now have been nearly six o'clock, and, as the last day of October was approaching, the twilight had already deepened almost to darkness. We could still easily see our way before us—the distant river lying like a sheet of steel, the low wooded hills in the far background—but I thought it would be difficult to decipher any details set forth on the small, slightly-yellow bit of paper which the Woman in Grey took from the bosom of her dress.

'Have you matches?' she inquired suddenly, peering at her map.

I drew a silver box from my pocket and struck a wax vesta.
The little circle of yellow light fell on the paper the girl held, and over the delicate white hands which grasped its edges.

I could not keep my eyes from the left hand, with the singular covering which I had first noticed in the clock-tower. It was ungloved, in the conventional sense of the word, but a set of thin gold rings, fastened together by the slenderest of chains, had been drawn over the four fingers, and even the thumb, while across the back of the hand lay a close netting (something resembling the mesh of an old-fashioned silk mitten), formed entirely of small pearls. This was again attached at the wrist to a narrow, closely-fitting bracelet of plain gold.

Never before had I seen so peculiar an ornament for a woman's hand, and I did not now admire it. It was too bizarre, too conspicuous, without being, in my opinion, artistic.

As I stared at the thing she looked up suddenly, and I thought that a quick frown passed over her lovely face.

'Were you looking at my map?' she said lightly. And yet there was a concealed anxiety in her tone.

'No. I——'

She folded up the paper and thrust it back into her dress.

'There are some rather interesting features in that little plan,' she went on; 'extremely interesting to any member of the Amory family—at least, so I should think. You had better put out your match. I don't need it any longer, thanks, and you will burn your fingers. I believe that I can find what I want at last.'

The night seemed of a purple darkness for a moment when the match went out. Then it lightened again; but the moon was down, and a black bank of clouds was growing in the west. A damp wind that came up from the river ruffled my companion's amber hair, and she lifted the hand with the pearls to smooth it into place, but, with a glance at me, changed it quickly for its fellow in a glove of suède.
'We shall come to the Abbot's Walk presently,' said the Woman in Grey. It was the first time the silence had been broken since the hiding away of the map.

'But I thought you had never been here before,' I caught her up quickly.

'I did not say that. I told you I had never seen the grave I am seeking. I have been here—as a child.'

All the buoyancy of her manner was gone. Something moved her almost beyond her self-control. What, I could not tell, though I would have given much if I had dared to ask. Not so daring, I was silent, and we came forth upon a path which ran along the moat.

'The Abbot's Walk,' I repeated reflectively. 'Here it must have been, then, or somewhere close by, that the mutinous monks pushed the poor old chap in after the treasure that he had sunk in a bag under the stagnant water. I heard the story to-day, and how neither the body nor the treasure was ever found. I think, if I come here to live, I must have a look for them.' And I laughed.

'I wouldn't waste my time, if I were you,' she said. 'If you are coming to live here, you may be able to make much better use of it, if the story that your face tells be not another proof that appearances are deceiving.'

'What does my face tell?' I asked.

'That you are a man who thinks. What will you do for me if I give you a clue?'

'A clue to the use I am to make of my time?'

'Ah, I was right! You do think, and quickly. Yes; that was what I meant. I hold the end of the skein.'

She was looking at me through the darkness which ever drooped lower, like a pair of dusky, brooding wings. Her face and hair gleamed moon-like, indistinct, her features scarcely distinguishable, save the great mysterious eyes, which glowed with the deep lustre of jewels.

'Who are you?' I cried suddenly, abruptly. I had not meant to ask the question, but it came, in spite of myself.
'That does not signify. For to-night I remain simply a clock-winder!' Her laugh rang out girlishly. 'But you have not answered my question. What will you give for a clue?'

'Is there something you would have me do for you? If so, I assure you it is unnecessary to offer me a bribe.'

'I always like to give good value for what I receive. I do want something in particular of you, though, after all, it is just possible that I shall get it without your aid. You may scarcely believe it, but frankly I turned clock-winder for the express purpose of obtaining this one thing.'

Her frankness was more abstruse than other women's mysteries.

'I don't understand you!' I exclaimed.

'How odd it would be if you did! I don't always understand myself. The favor I want of you is, to arrange that I shall meet your uncle, Sir Wilfrid Amory.'

A vague suspicion of the woman began to mingle with my unutterable bewilderment.

'You wish to meet my uncle. Why?'

'There are so many reasons, any one of which might be the correct one. Sir Wilfrid is a man whom everybody wants to know. Maybe I am vulgarly ambitious, and have a desire to meet celebrities. Maybe it is because he may come to live in a place in which I am--interested. Maybe I write for the papers, and am anxious to "interview" him. Of all these "maybe's," I give you your choice.'

'If you would tell me your true reason--' I began; but she cut me short.

'A man of the world asks a woman for her reason! I want to meet Sir Wilfrid, because—I want to meet him. I have asked you a favor—a very simple one, I thought, for, after all, though you and I have come strangely into each other's lives, you know no evil of me.'

Her voice was sweet as a siren's as she accused me of refusing her a favor which would have been easy to grant, and, smitten with a weak remorse, I said that I had not
refused. If she would tell me how, I would promise that she should know my uncle.

After all, though she had been so eager to extort the promise, I do not think she heard it when it came.

We had been progressing slowly along the Abbot's Walk, the moat on one side, a row of gnarled, withered elms on the other; but now she stopped abruptly, and I heard her draw in her breath with a gasp that was almost a sob.

'Over there—is the grave,' she whispered, pointing.

My eyes followed the direction of her finger, and I saw the pale gleam of a stone among the grass. It stood up, tall and straight, under a tree outside the rows of elms—a lonely thing, which spoke of death and desolation.

'Come!' she said.

Mechanically I followed, through the sodden tangle of weeds, until she and I stood together by the side of the mound.

I did not know who lay buried there. I had not known an hour ago that such a grave existed. And yet, somehow, my heart was stirred. The low billow of earth had assumed a weird import in my mind.

'Will you strike two or three matches, and let them burn in a bunch?' she asked.

I did so, and the flame rose steadily, sheltered in the hollow of my hand. The concentration of light shut the curtain of darkness more closely round us. Away in the moat the frogs gurgled hoarsely, with an occasional splash of water, and the rising wind wailed among the trees on the hill like a spirit in distress.

'Florence Haynes. Died July 11th, 1892. Aged twenty-four.'

I read the short epitaph aloud. And the name rang in my memory with the knowledge that I had heard it before—that it had to do with some unpleasant associations which I could not yet recall.

Then suddenly it came back to me, with a sense of irrita-
tion, that I should have bared my head for a moment beside
the grave of a creature so vile.

‘Pah!’ I exclaimed, not endeavoring to conceal my dis-
gust. ‘It is monstrous that this woman’s body should have
been put here. She ought to be lying in a prison burying-
ground.’

‘Ought she?’ asked my strange companion in a new and
childlike way, looking up at me from her knees, while my
matches burned out. ‘Tell me about her, will you?’

‘Don’t you know?’ I asked suspiciously. ‘This woman,
Florence Haynes, was a murderess. The story, such as it is,
began twenty odd years ago with an old woman who had
once been a servant in this very house. When she unexpect-
edly received a legacy from a relative in Australia which
made her wealthy, she chose to sink a good many thousand
pounds of her money in buying Lorn Abbey, which had just
at that time been offered for sale.’

‘I wonder that your uncle, Sir Wilfrid Amory, did not
secure it then, rather than let it fall into the hands of a
person of that sort,’ the Woman in Grey interrupted sud-
denly, and I could feel, though I could not fathom, her
desire to hear what my answer would be.

‘Among all the things which you seem to have heard of
my uncle,’ I said, with a touch of irony, ‘has no gossip
regarding the great tragedy of his life been included?’

‘You mean his wife deserting him, and taking their only
child away with her?’

‘I see you have heard. Well, the trouble was beginning
to brew at that time, I believe, and my uncle had no ambition
for acquiring property. It was soon after the purchase of
Lorn Abbey by this Mrs. Hannah Haynes that his tragedy
was completed by the loss of Lady Amory and the little girl
in a terrible hotel fire in America. I was a boy of eight or
nine years old then; but I remember the horror of the affair
distinctly, and I know that it was the beginning of the pro-
found melancholy which fastened upon my uncle, and kept
him from interesting himself in outside matters for many and many a day.

'I don't suppose he or any of us wasted much thought on Lorn Abbey, or the old woman who was living there, until we were reminded by the news of the murder in the papers. I was in Italy at the time. Let me see; it must have been seven years ago, this very month, when it happened; but the name, Lorn Abbey, drew my attention to the case. It seemed that poor old Hannah Haynes, who was something of a miser, and, on account of her anomalous position, made no friends, had attempted to lighten the loneliness of her life by taking to live with her a boy, who was the son of her dead husband by a former wife, and a little girl much younger, whose parentage nobody knew, though she went by the name of Florence Haynes.

'This child was sent to school in the village until some exhibition of temper caused her to be expelled, and she grew up with no other companion than her benefactress's stepson, who, from all accounts, was a gentle, kindly, and handsome youth—a great contrast in every way to the passionate, unruly girl.

'Hannah Haynes herself was said to be a hard woman to live with, and there were stories of constant quarrels between her and her adopted daughter, Florence. Sometimes she would make a will, leaving all her money to the young man, whose name I forget; and then she would destroy it, having another drawn up in favor of Florence. One night, as I said—it was seven years ago this October—the sole servant kept in the "House of Fear" overheard a violent quarrel between Mrs. Haynes and the girl, who was then about eighteen years old. The woman threatened to send for her solicitor next morning and have a new will drawn up, which would leave Florence penniless. And she was heard to say: "This is the last time. I swear that you shall never have a farthing of my money." The next morning the poor old creature was found murdered in her bed, in the clock-tower
chamber. She had been strangled, and stabbed as well with one of those long pins which women use for their bonnets. This pin was proved to have been the property of the girl; and a handkerchief marked with her name was found tightly grasped in the woman's hand.

Florence Haynes herself was missing, but was discovered afterwards in the boat-house, where she had apparently gone, intending to escape by way of the river, but had fainted from loss of blood, for one of her hands had been bitten to the bone, and the flesh and the veins were torn shockingly. Her story was that she heard a cry for help in the middle of the night, and, recognizing Mrs. Haynes's voice, had run to her room, where it was entirely dark, and she could see nothing. All was still as well, and while she searched fearfully for matches someone rushed by her, knocking against her as he went. She caught at him and attempted to grasp him by the clothes. There was a struggle, and her hand was bitten, when she loosed her hold and rushed after the murderer down the stairs. Through an open window in one of the rooms on the ground-floor she followed, seeing a man's figure running before her at a distance in the darkness, and at last, still trying to follow, she fell and fainted in the boat-house.

But the story was an unlikely one, and evidence was very strong against her. The two women had had a quarrel. The money was to pass away from her, probably forever, on the next day. That night had been her last chance, and a thing which looked still blacker against her she was forced to admit: that she had gone, only a few days before the murder, to London, at Mrs. Haynes's request, to draw out by cheque nearly all the money which had lain in the London and North-Western Bank. The reason given for this act by Mrs. Haynes had been a rumor of a financial panic, and her preference for keeping her fortune in notes close at hand, until she should decide upon another place of deposit, by-and-by.
'Florence confessed to having brought home the money in a bag, all in notes, but swore that she had no idea where Mrs. Haynes had put it for safe keeping. It was supposed, however, that she did know, and had managed to secrete the money somewhere, as, though search was made in every hole and cranny about the house, it was never found.'

'Did no one suspect the stepson?' questioned the Woman in Grey.

'Inquiries were made, but no possible suspicion seemed to attach to him. He had been away in London for three or four days before the murder, looking for employment, or something of the sort. He did not know that the money had been taken from the bank, and even if he had, as it was to be left to him in a will which, doubtless, would have been made next day, if Mrs. Haynes had lived, there was no motive for the crime. He had, besides, some little private means of his own, I believe, while the girl had nothing except what her benefactress might have chosen to leave her. She was condemned to death, but through the efforts of Gordon, the Queen's Counsel who defended her, a great agitation was got up in her favor. Much stress was laid upon her youth, and the fact that the evidence was entirely circumstantial. My uncle, who was Home Secretary at the time, finally commuted the sentence to imprisonment for life.'

'Worse than death!' cried my companion. 'Might it not have been within his power to be more lenient with so young a girl, if he had chosen?'

'Probably. But he believed her guilty. He considered that she had had mercy enough. The murderess, therefore, remained at Woking Prison, and would have been there still, had she not died a couple of years ago and escaped the greater part of her sentence; Lorn Abbey, which had been left to her, thus falling into young Haynes's hands.'

'Five years in prison! Five years of a living death! How thankful that poor creature must have been to die! If I
were Sir Wilfrid Amory, I don't think I should like to remember my responsibility for so much suffering when I lay awake in the dark at night.'

'I don't fancy my uncle has any qualms of conscience in regard to the affair,' I returned.

'Ugh!' she ejaculated, rising. 'I wish I had not asked you to tell me the story. It has made me cold—cold, and sick at heart. I have done with this place of death. At the inn there will be lights and fire and dinner and dry shoes. Shall we go? Come! I invite you to dine with me—I mean, of course, with us.'
CHAPTER III.

WHO SENT THE TELEGRAM?

'I mean, of course, with us!'

The words repeated themselves in my mind, and aroused a keen curiosity. Then, this incarnate mystery was not alone. She was stopping at the inn with relatives or friends. The mere fact that she should possess and be in the company of either caused her to lose a little of the uncanny aspect she had worn in my eyes, and bring her nearer to the comfortable level of other women whom I knew.

'I accept your invitation gratefully, even though you are not alone,' I said boldly. But I was not quite bold enough to question the Woman in Grey concerning her companions.

'No, I am not alone,' she echoed.

And there was a mischievous comprehension and evasion of my suggested curiosity in her words.

She hurried on with a long, gliding step, and I hastened my own to keep pace with her. So tall and erect she was, that as we walked side by side her head was on a level with my chin, though I had three or four inches over six feet of height, and was used to looking down a foot or more on the majority of women.

But we had not walked far when a closed carriage rolled past us round the corner of the road which led up from the railway-station, and towards the inn. The light of its lamps fell full upon our faces as we stepped quickly aside to let it go by, and, to my amazement, Paula's voice from within loudly called my name.

I gave a start of utter amazement, so far from my
thoughts had Paula been, so beyond the bounds of probability seemed her unexpected presence at this place; then, involuntarily, I began to walk rapidly, feeling sure that the carriage would presently stop. For the fraction of a second I had forgotten my strange companion, but she brought herself to my recollection with a light touch upon my arm.

‘Wait!’ she said. ‘Don’t go on for a moment yet. Tell me quickly, who is in that carriage? Is your uncle, Sir Wilfrid Amory, there?’

‘I don’t know,’ I hurriedly replied. ‘My cousin, Miss Wynne, called to me. I think, in all probability, my uncle is with her. He would not have allowed her to come alone. Though what can have brought——’

‘Remember your promise. Now is the time to carry it out. There’s only a moment to arrange how it shall be done. See, the carriage is stopping! I invited you to dine with me this evening at the inn. I take back that invitation, and you must give me one instead. If you will do this, you shall know all you have asked. If your uncle has come, you must say that you have found two friends—ladies—stopping at the inn; that you’ve taken a private dining-room, and asked them to dinner with you. One of the ladies is elderly, you may say, that your cousin need not call you to account. You must tell your uncle, too, how pleased you will be that he and your friends should meet. Will you do this—for me? Ah! you are hesitating, and I know why. I am a stranger to you; our meeting has been most unconventional. You are thinking of your cousin.’

Her hand was still on my arm—the hand with the pearls—and my very soul seemed to feel its soft touch. Suddenly my thought for Paula and les convenances began to look very small and mean and unimportant. There could be no evil, I told myself, behind those wonderful eyes.

‘I do not at all understand you,’ I said; ‘but you put your request in such a way that I must grant it, or be misjudged. What you ask I will somehow manage to do.’
‘Thank you! Then, here we part. They will wonder at your delay when they have stopped the carriage for you; but you can easily say that you waited for a moment to take leave of your friend, Miss Hope. Don’t forget—Miss Hope.’

And before I could answer she was gone.

As I had expected, my uncle’s pale, prematurely aged face was thrust through the carriage window, anxiously watching for my reappearance. Paula had sunk back against the cushions, doubtless offended at my delay, and vouchsafed no further word to me.

It was my uncle who spoke as I drew near.

‘It is a very welcome surprise, Terry,’ he said, ‘to find you apparently well and unharmed.’

‘Well and unharmed?’ I echoed blankly. ‘Why, what do you mean?’

‘Evidently there’s been a mistake somewhere—a mistake for which Paula and I can afford to be very thankful. Your surprise at my words is answer enough for the moment, and so I think the best thing we can do, as there won’t be another train to London for a couple of hours at least, is to go on together to the inn, where we were hastening for news of you. Will you tell the driver, Terry, and then get inside?’

Still somewhat dazed, I did as he requested, and took the seat opposite my uncle and cousin in the musty vehicle which they had obtained at the station.

‘Now,’ I said, as the horse was started on its way again; ‘will you explain what has brought you and Paula down from town in this impromptu fashion? You, as I understand, were to await a wire from me. If it appeared to me that a great many repairs and improvements about the old place were necessary, I was to remain, and you were to come down and have a look about to-morrow morning. If not, I was to go back to-night, and——’

‘There’s been no mistake so far as all those arrangements were concerned. But before we proceed any further, let me
ask how you explain this.' And he handed me a slip of paper, evidently a telegram, without an envelope.

I glanced it over by the light of a little traveller's lamp, which my Uncle Wilfrid was in the habit of carrying with him.

'Come at once,' I read. 'Your nephew has met with an accident. Is at the Bear Inn, Martenhead.'

'Of course I came,' said my uncle, while I continued to stare at the paper in blank astonishment. 'And, of course, Paula naturally wished to come with me.'

I was utterly at a loss to explain the telegram, and this being so, the discussion which followed was fruitless. It was almost a relief, therefore, to attempt to satisfy Paula's veiled curiosity regarding my companion. I got out of this dilemma as well as I could, and finally gave my invitation, blundering between truth and fiction.

It was decided at last that they should meet Miss Hope and her travelling companion at dinner, remaining with me at the Martenhead inn for the night. This was so far satisfactory; and having arrived at the Bear, and secured rooms for the party, I hurried to the telegraph-office. Nothing could be learned there, however, save that a small dark boy, somewhat poorly dressed, had handed in the lying message.

The tall clock in the hall of the inn was striking the quarter after eight as I ran down the stairs, from the room which was to be mine for the night, and opened the door of that in which our dinner was to be served.

The table was laid for five, and there were a few vividly-tinted asters and chrysanthemums in the centre and scattered in cheap vases about the room. A bright fire blazed and crackled on the hearth, but the lights were turned low, as dinner was ordered for half-past eight, and no one save myself had yet come down.

I left the door half closed, and had gravitated instinctively towards the fire, when the whispering of silken garments caused me to raise my eyes.
"She stood framed in the doorway, no longer a woman in grey. Though I knew little of feminine apparel, I could see that the dress she wore was of a fashion past before my day, and only familiar to me in pictures. Her amber hair, too, was quaintly arranged, puffed out at the sides, with little diamond combs, which kept in place a cluster of round shining curls behind her dainty pink ears.

The gown was of black velvet, and there was a wide filmy fichu, or scarf, of lace. Altogether, the tall, slim figure looked as though it had stepped out of an old portrait, and the face, with a new glow of color and excitement, was even more bewilderingly beautiful than before.

'I have come alone, because I heard you open the door, and peeped out from my room, which is opposite this,' she said. 'I wanted to say something I had not time for when I left you. Your other "friend," whom you have so kindly invited to meet your uncle and cousin, is my companion. Her name is a strange one—Miss Traill—but her face is stranger still. I want to prepare you for them both; and don't mind if she brings with her the only creature she really loves in the world. They are never parted for a moment, night or day. You have kept your promise nobly, and now, before anyone comes, I will keep mine. When you go to live at Lorn Abbey, as something tells me that you will soon, take my advice, and follow the example of the poor old woman who was murdered there—choose the room in the clock-tower for your own. Believe me, she was wise, and had her reasons for doing so; it couldn't have been a mere whim.'

'Why should I live in a place haunted by such evil associations,' I asked, 'when there must be so many bright, pleasant, untainted rooms in the house?'

'Because in that room, and that room alone, you will be able to learn and profit by—your catechism.'

'My catechism!' I echoed stupidly.

'Hush! someone is coming. It is Miss Traill!'"
The sound of a heavy footstep in the hall, accompanied by a curious, stealthy patter which I could not understand, had brought a striking change to the beautiful face of the girl. If there could have been any possible cause for fear in the approach of her companion, I should have said that it was fear she felt.

With the strange words she had just uttered ringing in my ears, I turned, by way of doing my duty as host, and took a step towards the door.

Had I been a few years younger and less well schooled in the lesson of self-control, I think I should have started, and shown my discomposure, as my eyes fell upon the face of Miss Traill. She was a little woman, with a stout, hunchy figure, having a puzzling suggestion of hidden deformity about it. So short was the throat and sunken between the shoulders, which protruded forward, that she appeared to have none at all, and the folds of a huge chin fluted down to the curve of the bosom. The mouth was large, thin and flat of lip, with a great squareness of jaw; the nose, remarkably small, round, and podgy as an infant's, though with a cruel curve of nostril. The prominent grey eyes were set close together, and rose at the outer corners, carrying the heavy brows with them, like those of a Chinese doll. The skin was yellow and polished as old ivory, while over the rounded dome of forehead was parted a mass of dead-black hair, too evidently a wig. What might have been this strange being's age I could scarcely judge, for she looked, as a Burmese idol looks, bereft of all traces of youth, yet unwrinkled by age. Anywhere between forty and sixty it might have been safe to place her, perhaps.

At her side ran and gambolled a small animal, of a sort unknown to me, but I hated it at sight. It had a little ratlike head, a spindling tail, and a body (covered with a growth of short light-brown hair) which looked gross in proportion to the thin, dwarfed legs, which extended into claws.

Perhaps I got out of its way, as it ambled aimlessly
toward me, rather conspicuously, for Miss Traill exclaimed in a deep, unctuous voice: 'What! afraid of my poor little innocent mongoose?'

Even that one short sentence was enough to tell me that she was not a lady.

I had scarcely had time to assure her to the contrary, and murmur something as agreeable as I could, when, standing near the open door, I saw Paula and my uncle coming down the stairs.

The girl by the fireplace saw them too. My eyes turned involuntarily upon her for a second, but she was unconscious of my scrutiny. A brilliant spot of rose-red color burned on either cheek, and the hand with the pearls was pressed upon the billowing laces on her bosom.

A wave of sympathetic excitement surged over me.

Paula and Uncle Wilfrid were on the threshold, but the words with which I would have made them all known to each other died upon my lips. The tall, thin figure of the old man whom I loved tottered forward, like a child who cannot walk (his eyes fixed glassily upon that lovely face), and springing to his side with a rush that brought a whirl of table-linen, flowers, and crashing glass around my feet, I caught him as he fell.
CHAPTER IV.

BEWITCHED.

Sir Wilfrid Amory was accounted a tall man (though I had the advantage of him by three or four inches); but my anxiety was touched with pity as I carried him to the slippery, horse-hair-covered lounge in the corner, and found myself scarcely more incommode by his weight than if he had been a child.

Gently I laid him down, and would have supported his grey head on my arm, had not she, to whose mysterious beauty I attributed his seizure, come forward and prevented me.

‘Let his head lie as low as possible,’ she said; ‘that is the right way in a fainting-fit, if only people knew it.’

She would have sprinkled a few drops of water on the forehead of the unconscious man, but Paula stepped between her and the sofa.

‘No; you shall not touch him! It was the sight of you which made him ill!’ she cried angrily. ‘Terence, tell her to go!’

Even at that moment, which was full of alarm for my uncle, I could not help noticing the contrast between these two women—Paula, who was to be my wife, and that creature of snow and moonlight, who already held me half enmeshed in the tangles of her magic web.

Paula I knew to be twenty-four years old, and her rich, olive beauty was already in its prime. She was handsome, without being what I might call well finished in feature or
detail, and never had this flaw presented itself so clearly to my mind as it did now. Her dark-brown hair was glossy and abundant, but she controlled its obstinate straightness by hot irons, or other devices known to coiffeurs. Her complexion and eyes were magnificent. In the former there was no fault, but the lashes were thin and uneven, and the brows were characterless. The mouth and chin were beautiful, if a trifle heavy; the nose was too high at the bridge, and the large ears, partially concealed with some skill by the drooping hair, were almost unpleasantly prominent and thick in the lobe. Never did a woman carry her head more haughtily, on a white column of throat, than did Paula Wynne; never did the confections of a Parisian modiste show to greater advantage on a figure moulded according to the dictates of fashion. But the waist was too small in proportion to the swelling bust and shoulders, while the perfectly shod feet were flat of instep, and the white, well-manicured hands had neither the tapering fingers nor the filbert nails beloved by an artist. Despite these ungraciously catalogued blemishes, however, Paula was a woman whom people turned again to look after in the street or park, and men riveted their opera-glasses upon when she sparkled in the glories of evening dress at the theatre.

As for the other, in all the points missed by Paula in the silent contest of beauty she scored triumphantly, while, though I knew not her age, she appeared more girlish. In moulding that form and features, Nature, the artist, might have been in love with her handiwork, so daintily had she completed each detail, even to the deep, cool-looking corners of the mouth, with its cupid's bow laid on with accentuated rose-leaf points against the snow of the short, curved upper lip; the delicate 'tip-tilting' of the nose, which just saved it from being too statuesquely Greek; the dark, shadowy sweep of eyelash, the little pink, shell-like ears, and the ripple which played—lightly as a breeze ruffles the surface of water—over the amber hair.
I had always considered Paula tall, but for the first time in her life, perhaps, she looked dwarfed and insignificant—almost common in type—beside another woman. Her voice rang out with a brazen note after the mellow, bell-like tones of the first speaker, and perhaps it might have been its sudden clamor which wrested Uncle Wilfrid back to consciousness again.

He opened his eyes dazedly at first, and then, as a realizing sense of his surroundings dawnded in them, they turned to Miss Hope. Never had I seen such a look upon my uncle’s face. Sadness, intellectual absorption, a not unkindly irony, dissatisfaction with self and the world at large—all these things I had seen written so often there that each had left its own distinct tracery of lines in mingling with the play of others. But such a look as this I had not known that worn countenance was capable of wearing. The light of a long-vanished youth shone out of his eyes. The marks which showed him a tired man of the world and of affairs had all been smoothed away in a moment. It was a transfiguration rather than a change of expression.

Still he did not speak, and I saw, with a vague thrill of repulsion, that the Gorgon features of Miss Traill were well-nigh tremulous with an eagerness of expectation.

‘I very much regret if my presence has distressed Sir Wilfrid Amory.’ Miss Hope answered Paula’s tirade with an exquisite humility which surprised me. ‘I will go, of course. Come, Miss Traill.’

Then my uncle spoke.

‘No; I beg of you, do not go!’ he said imploringly. ‘Terence, give me an arm, and I will rise. I am quite right again, and must apologize to everyone for making a ridiculous exhibition of myself.’

He sat up, I helping him, but sank back once more with an impatient sigh.

‘I’m afraid I am a little giddy yet, after all,’ he went on. ‘Will you be so kind as to give me a glass of water?’
He looked at Miss Hope, who still held the jug from which she would have sprinkled his forehead; and now she made a movement to obey him, but Paula quickly stretched out her hand and took the vessel from her, at the same time catching up a glass. The girl did not attempt to resist this rather summary proceeding, but only turned her eyes, with a pleading sweetness, to those of my uncle, so eagerly fixed upon her.

'Will you not give it to me?' he asked. Then, with a sternness I had never heard him use in addressing my cousin: 'Paula! You forget yourself!'

And so it was, after all, Miss Hope who poured the water from the jug into the glass. She went down on one knee to give it to him, her left hand on the arm of the sofa above his head, so close as almost to touch his hair.

Perhaps the strange witchery she had exerted over me sensitized me, so to speak, to the effect she produced upon others. At all events I knew, with an electric shock through every nerve in my body, the quick magnetic thrill which touched my uncle with her nearness.

He looked straight into her eyes, and I, standing at the foot of the lounge, could see both faces in profile. His hand lingered in taking from her the glass of water which she offered.

'You are Miss Hope, and a friend of my nephew, Mr. Darkmore, are you not?' he asked, more, I think, with a desire to hear her speak than with a wish for information.

'Yes; we are acquaintances, at least,' she replied; and her voice, and the look with which she met his, were soft and gentle as those of a child. All the witch-glamour of her old mockery and evasiveness was gone. 'We came across each other unexpectedly to-day. He will have told you that; and I was glad to think I should meet you, Sir Wilfrid. I could not bear to go out of the room until you were yourself again, and I might hear you say it was not my fault that
you were ill. Indeed, I can’t see what I did. Please tell me it was not I.’

‘I’m afraid I couldn’t tell you that with truth,’ said my uncle, when he had sipped the water which she now held to his lips. ‘But it was assuredly not your fault. Only the fault of a resemblance to one who was very dear to me—a resemblance scarcely short of marvellous. When I came in at the door and saw you, it was as though the clock of time had been suddenly turned back a quarter of a century. Had I seen a spirit, I trust I might have been better able to retain my self-control. It was the very fact that the presentment was of flesh and blood which, for the moment, completely unbalanced me. Terry, I think you will bear me witness that never, in all the years you have known me—and they are not a few—did I so disgrace myself before.’

He was smiling now; but he scarcely for an instant removed his eyes from her face.

‘I’m quite ready to give my evidence as to that,’ I returned cheerfully, ‘and so, I should think, is Paula.’

I wished to bring her back to his recollection, for, though she had been actively rude, and had deserved his harshness, I could not but be sorry for the girl. Her face was scarlet from brow to chin with anger and humiliation. She stood patting her foot on the floor, panting a little between red, parted lips, and maltreating a tiny lace handkerchief she was ostensibly smoothing between her hands.

Miss Traill, closely accompanied by the mongoose, was now ostentatiously engaged in picking up the flowers, plates, silver, and broken glass with which my sudden spring to my uncle’s rescue had strewn the floor; but from time to time she glanced with a furtive smile at Paula or the group around the lounge.

‘I shall be glad of all the evidence in my favor,’ said Sir Wilfrid, still smiling at Miss Hope as she knelt beside him. ‘I don’t wish to pose as an emotional sensationalist, although I find the rôle of invalid an agreeable one. Never
until now have I completely realized the compensation life allows to an old man.'

The girl blushed a little, and gently withdrew the hand that held the glass.

'I am so glad you are better,' she murmured, rising from her knees.

A discreet tap at the door prevented further conversation, followed as it was by the entrance of a sleek, middle-aged waiter, who, ignorant of all that had occurred, bore in both hands a generous soup-tureen.

'There has been a little accident,' exclaimed Miss Traill's unctuous voice. 'The room isn't very large, you see, and ladies' skirts in these days are responsible for a good deal.' She looked up with slanting eyes at me for approval of her strategic statement, and I needed no more to assure me that Miss Traill would rather tell a falsehood than the truth. She would not draw the line at 'necessary lies,' but would manufacture unnecessary ones for sheer enjoyment of it. 'However,' she went on, 'I have nearly repaired the damage, and you will only have to get a few more glasses to make up for these that are broken, and some fresh water for the flowers. I hope you think me right, Mr. Darkmore, in giving these directions, although we are your guests. I am so used to taking the responsibility of anything with Miss Hope.'

I thanked her with some conventional murmur, expressing my opinion of the superior tact of women in all domestic arrangements, and then turned to Paula, but not until I had seen, out of the 'tail of my eye,' that Miss Traill, with the abominable mongoose tucked cosily under her arm, was reading the labels of the wine bottles on the sideboard.

'Paula, there's an end of our anxiety now,' I said, with an effort. 'Uncle Wilfrid is sitting up, and quite himself again. You must consider yourself hostess, please, and Miss Hope and Miss Traill are your guests.'

In a few minutes we were seated round the table, as though nothing had happened, save that Uncle Wilfrid's
pale, thoughtful face was rather paler even than usual. He seemed perfectly well again, however, and talked with a lightness of wit and an abandonment of the sadness that habitually clothed him as with a garment, which was nothing less than a revelation to me.

He did not refer again to the strange likeness which Miss Hope bore to some face vanished from his life, nor did he tell us whose that face had been. Frank and almost tender as were the relations between my uncle and me, I knew that to question him regarding what had led to his fainting fit would be one of the things I must not venture to do, nor would he ever explain to me the mystery of his own free will. I felt that I had no right even to be curious, and yet I was so, whether through my affection for him or my interest in the woman, I scarcely knew myself. Try as I might to drag my thoughts once for all away from the subject, I found the old questions constantly repeating themselves in my mind.

What woman, with the same strange moonlight beauty which this one possessed, had had power enough over my uncle's past that he should be thus moved by a chance resemblance? Had Miss Hope herself been aware of the effect the mere sight of her face would be likely to produce upon him? And, if so, was that the secret of her overweening desire to meet him? Had she, with all the zeal of an actress for the artistic 'making up' of a part, dressed herself in the fashion of many years ago, to complete the impression she had deliberately determined to create? And was the curious pearl sheath upon her left hand a detail in this deeply laid design?

I saw my uncle's eyes fixed upon it more than once, though whether in bewilderment or recognition I could not tell, save that I fancied his gaze, directed upon her hand, troubled the girl, and that she sought thereupon to draw his attention away from it. Paula, too, had observed the unusual decoration. Indeed, being a woman, it would have
been odd if she had not; and I knew, if I were suffering the pangs of unsatisfied curiosity, her mental disorder was far more acute than mine.

Though my uncle asked no questions as to Miss Hope's life and surroundings, past or present, he led the conversation once or twice into such channels as might easily have called forth the information, had she chosen to give it. But she evaded him as skillfully, if less directly, than she had me, and always with a sweet semblance of childish frankness, not so marked when she and I had been alone.

As for Miss Traill, she was as silent as Paula, though for a different reason. While Paula merely trifled with the various dishes which the sleek waiter, in virtuous pride, set down before us, Miss Traill showed a keen appreciation of each one. She betrayed little interest in anything that was said, seldom removing her eyes from her plate—except to smuggle tit-bits to the mongoose, which slid about among our feet—until my uncle began speaking of Lorn Abbey. Then she glanced stealthily from him to Miss Hope, and from Miss Hope to me. There was something secret and evil in her face which held me with a species of disgusted fascination, and I asked myself wonderingly what could be the bond which held mistress and companion together. Whatever it might be, I decided it was assuredly not love.

'My nephew says that you and he met to-day in the Abbey grounds,' said Uncle Wilfrid, anxious, as he had shown himself from the beginning, to make the conversation in some manner personal to Miss Hope. 'Was it merely the curiosity of a sightseer, may I ask, which attracted you to the old place, or was this not your first visit?'

'It was not my first visit,' she returned lightly, 'although the first for years. My childhood holds some recollections of Lorn Abbey and walks about the neighborhood; and, do you know, Sir Wilfrid, the house has always had the most wonderful charm for me. I would give—oh, I hardly know what I wouldn't give to live at Lorn Abbey! If I were rich,
I should buy the place and have it made fresh and beautiful, without in the least destroying the charm of its antiquity. I was making all kinds of delightful castle-in-the-air sort of plans when I was wandering about the grounds to-day—what I should do if I had plenty of money.

'It sounds very brutal to listen to your desires, and then to announce that I am thinking of buying Lorn Abbey myself,' said Sir Wilfrid; 'but you have only to tell me your plans for the place to see them carried out. My mind is a blank as regards proper improvements, and I shall be glad of a little practical advice, which I'm sure I shouldn't obtain from either of these essentially modern products'—smiling at Paula and me. 'Will not you and—Miss Traill go with us to-morrow morning to look over the house and grounds, and give me the benefit of any ideas you may have?'

'We shall be charmed, I'm sure,' responded Miss Traill without hesitation.

'If we are still here,' interpolated Miss Hope, with a certain emphasis, and I looked up just in time to catch a glance exchanged between the two. Exactly what it meant, I could not tell; but in the eyes of the companion I fancied I read an obstinate insistence; in the eyes of the mistress defiance, not unmixed with dread.

'If you approve the idea,' continued my uncle, 'you will reward me—us—with a long visit at Lorn Abbey, when, according to your suggestions, it has been made habitable.'

Miss Hope seemed inclined to respond favorably, though not quite seriously as yet, but I could see that Paula grew restless and impatient. She complained of being cold, and I chaffed her a little on being vexed at having missed 'Lohengrin,' to which she had been going with some friends—the Annesleys.

This led to the mention of the false telegram, and I was not sorry to have indirectly brought the subject up. I watched the girl's face as Uncle Wilfrid explained the matter—ostensibly to her companion, though really to her-
self. But the calm eyes—sometimes lifted to his, sometimes cast down with a tender shadowing of eyelash, which stirred my heart to an almost painful admiration—told me nothing. Miss Traill, whether out of compliment to Sir Wilfrid's power of narration, or because she was really interested, gave vent to exclamations from time to time, threw up her eyes, and suggested various hypotheses, none of which were worthy of being for a moment entertained.

'I only hope,' she said at last, 'that when you go home you won't find your house has been robbed. I shouldn't be surprised if the thing was a blind to get you out of London. Or perhaps, as you are a prominent man, and are pretty sure to be in somebody's way, there may have been a plot to get you down to this lonely place in the country. Indeed, Sir Wilfrid'—and she pronounced the title with considerable union, as she did whenever she had occasion to use it—'indeed, I should employ every precaution for my own protection to-night if I were you.'

My uncle and I both laughed.

'I intend to find the boy who took that message to the postoffice before I'm twenty-four hours older, at all events,' said I.

Miss Hope rose hastily from her low chair by the fire as I spoke.

'Miss Traill, I'm afraid it is time we said "Good-night,"' she exclaimed, glancing at the little watch which adorned her right wrist.

Perhaps I imagined it, but I certainly fancied that there was a strained inflection in her voice. Could it be possible, after all, I asked myself, that she had had something to do with that telegram? If she had not sent it herself, could she have instigated the sending of it?

I put the thought from me, and listened as Uncle Wilfrid eagerly protested against so early a departure.

She was not to be persuaded, however, pleading that she had letters to write which must go by the first post next day.
'Until to-morrow, then,' Uncle Wilfrid said, as she gave him her hand at parting when the evening was over. 'And after? Can my niece and I persuade you to give us your town address, or are you to remain—a mystery?'

'My address shall be the only mystery,' she laughed. 'And that but for the present. We shall meet again—after to-morrow.'

'When and where?' Sir Wilfrid asked, trying to speak lightly, but succeeding ill.

'Only promise to accept all your invitations for next week, and that question will answer itself.' She threw a glance in my direction as she spoke, which I interpreted as including me in her command.

When the door, which I had held open, had been closed behind the two oddly contrasting figures, my uncle passed his hand over his forehead and seemed to awake.

'Ah, well!' he said, smiling. 'For an hour or two I have gone back to five-and-twenty. I must now take up the burden of fifty again. Who is she, Terry, if it is not treasonable to ask?'

'Miss Hope,' I answered laconically.

'Ah, you won't answer my question. I shan't urge you—and so good-night. You'll not be sorry for a few unchaperoned moments together, I dare say.'

When he had left us, Paula sprang to me with flashing eyes, but not for the indulgence of sentiment, at which he had hinted. She and I were much too sensible an engaged couple for that.

'Terry, what is that woman?' she panted. 'What is she doing here? What does she want with Uncle Wilfrid? Mark my words, she wants something, and that something she means to have. You were a fool to play into her hands. She will marry him, if she chooses, and where shall we be then—we, who have been brought up to feel that we've a right to everything that is his? She has bewitched Uncle Wilfrid, Terry, and I hate her—hate her with a hate that kills!'
CHAPTER V.

THE KEY AND THE CATECHISM.

I was very thoughtful as I went into the room that was to be mine for the night, and locked the door. Paula's face, its beauty wiped out with the smear of an unwomanly passion, remained imaged on my eyeballs like that of the noonday sun looked at too clearly or too long.

'She will marry him, if she chooses, and where shall we be then—we, who have been brought up to feel that we've a right to everything that is his?'

These were the words that ran in my recollection, and the thought that they had been spoken by the girl who was to be my wife sickened and disgusted me. Was this the reason then, for her devotion to Uncle Wilfrid: that she liked the luxuries with which he surrounded her, and wanted his money to be hers after his death?

Perhaps the worst of it all was that she should so thoroughly take my sentiments in the matter for granted, believing that there was no other way for me to feel than she felt. We were to make common cause against this woman who at first sight had, so she said, 'bewitched' Sir Wilfrid Amory. We were to prevent that woman from worming herself into his confidence, getting a grasp upon his money-bags, and thus ousting us from our snug position.

Pah! the suggestion of such sordid motives, such selfish scheming on our part, brought a bad taste into my mouth.

Uncle Wilfrid had always been to me a hero, including in himself all that a man should be. The long oval of his
melancholy face, with its magnificent arch of forehead, shaded by hair that each year showed more of silver, its dream-haunted grey eyes, its high-bred aquiline nose, its firm, thin lips, with their pathetic sweetness of downward curve, its clever, determined, audacious chin, had, from my boyhood up, simply represented to my eyes perfection. I was naturally an ardent lover of beauty in every form.

Although so reticent regarding his past and his own most sacred feelings, there had always been a silent bond of sympathy between us ever since the days when I, in Eton jacket and shining tall hat, had accompanied him in the long country walks of which he had been so fond. I had loved him for what he had done for me, but, more than all, for what he was; and though, in spite of the fact that we had been playmates, Paula and I had never exchanged any intimacies of thought, I had taken it for granted that her regard for Uncle Wilfrid was only less than mine. Now that she had shown me, in one revealing lightning flash of rage, her inner self, I shrank from her, and began mentally analyzing her as I had never done before. Struggle against the feeling as I might, I could not help the shrivelling away of the old accustomed cousinly affection and admiration of a pretty face which had previously reconciled me to my future with Paula. I am afraid that, in those moments which I spent stretched out, with my hands thrust deep into my pockets, in that uncompromising hotel chair, I would have rejoiced if I need never have seen my fiancée again.

It was a peculiarly dingy little room in which I sat. There was not even a fireplace, but an ugly black pipe came through the floor from some mysterious and un-English heating apparatus below. Evidently it was in use in the room under mine, for, as I involuntarily approached my chair to it and held out my hands, a gentle warmth made itself felt in the region immediately surrounding. For some time, as I sat steeped in distasteful introspection, I had been
dimly conscious of the hum of voices not very far away. Now, I knew that the sound ascended to my ears through the aperture which admitted the passage of the pipe.

At first there was merely an indistinct buzz; but presently, just as my thoughts had wandered far afield, a voice that could not escape my recognition brought me to my feet. I could not sit there and listen. I must move away, and yet—the words I heard made my ears tingle, as though under a sudden blow.

'Life will become intolerable if you mean to threaten me. I give you fair warning: this must end, or anything may happen.'

It was Miss Hope who thus cried out, in a tone which told me that something or someone had goaded her to the pitch of desperation.

'Don't be a fool, then! You've brought it on yourself!' grated the deep voice of the companion.

I had already risen, and now I put temptation away from me, and strode, with footsteps purposely made heavy, to the farthest end of the room.

No doubt eavesdropping is both vulgar and disgusting; but, for the first time in my life, I felt overpoweringly tempted to be guilty of it. I wanted to have faith in the integrity of that beautiful mysterious woman. I wanted to be sure that any secrets that she might be cherishing were only such as a high-minded, if mischief-loving, girl would have a right to withhold from chance acquaintances, or even society at large, so long as she might choose.

Perhaps a few more words overheard, and I should either know that which would enable me to defend her from any aspersions, or else—— But I shut my ears to the voice of temptation, as I did the voices of the two women in the room below. I walked up and down until the boards in the old flooring creaked a protest. I opened the window, and clattered the Venetian blind, which, like those in most inn bedrooms, was more or less out of repair.
Still, I could not avoid catching an occasional word or sentence, so oblivious did the speakers, in their evident agitation, seem to be of everything save themselves and each other.

‘Do you mean to carry it through, or do you not?’ stridently demanded Miss Traill.

‘Yes—yes—yes! A thousand times yes! But it must be in my own way. Now will you leave me in peace?’

‘Not till you tell me whether or no you found what you went to look for in that old woman’s room.’

‘How do you know I went to look for anything?’

‘Because I know you. And I know that there was something there to find.’

The wish to learn more might have overmastered me even yet, had I not, really by accident this time, upset a small, untrustworthy chair. There was a sudden cessation of all sound below, and the silence was not broken again, though long after I had gone to bed I lay awake, staring into the darkness.

With what threats had Miss Traill the power to terrorize her lovely mistress? What did the latter mean to ‘carry through in her own way’? And had Miss Traill referred—in mentioning ‘the old woman’s room’—to that strange, dim chamber of murder in the clock-tower at the House of Fear?

* * * * *

‘Did you hear that big clock striking all the hours and quarter-hours last night, sir?’ inquired our smooth waiter, busying himself over the breakfast-table in the little private sitting-room where we had dined the evening before.

I had come down early, though I had not slept till late, and stood looking out of the window at the morning sunshine, which made the mean little grey-brick houses of Martenhead temporarily beautiful.

‘Yes, I heard the church clock striking,’ I returned absently, ‘until the quarter after two had sounded.’
'Ah, but, sir, it wasn't the church clock. That's why I took the liberty of mentioning it. Everybody in the village has been talking about it, sir.'

'Indeed!' Until he had spoken I had forgotten the sudden travelling of those slim, gilded hands over the face of the clock at Lorn Abbey; but now I remembered that the Woman in Grey had wound it, and knew what the man was about to say. 'How do the village people explain the fact that the clock has suddenly begun to strike?'

'Oh, it's explained in different ways, sir. You see, when Mrs. Haynes was murdered—which was two or three years after I came down to the village—everybody missed the clock, which had always struck every quarter of an hour since the oldest inhabitant could remember. For the place hadn't been empty but a few days when the last of the Amory family moved out, sir, so I've been told, before Mrs. Haynes moved in. And so, when she was dead, and the house was shut up, it seemed queer enough for a long time without the clock. Then it got round among some of the superstitious old bodies, sir, until everybody'd heard it, and got used to it, that if the clock in the tower should ever be set going again it would be by old Mrs. Haynes's spirit itself, come back to try and tell something which was lying heavy on its mind.'

'Was Mrs. Haynes supposed to have anything lying particularly heavy on her mind or conscience?' I inquired.

'Well, sir, the story used to go that there was some family secret of the Amory's she'd either got hold of or was anxious to get hold of, and that was the reason why she, who'd been but a servant, spent so much money in buying the house. That's all as I ever heard of, and it ain't likely there's much in it. I fancy the gossip grew up out of what Fanny Edwards, the servant who lived with the Hayneses, told after the murder.'

'What sort of girl was she?' I questioned.

'She was a Welsh girl, sir. A tall, fine creature, I remem-
ber, with big eyes and a lot of yellow hair. She had several admirers in the village, and there was more than one who was sorry when she went away without leaving any word behind her as to where she was goin’ to live. I was thinkin’ to myself, it might be that Fan had come back to Martenhead, and wanted to give folks a scare by windin’ up the old clock. She’d be daring enough to do it, if no one else would. And then she knew how to wind the clock.’

‘Ah! is the mechanism anything out of the ordinary?’

‘That it is, sir. There was the old woman herself, and her niece who killed her and afterwards died in prison. There was Mr. Haynes, her stepson, such a kind, handsome young fellow, sir, educated like a gentleman, and Fanny. They was the only ones that had got the secret of it; Mrs. Haynes had it from the Hon. Mrs. Amory in old days, and she’d taught it to the others, so Fanny used to say. And you must know the big clock is wound neither with a key nor a windlass.’

This was an aspect of the case which had not struck me before, and it gave me food for thought. Suddenly I had lost interest in the waiter’s story. I was consumed with a tingling impatience for the moment to arrive when I might see her again. I wished that Paula and my uncle would come down to breakfast, that we could get the meal over, and claim Miss Hope’s almost positive promise that she and her companion would go expiring with us to Lorn Abbey.

I took out my watch, and found that it was half-past nine.

‘Do you know,’ I asked abruptly, ‘whether the ladies who dined with us last night have had their breakfast yet?’

‘Oh yes, sir,’ replied the waiter. ‘They breakfasted very early. I thought you would have known that they had gone.’

‘The ladies have gone?’

It was the voice of Uncle Wilfrid at the door which echoed the words the waiter had just spoken.

Paula, who had come down at the same time, stood beside
him, a slightly malicious smile drawing up one corner of her pretty mouth—a characteristic little trick of hers.

‘If you mean your Mongoose Lady and your Miss Hope,’ she said (as though there were any number of others in the hotel to whom we might as naturally refer), ‘I knew that they had gone. My room is over the front-door, and directly after I had got up, about an hour ago, I saw them driving off with two boxes and the mongoose, in a fly.’

She walked into the room with her head up, looking bright and well satisfied with herself and the information she had afforded us. Then she went to the fire and began to warm her hands and examine her numerous rings (as she was fond of doing) at the same time. The hoop of brilliants which I had dutifully given her was among the others, of course, and she ostentatiously arranged it so that it showed more conspicuously between the ruby and the sapphire which she wore above and below.

Sir Wilfrid said no more; but I saw a disappointment which seemed disproportionate to the occasion written on his face.

As for me, I felt an unreasoning sense of irritation with myself, with everybody, with everything. I seemed to hear, far back in my ears, the echo of mocking laughter, and a faint refrain of some such words as: ‘I came, I saw, I conquered; and now it has suited my convenience to disappear again.’

I was no longer interested in Lorn Abbey. I was vexed that I must go through the ceremony of exploration after breakfast. I was not hungry. And the tea was sure to be bitter, the toast cold.

‘It has occurred to me,’ I said, when breakfast had been got out of the way, ‘that if nothing has been learned at the postoffice of that queer telegram, we might advertise in the local paper for the boy who brought it in, offering an inducement for him to come forward. Of course, as I said last night, it may have been some vacuous person’s idea of a
practical joke, but I for one shall not be quite comfortable until the little mystery is solved. Does that course meet with your approval, Uncle Wilfrid?'

He intimated that it did, and it was finally arranged that our bill at the inn should be immediately paid, and our small amount of luggage sent on to the station, to which we ourselves should proceed, after having attended to the business of the fraudulent telegram, and satisfied ourselves as to the condition of Lorn Abbey.

Before leaving the inn, I had the curiosity to glance over the visitors' book as I waited for my change.

It did not take me long to find the names that I was seeking. At that time of year there were not many arrivals at this riverside village inn, and I had but to turn back a single page to discover that 'Miss Hope and Miss Traill, of London,' had made their first appearance on a date two days ago.

Vaguely, I had felt that the handwriting must tell me something about the character of her who had held the pen. But it was merely a specimen of that neat and rather insipid chirography known as 'back-hand,' and I found myself hoping that Miss Traill, and not Miss Hope, had been responsible for it.

Finding that matters were no further advanced at the postoffice than they had been the night before, and that the original telegraphic message, which was produced at my request, was written in a nondescript, featureless hand, that neither I nor anyone else recognized, I wrote out an advertisement for insertion in the small paper which was published weekly in the town of Witherton, a few miles away, and another, of much the same description, to be hung up in the window of the Martenhead confectioner's shop which did duty as telegraph and postoffice as well.

There were two ways of approaching Lorn Abbey: one from the river, to which the lawn sloped down, and the other by entering at the tall gates, along a winding carriage-
drive a quarter of a mile in length. These gates opened off the highroad from Martenhead, and what remained of the estate was enclosed by, first, a high brick wall, mantled with ivy which had outlasted a dozen generations or more, and, where the meadowlands extended, a tall and straggling holly hedge.

As we passed the empty and desolate-looking porter’s lodge, the clock in the distant tower tolled out the hour of eleven, and Sir Wilfrid remarked it with surprise.

‘Can that be the Abbey clock?’ he asked, rather more by way of an exclamation than a question. ‘Very odd if it is, for who can there be left who is able to wind it? I remember, when I was a boy, listening, with a child’s usual appetite for horrors, to the Lorn Abbey ghost stories of several centuries, and one rather weird tale connected with the invention, by a dead and gone Lord Loveless, of some wonderful clock mechanism, which only certain favored and instructed ones were able to manipulate. I had then the most intense longing to examine the works of the clock, which, however, never was satisfied. I have never even so much as set foot within the gates of Lorn Abbey until this morning, though I have sometimes cast envious eyes upon it in passing on the river. But I verily believe a large part of my desire to possess this ancestral bit of property has sprung from those stories of the clock, eagerly listened to so long ago. Now, if the secret of its machinery has become common property, half my enthusiasm will have evaporated.’

To-day there was no sound of scurrying footsteps or creaking boards to disturb us. The great hall was silent as the grave; but its aspect was more cheerful as the sunshine streamed brightly through the stained-glass window over the stairs.

The plan of the tower comprised a winding stairway which, after circling round for a short distance like a corkscrew, ceased abruptly at the door of a small room, the existence of which prevented any further windings. And be-
yond, the stairs ascended straight and uncompromisingly to a second small door that opened upon the clock and its internal economy.

‘Haven’t I heard that this is the room where the murder was committed?’ Paula asked, with signs of apprehension which I could not help thinking more affected than real, as we all three wound slowly up to the scene of my yesterday’s adventure. ‘You and Uncle Wilfrid must go first. If there’s anything horrid to be seen, I shan’t follow you.’

‘I assure you there’s nothing more dreadful than a great bed, like a catafalque, and a wardrobe with a mirror in which, through the dust, you can dimly see your own frightened face,’ I said, recalling, with a thrill, the apparition that I had seen there not twenty-four hours ago.

I went in as I spoke and pushed open the shutters, which had been closed again by the wind that had raged throughout the night. Uncle Wilfrid followed, but Paula remained hovering on the threshold.

Her bright dark eyes pierced the gloom which still, despite the sunlight outside, brooded over the place like an evil influence, and, suddenly stepping briskly inside, she advanced to the bedside and bent curiously over it.

‘Look there!’ she said to me, pointing at something which lay upon the spectral remains of what had once been a coverlet, now but a dark and flimsy rag with more than one ominous brown stain upon its originally purple groundwork. Among the tumbled folds shone the scarcely-faded petals of a white chrysanthemum.

‘Somebody must have dropped that flower here to-day, or yesterday at farthest,’ Paula went on. Then, with a sharp glance at me: ‘I suppose you came here?’

‘Yes,’ I answered unhesitatingly.

‘And the Mongoose Lady’s friend?’

‘I think Miss Hope had been here before me.’

She picked up the drooping chrysanthemum with a gesture as if she would have tossed it to the far end of the
room, when suddenly she made a dart with the other hand at a small object which had been covered by the flower and its leaves.

'Ah, something else dropped!' she cried. 'I seem to be constituted a "picker-up of unconsidered trifles."' And she held out a tiny brass key. 'Whoever lost the chrysanthemum lost the key as well.'

'You are too sensational, my dear girl,' said Uncle Wilfrid. 'It is a most prosaic, ordinary key to look at. Perhaps it opens the box where Miss Hope—if it be hers—keeps her Paris bonnets.'

'I wonder why men invariably talk about "bonnets," never hats,' soliloquized Paula evasively. 'Well, treasure-trove, you know! I found the key, and I have the right to keep it until the owner claims it, I suppose.'

Two men are very helpless in the management of one woman. And though my uncle and I both watched Paula with a sense of guilty discomfort, we made but feeble protest as she ostentatiously put the little brass key into her purse, among the bits of odds and ends that women delight to keep in that receptacle.

'Shall we go up to look at the works of the clock now?' I asked stiffly, with a return of that almost physical shrinking from her that I had felt the night before.

'No!' she exclaimed commandingly; 'I haven't finished with this room yet. There's a lovely view from the windows up here, and see what a curious little escritoire is fitted into the wall.'

She pulled a lace handkerchief from the pocket of her jaunty, tailor-made coat, and began flicking the dust from a desk, which had evidently been specially made to please the fancy of some former occupant of the tower-room—perhaps for old Hannah Haynes herself. It was small, though the heavy rosewood of which it was fashioned caused it to appear somewhat clumsy. There was a desk-lid which would unfold into a writing-table, and above were a couple
of glass doors, lined with silk, which still looked quite fresh and new. The lid of the desk was not locked, as Paula soon demonstrated by pulling it open, to display a faded and somewhat ink-stained lining of purple leather, a few rusty pens, and other untidy accumulations of an ill-cared-for writing-desk.

' The glass doors are locked,' announced Paula regretfully. 'I wish I could see what is inside. I always want to get at things that are fastened up.'

'Even when they be the property of the dead?' asked Sir Wilfrid a little contemptuously, moving towards the door. But before he had opened it Paula had, as though stirred by a sudden impulse, whipped out her purse again, and was busily fitting in the brass key.

'Paula!' I exclaimed warningly; but I was too late, even if she would have heeded me. The doors opened wide, revealing a couple of shelves, one fitted with empty pigeon-holes, the other containing three or four old leather-bound volumes.

'A memorandum-book,' Paula announced eagerly, 'with entries made in such a queer, old-fashioned handwriting, a "History of Old English Houses," and a Bible. That's all, except——— I wonder what this queer, chart-like paper inside the Bible is? Why, Uncle Wilfrid, the book and the paper both must have belonged to the Amorys. There are ever so many Amory births and marriages written in the Bible, beginning—let me see—with 1692. And at the top of the paper someone has printed with pen and ink, in crazy, faded letters, the words: "The Catechism. What Every Amory Must Know."'

'The Catechism!' I echoed. And the words of the Woman in Grey came back to me: 'In that room, and that room alone, you will be able to learn and profit by—your Catechism.'

A few swift steps had brought Uncle Wilfrid back from the door to Paula's side.
‘What! the “Amory Catechism” here?’ he ejaculated, his voice expressing more surprise and excitement than mine had done. ‘I can’t think how it can have got here, unless——’ He checked himself suddenly. ‘Let me see it,’ he went on, ‘and the Bible, too, my dear.’
CHAPTER VI.

‘FROM THE EVIL ONE AND THE MONK.’

‘Not until you have told me what you meant to say after that “unless,”’ protested Paula, allowing him to hold out his hand for the book and the paper in vain.

‘I was going to say, “unless it had been stolen.”’ But I thought that would be hardly fair,’ Sir Wilfrid responded. And Paula gave him the leather-covered volume, with the ‘Catechism’ folded inside.

‘It must be nearly thirty years ago,’ he continued, as he examined the binding and title-page of the book, ‘that a great hue and cry was made by my wife’s brother—my second cousin, Hugh Amory, who was an enthusiastic book-lover—over the disappearance of a Caxton Bible, greatly valued by him for its own sake, naturally, and also because the “Amory Catechism,” as it is called, had been laid away for safe keeping between its pages. I heard it talked of in my club, and saw the Bible advertised for in a number of papers, with the offer of a large reward. But I am sure it was never found, or I should have heard of it, at the time Hugh Amory’s library was sold to help pay off his debts. Here, however, is the book, without the slightest doubt in the world; and here, also, is the “Amory Catechism.”’

I think, for the moment, not only had my uncle forgotten his desire to see the works of the big clock, but even the disappointment inflicted upon him by the vanishing of Miss Hope. He had also forgiven Paula her unwarrantable pry-
ing into other people's belongings, for the sake of what she had discovered.

He laid the Bible down, and spread out the 'Catechism.'

'Here lies all that is left of a family mystery—and tragedy,' said Sir Wilfrid reflectively, smoothing out with his hand the creases in the parchment, as it lay upon the writing-table.

Only a few vaguely-defined lines, which might have represented an unfinished plan of some part of a building, and beneath a set of questions and answers, conveying very little sense to the mind of the uninitiated. Half to myself I began to read them over aloud:

"'Where had it lain?"
"'In the depths."
"'By what right was it raised?"
"'The right of possession."
"'From whom was it wrested?"
"'The Evil One and the Monk."
"'Whose shall it be?"
"'The Amorys', now and henceforth."
"'When may the secret be told?"
"'When the limit of disaster is at an end."
"'Where may it then be found?"
"'When the hour is right that which is green shall move, and the shining of light may reveal the way."
"'Does the way tend upward or down?"
"'First the one, then the other, as the chart directs."

'So far as I can see, there's neither rhyme nor reason in the words!' I exclaimed at last. 'What is the explanation or key to it all?'

'That is what nobody has ever been able to find out,' Uncle Wilfrid responded. 'And yet every male member of the Lorn Abbey branch of the Amorys has learned this rigmarole by heart on his twenty-first birthday, if not before; or, at least, so it was until the place was sold and the family broken up. I don't know if the old custom is still continued.'
He sighed heavily, with that sad, introspective look in the eyes that was so familiar to me. For Uncle Wilfrid's wife had been his second cousin, and a daughter of that branch of the Amorys of which he spoke. And it was the trouble which had come between the two that had caused a family estrangement, lasting over twenty years. Never had I heard him allude to it so directly as he had twice done to-day.

'I can't understand generation after generation of rational men being so besotted with a worn-out and senseless superstition,' I commented.

'It wasn't precisely superstition,' my uncle said. 'I'm rather surprised that you've never happened to hear me, or someone else, mention the "Amory Catechism." You see, the date at the top of the paper, among all these faded flourishes of pen and ink, is 1651, and the initials beneath the list of questions and answers are "R. V. A." The "Catechism" was written out by a certain Robert Victor Amory, Lord Loveless, a friend of King Charles I., who escaped imprisonment or death during the troubles between Royalists and Parliament only because he was believed by Oliver Cromwell to be mad. He it was who caused this tower to be built, and who invented the mechanism of the clock—said to be so remarkable. But, mad or sane, his will was not disputed on his disappearance and supposed death a few weeks after the Restoration, leaving his wealth very justly divided among his sons, with the sole proviso that they and their heirs should commit to memory the "Catechism" which he had composed. Thus it came about that all the heirs who followed have learned it—up to those in my generation, at least. And when this old parchment vanished with the Bible, Hugh Amory was naturally greatly distressed.'

'It looks very much,' I said, 'as though Mrs. Haynes must have taken both, during her reign as housekeeper at Lorn Abbey; though what possible value she could have placed upon the parchment I can't imagine. As for the
Bible, she might have realized a large sum if she could have managed to dispose of it without having the theft traced to her. But surely the "Catechism" would not have been worth the trouble of stealing?"

As I thus pronounced my opinion, certain words spoken yesterday rang again in my ears.

'If you are a man who thinks, you can make better use of your time than searching for drowned monks or sunken treasure. I hold the end of the skein. What will you give for a clue?'

Was it possible that in this piece of yellow parchment lay that 'clue,' if I only knew how to use it aright.

Suddenly the 'Amory Catechism' assumed a larger importance in my eyes.

'We are waiting yet to hear in what way this thing represents "all that remains of a tragedy and a mystery,"' Paula said, her voice jarring a little upon my reflections.

'Oh!'—evidently Uncle Wilfrid had also been roused from a brown-study—'didn't I tell you? The composing of this "Catechism," of which Lord Loveless used to boast in a vague way to everyone he met, was thought to have been a proof of his growing madness. His hobby regarding the clock was a secondary one, in some way seeming to connect itself in his mind with the "Catechism," which he was always writing and re-writing. At last, this parchment copy, with the unfinished and unexplained plan, as you see it, was found, with the ink fresh upon it, in this very room, which he made use of as a study; and the writer was never seen again. Search was made for him in vain, and at last, as he was supposed, without doubt, to have taken his own life in some mad way, the heirs were permitted to avail themselves of the property left among them by his will. Therefore the "Catechism" has always been accounted to have had its share in the mystery.'

'What shall we do with it now that we have found it?' Paula asked.
'Hugh Amory is dead,' said my uncle sadly, 'and we three are the nearest relations left. What to do with the book and the parchment I scarcely know, but for the present I shall take charge of them.'

'And the key?' smiled Paula. 'I still claim that as mine; and, oh, how you would both open your eyes if I should tell you (which I won't) what use I mean to make of it!'
CHAPTER VII.

IN THE DARK.

'It was sweet of you all to come, especially you, dear Sir Wilfrid, when you are so busy with that learned book of yours. Of course, I was delighted to have you bring your secretary, Mr. Jerome—isn't that his name? Only you mustn't work too hard and seclude yourself from us all while you're at Hazelmout.

'Miss Wynne, my dear, the three years we've spent abroad have only made you lovelier; and as for you, Terry, you great overgrown young giant, you! I mustn't tell you how handsome I think you, or you'll be vainer than you already are.'

Thus, Lady Towers, who had been plain Mrs. Tom Towers when we had seen her last: she was little; she was voluble; she spoke in italics; she wrote novels, and somehow got them published; and she and her stout, red, good-natured husband (who had known Sir Wilfrid long ago at Oxford, and had achieved knighthood successfully by painting portraits of royalty) adored Upper Bohemia, and continually called its best-known representatives around them.

They were not of our set, though we had known them more or less well since my early recollection; their intimates we only saw on the stage, heard in the concert-hall, or read between the covers of 'smart' novels. In fact, since Mr. Thomas Towers had become Sir Thomas, and taken his wife on a tour round the world, we had not seen them at all until to-day. Lately they had bought a place in Surrey, sold with
various other effects of a bankrupt lord, and now an invita-
tion for a few days' visit had come to us as a surprise. Per-
haps Sir Thomas and Lady Towers would not have been
wholly flattered could they have divined our various, and
yet united, motives for accepting it.

My uncle had not explained his to me, but I had needed
no explanation. He was not fond of society, and seldom
went out, save to a little dinner of intimate friends, or a
'first night' at the Lyceum—the one theatre he patronized.
But for the past week he had changed his tactics, and I
understood why.

He had been everywhere—for invitations were never lack-
ing, even out of the season—but nowhere had he seen the
face which had been his lode-star. I knew this, because I
had accompanied him, trying always to convince myself that
I did so for his sake alone, and because he was fond of
having me with him.

He had come to Hazelmount now for three or four days
(in the midst of so great a press of work that he had been
obliged to ask permission to bring his secretary with him),
because he hoped that, in a house-party recruited from a set
unknown to him, he might find the woman he had failed to
meet elsewhere.

I had come because I had some little private hopes of my
own, not absolutely unconnected with my uncle's, and
because, secondly, he had made a point of my doing so.

As for Paula, she had never been fond of poor Sir
Thomas and Lady Towers. The latter she had snubbed
more than once in old days, often likening her to a poodle,
with her near-sighted eyes peering out between the falling
masses of grey curls on either side the thin little face. Paula
thought herself too good for Upper Bohemia, and had
nothing in common with its inmates. Still, she had refused
one or two other invitations to accompany us to Hazel-
mount, having previously attempted to dissuade Sir Wilfrid
from going; and it had not needed her hint to me that she
intended to keep her uncle under surveillance to acquaint me with her motive.

It was, therefore, indirectly, the last words of the Woman in Grey which had brought us all three, to say nothing of Mr. Jerome, to the big country-house in Surrey.

'Such weather for you to have come down in!' rambled on Lady Towers, as we stood in the drawing-room during the mauvais quart d'heure before dinner. 'There seems something almost uncanny about it, doesn't there? I, for one, am superstitious enough to be rather frightened.'

It was, indeed, the sort of weather which a poet or a fanatic might fancy as heralding the 'end of the world.'

I had always, since childhood, experienced an odd, inexplicable depression in a thunderstorm, and to-night I was acutely miserable. It is possible that, had the glamour of Miss Hope's wonderful face shone upon me, and brightened the otherwise disappointing assemblage, the electric current might not thus have twanged upon my nerves like a bow upon a fiddle which is cracked and out of tune.

But she was not there. And as this was Saturday, exactly a week since the day when she had vanished almost as mysteriously as she had appeared, it was clear that her promise had been but an empty one, after all.

There was a Mrs. Lord-Lorton, who, according to Lady Towers, had written that 'delightfully shocking book, "A Whited Sepulchre," which had run through ten editions in a year.'

There was her husband—'such a wonderful amateur conjurer; quite equal to any professional.' There was Mr. Fitzroy Dermot, the handsome tenor, the idol of stage-struck girls. And there was the authoress of 'A Fly in Amber'—'such a clever American, known as the "Amber Witch," because of her book.' Of course we must have read it. Everyone had done that. For a wonder, we had.

I had called my uncle's attention to the book a few months before, and we had not forgotten it. Disappointed in our
one keen though unexpressed hope, our drooping spirits slightly revived at the prospect of meeting the woman whose strange, simply-written little story had fascinated and haunted us. But not even in this desire, it seemed, were we to be gratified, for the American authoress was ill and confined to her room.

In the frankly Bohemian household at Hazelmount the ladies did not leave the men to linger alone over the dinner-table, but remained with them, talking nonsense and smoking, or pretending to smoke, gold-tipped Turkish cigarettes.

I had taken in Mrs. Lord-Lorton, a good-looking woman of a certain age, but her epigrammatic utterances rang false in my unappreciative ears.

I was relieved when, at about ten o'clock, Lady Towers rose, and we all proceeded to follow her out of the dining-room into the large square hall. Opposite, twenty feet or so distant, were the wide-hanging portières of tapestry, which hid the drawing-room from our eyes, and curtained the space where a pair of great double doors once had been.

As a matter of course, our destination was the drawing-room. Talking and lingering a little by the way, we were slowly approaching the hidden doorway, when our progress was suddenly arrested by the failure of the many brilliant electric lights, of which Sir Thomas had been good-naturedly boasting but half an hour before.

At the same instant the whole house quivered with a reverberation of thunder, which might have exploded in the cellar under our feet. There was a little half-awestruck, half-laughing outcry from the women of the party, and then a listening silence fell.

We were in total darkness, save for a faint glow from the mass of red ashes in the hall fireplace, and a baleful ruby spark which shot from a pair of great, slanting crimson eyes, in a hanging Indian lamp, fashioned to represent the head of a huge idol.

There was a slight rustling noise just beyond the group
which we had involuntarily formed as the lights went out, and a quick rasping of the brass rings along the rod supporting the portières. Though we could see nothing, we became aware that the curtains had been parted. The fire which we had thankfully anticipated was dead, and a chill outer air swept remorselessly across our faces and the uncovered necks of the women like an unfriendly breeze.

A still blacker space yawned between the lately opened portières, unrelieved by the smallest ray from the lamp or hearth-stone.

As the wind paused, sobbing, there came to our ears the wild, sweet wail of an Æolian harp; and far away, as though visible at the remotest end of the long drawing-room, a single spot of white, shimmering radiance commenced to grow.

At first a few drifting particles like sparkling snowflakes eddied to and fro, and then, as we stood wrapt in astonished silence, out of the pale, uncertain glimmer, fancy or reality began to show us the semblance of a human form.

A misty, indefinable cloud, developing into the distinctness of classic drapery, rose, straight, and white, and severe as a shroud.

Underneath was visible a more solid roundness, as if the soft folds concealed a human form. Then, in the midst of the strange appearance began a fluttering—a confused waving of two small, birdlike objects back and forth. This ceased, and a pair of hands, lightly clasped together, were plainly to be seen.

Still the presentment grew, gently rising from the ground (like smoke which freezes into partial solidity as it moves), until the body of an exquisitely formed woman seemed to float, moonlike, out of the surrounding gloom. The figure, clothed in white clinging garments, which bespitted a revivified corpse or a ghost, was veiled with a cloud of pale, gleaming hair that covered the face and descended in rippling disorder below the waist.
For a second it was motionless, save for a slight swaying, as though a lily were disturbed by a breeze; and then, with a quick, unexpected lifting of the hands, the masses of waving hair were swept suddenly away from the face, and a pair of eyes flashed out like rich, dark jewels.

I had not needed the revelation of the features; for the left hand in its sheath of pearls had told me its own story of identity.

My uncle, who had passed out of the dining-room a little before me, stood close at hand. I knew that our shoulders had touched just before the lights went out, and I was sure that it was he, and no other, who gave that great start of astonishment and recognition as the parting masses of hair revealed the face which certainly had been uppermost in his thoughts for so many days.

A quick pang of anxiety for him shot through me, for I remembered his swoon of the week before, and involuntarily I put out my arm to support him if necessary. As I did so, in a flash, the white figure, blooming lily-like in the dark, was gone—completely blotted out; and while we still strained our eyes after it, the electric lights shone forth again all around us.

We were once more simply a commonplace party of men and women in evening-dress, grouped together in the large, well-warmed, brightly-lighted hall of an ordinary country-house. We seemed suddenly to have been set free from witchland, with the mocking cries of our late weird captors still echoing back to us on the storm.

We all turned and looked at each other. If not my first, at least my second thought was for Uncle Wilfrid. He was pale, but he was smiling conventionally down upon Lady Towers, who stood close beside him, and whose little bobbing grey curls reached scarcely to his shoulder.

‘Didn’t they do it well?’ she was asking of everybody. ‘Really, Mrs. Lord-Lorton, I must congratulate you upon your clever husband. That was better than any professional
conjuring trick I ever saw, and I'm sure everyone will agree with me. Dear Consuelo, too—didn't she make a charming spirit? Consuelo! Amber Witch!—calling loudly—'come out and let us see you in the flesh!'

The portières had fallen over the drawing-room doors again; but once more the rings slipped along the rod, this time to show a lighted interior, with Mr. Lord-Lorton and his accomplice standing smiling and bowing side by side as though responding to a 'recall' upon the stage.

Uncle Wilfrid and several others passed in, and I heard exclamings and questionings—heard Mr. Lord-Lorton volubly explaining the mechanism of his clever trick; and still I stood in the hall, something within me holding me back from giving my greeting, or pressing the fellow of that white hand gloved in pearls.

I retreated to a retired corner of the hall, where I sat down on an Oriental divan, half sunk in many-colored silken cushions.

Hidden in the shadows, I sat brooding, when a crisp sound of satin skirts, silk-lined, trailing across the inlaid floor, caused me to lift my eyes. It was Paula who advanced along the hall, and I would have risen, supposing she had come in search of me, when she stopped short, evidently waiting for something—or somebody.

In another instant a slim, undersized young man, with drenched hair matted around a pale, sickly face, came suddenly out from a narrow, dim passage which led away from the main hall. His grey tweed travelling-coat was drenched, and in the bright electric light I could see drops of water glistening on his cheeks and forehead.

'Well—well—what news have you?' Paula ejaculated eagerly yet imperiously.

'For Heaven's sake, Miss Wynne, give me one moment in which to recover myself,' stammered my uncle's secretary—for it was he—'before you ask me to tell you anything. I've met with an experience out there—pointing a thin hand in
the direction from which he had come—that has unnerved me. What sort of house is this Hazelmount? Do they keep wild animals about the place?"

'Perhaps you mean a mongoose?' said Paula scornfully.

'No, Miss Wynne; I'm telling you the truth. I mean something dangerous.'

It did not occur to me that Paula and Jerome could have anything of a secret nature to discuss.

True, I was aware that in idle moments she had condescended to bestow a coquettish glance or two upon him; but Paula flirted with every man, and it was probably the greatest pleasure in Jerome's life to fetch and carry for Miss Wynne.

He had pleaded a headache, and had not appeared at dinner, as he had been cordially urged to do by Lady Towers, and if I had thought of him at all I should have supposed him to be recruiting for to-morrow's work in his own room.

Yet here he was, breathless, hatless, stammering with an emotion very like physical terror. I had never been able to like the fellow, but now I did feel somewhat curious as to his unusual condition.

It scarcely seemed necessary to make an obtrusive announcement of my presence. In fact, to do so would be something in the nature of a tacit affront to Paula, who could not possibly have anything to say to her uncle's secretary which all the world might not stand by and hear.

'What are you talking about?' she questioned irritably. 'You look as though you had gone mad!'

'I believe I have had a very narrow escape from death,' he answered, rather more steadily than before. 'You know what excuse I made to get away and do your errand. I slipped out when everyone must have thought me in my room, and—'

'Oh, Mr. Jerome, pray come to the point,' interrupted Paula. 'Have you brought me back any letter?'
'Yes, Miss Wynne, I have.'

'And the news?'

'You will think it of vital importance. But I—I—forbear me, Miss Wynne, I am ill—not feigning now. The letter—I will give you. If—if you could ring for a little brandy for me—everything seems going round.'

He put up one small womanish hand to his head, and then both went out gropingly as if to save himself from a fall. Wheeling half round, his face was turned to me, and I could see that it was ghastly white. Helplessly he clutched at Paula's sleeve, and I heard the rending of stitches and delicate chiffon; but, instead of supporting the slight, swaying figure, Paula made an involuntary start away from him.

I sprang up from my divan, and with a few quick strides had reached the place where they stood. But I was too late. Jerome had tottered backward, and, easily losing his balance on the slippery and polished floor, had fallen heavily, striking his head with a crashing thud.

The noise of the fall and the cry of alarm from Paula's lips brought everyone troop ing out from the drawing-room.

Lady Towers was not a woman to take matters quietly. Wherever she was there was an atmosphere of fussy excitement. Bells were rung, servants sent flying hither and thither for salts and cold water to dash in the face of the fainting man, and brandy to force between his pallid lips. No one could understand what had happened, or why Mr. Jerome, who was supposed to be temporarily an invalid, had ventured to leave his room.

'I met him just coming in, very wet and strange-looking,' exclaimed Paula innocently. 'It was so warm in the music-room, and I had come out here for a moment. Then, when I saw Mr. Jerome passing, I asked him if he were better. He said he had been out of doors for a little walk and some fresh air, which he thought would help his head; but something had happened to him, something which seemed to have
frightened him very much. I thought at first he might have seen Mr. Lord-Lorton’s ghost, which, really, you know, though so clever and amusing, was enough to have sent anyone with weak nerves into a fit. But it was not that. He tried to explain, stammering out a few words about having seen some animal, some dangerous animal, and thinking he had narrowly escaped from it with his life. In the midst of his story, however, he began asking me to ring for brandy, and before I could do anything he had fainted away. Of course, that about the “animal” must have been all nonsense, unless you keep a fierce dog wandering about the place at night, Lady Towers.’

‘Good gracious, no!’ exclaimed the little woman. ‘No fierce dogs at all; but oh, Tom! do you think it possible that the poor man could have seen that dreadful creature we were warned about this morning?’

‘Oh, dear Lady Towers! surely you don’t mean the tiger—the tiger that escaped from the Barnes’ place yesterday?’ cried Mrs. Lord-Lorton.

‘It certainly does not seem improbable,’ said Sir Thomas with a grave face. ‘I wish the poor chap would come to himself and tell us what he thought he saw.’

‘I’m sure we had better not wait any longer, Lady Towers,’ Paula interpolated quickly and anxiously, ‘but have him carried at once to his room.’

Even as she spoke Jerome opened his eyes.

‘The—letter!’ he stammered in a thick, unnatural voice.

‘Where is—’

‘Tell us what it was you saw that startled you so.’ Again Paula spoke out sharply.

‘A little more brandy, if you please,’ faltered Jerome. ‘Thank you. I—my head is very queer, but I remember—it was close outside the house—only a few yards down the avenue. I—I’d been walking fast, and stopped for a minute to take breath. Suddenly I smelt something strange and pungent. It was like the odor in the tiger-houses at the Zoo
more than anything else. The thought of the last time I had been there came back to me in an instant, though it was years ago. I kept still, for I heard something breathing close to me, short and hard, and when I looked round I could see a thing, darker than the darkness, moving close by, among the trees at the end of the avenue, and I stared straight into a pair of eyes that glowed like two red-hot coals. I gave a shout, and whether that kept it away from me I can't tell, for I hadn't time to think again before I was inside the house, coming in through that little door at the end of the long passage there which opens on the lawn and slamming it after me. That's all, except the letter, Miss Wynne, and I——'

'I don't think poor Mr. Jerome half knows what he is talking about yet,' ejaculated Paula. 'You want to be taken to your room, and have cooling bandages put on your head, I'm sure, don't you?'

'Yes—oh yes! My head is very bad. I have a feeling as though something had snapped—inside!'

Forthwith he was assisted to his feet by two stalwart footmen, almost twice his size, and so, supported firmly under each drooping arm, he was borne away in the midst of a little procession.

As they moved him, a folded sheet of paper fluttered from his coat to the floor, and I, being nearest to the spot, stooped and picked it up. So doing, without the slightest intention of reading words not intended for my eyes, part of a sentence, written in a large, bold, clerkly hand, seemed suddenly to separate itself from those surrounding it on the page which was uppermost and print itself upon my consciousness: 'I have been able to ascertain that the woman now passing under the name of Consuelo Hope is——'

My blood leaped with contending emotions: anger against Paula and Jerome, surprise and disgust, as a flood of enlightenment regarding the errand on which the secretary had been sent poured into my mind, and above all an overween-
ing desire to turn the page and read the remainder of the sentence.

'Isn't that the letter which poor Mr. Jerome appeared to be so anxious about?' Paula inquired. 'At least he has dropped it, and as I am going to my own room I will get my maid to leave it at his door.'

Without a word I gave her the letter, and she hurried away with it at once. I hesitated momentarily; but, deciding that it would be impossible for me to play the hypocrite, and go to inquire civilly after Jerome's state of health, I slowly followed the others into the pretty music-room.

It was charming, if somewhat conventional, with its musicians' gallery, its big piano, its plenitude of Indian ornaments and hangings, and I entered with a sense of having awakened from an unpleasant dream.

'I was just going to find you,' spoke Lady Towers' voice inside the door. 'I'm sure the poor little secretary will be better presently. Sir Thomas has sent three or four men skirmishing with guns all over the place, in case that dreadful beast may still be lingering about; and another man has gone to Barnes, the person from whom the thing escaped. You see, he's a menagerie proprietor, and keeps his animals on his own place in the winter. I do hope, after this, there'll be an indignation meeting, and he won't be allowed to menace the neighborhood with such a danger any more.

'By the way, you haven't been introduced to our "Amber Witch"—Miss Hope? Isn't "Amber Witch" a good name for her? See, there she is at the piano, with the light falling over her. Sir Thomas has asked her to sing.'

'We have met before. Didn't she tell you?' I questioned.

'She did speak of knowing Sir Wilfrid slightly. In fact, it was she who suggested—— But, dear me! I promised not to mention that. I mean, of course, I was not to let Sir Wilfrid know, when I asked you all down, that she was here. She wanted that to be a surprise, even going so far as to plead illness—I dare say because she and Mr. Lord-Lorton
(they've been here for nearly a week, you know) were planning to get up that spiritualistic trick for to-night. Mr. Lord-Lorton has performed such wonders for us every evening that we've quite grown to look for something novel always. But I'm sure this has been the climax. He can do nothing more remarkable.'

She paused, perhaps expecting an answer, but so absorbed was I in gazing at Miss Hope as she seated herself at the piano, smiling up at Mr. Fitzroy Dermot, that I forgot to speak.

'You are thinking of poor Mr. Jerome, or wondering if an escaped tiger is still prowling round the house,' went on Lady Towers. 'Come, don't look so grave! Let us listen to the Amber Witch when she sings.'

As we moved nearer, Miss Hope looked up and met my eyes, the pink-shaded candles on the piano illuminating her face.

She smiled faintly, and began softly playing, without notes, some plaintive little melody which I had never heard before. Then she began to sing, in a contralto voice so rich and thrilling that its sweetness ran through my veins with the warmth of newly-drunk wine. It was Vivien's song to Merlin, 'Trust me not at all, or all in all;' and as she sang she never removed her eyes from mine. To others she would merely have appeared to be gazing straight before her, between the lights on the piano; but I knew that she saw only me, that for me was the message of the song, for me the mystic smile hovering on the lovely lips. And as I stood, absorbed by her, forgetting everything—everyone—in the world save the Amber Witch and the magic of her eyes, the secret of my own heart was suddenly laid bare before me. It was as though a burning simoon had swept across my naked soul, shrivelling and scorching with its breath of fire.

This woman—angel or devil—had had the power to teach me a new meaning in life—the meaning of Love.
I was bound to marry my cousin, Paula Wynne; but I loved this other with all my heart and soul and mind. And a week ago I had been ignorant of her existence.

As the liquid notes fell, jewel-like, from the sweet, curved lips, the soft eyes half warning, half entreatling me, I could have cast myself on my knees at her feet, and kissed the white robe that hid them with its folds.

I had lived nine-and-twenty years. I had known something of happiness and sorrow, and I had felt the joy of life throbbing through my vigorous body. But the emotions of my past seemed to lie far in the background, grouped along the distant horizon like dwarfed and insignificant hillocks. This—this new and overpowering sensation towered before my dizzy sight as a mountain bathed in the exquisite radiance of sunrise—a sunrise for me alone.

Then, as my heart beat loudly in my own ears, the song ceased—the roseate light went out. I saw myself a traitor to Paula, to myself, and to the man who had been to me more than a father.

People were congratulating Miss Hope, and saying pretty conventional things to her about her singing. It had all passed within a space of five minutes, but I could not realize the briefness of the episode. I seemed to have lived years since I had been bidden by that wonderful voice to ‘trust all in all, or not at all.’ I had met and grappled with a great life crisis. I had been worsted in the battle, and left weak, remorseful, utterly miserable, and desperately happy at the same moment.

As she finished singing my uncle came into the music-room. Probably he had been standing just outside the door, waiting until his entrance might be made without disturbing singer or listeners. But he had heard. I knew that from his face, as he went to her and said something, bending low. Paula, too, had come in again, and, though she had no word of admiration for Miss Hope’s performance, she applauded loudly when Mr. Fitzroy Dermot had sung an air from some
popular light opera. Afterwards I saw them talking together over a pile of music in a corner.

Three words of thrilling portent rang in my ears, echoing and re-echoing: 'I love her! I love her! I love her!' over and over again.

I could hear nothing else. I saw nothing distinctly save the vision still painted on my retina. The exquisite face, with the pinky light upon it, the speaking eyes, and the lips parted with their song.

What I did I scarcely know, though I have a dim recollection of wandering to a distant table and sitting down to a mechanical turning over of the leaves of a gorgeously-bound visitors' book.

I was roused from a long reverie, half pain, half pleasure, by a voice close beside me.

'Lady Towers sent me over here to find Madame Patti's autograph for you. And she thinks Mary Anderson's is on the same page.'

As I looked up, and rose quickly to my feet, I fear I must have blushed like a schoolboy detected in some piece of mischief, so conscious was I of the crisis I had gone through, so fearful of betraying my feelings.

'Don't get up, for I am going to sit down here by you,' said the Amber Witch. 'Lady Towers is very proud of this book. It seems she has made all the celebrities who ever came to see her write in it, for many and many a year,' the girl went on, in a smilingly didactic manner, which, perhaps, cloaked a faint embarrassment, responsive to mine. 'I found Sir Wilfrid Amory there, but not—not you.'

'I am nobody,' I said, trying to feel, as well as appear, at ease, and succeeding in doing neither.

'Then nobodies must take up a good deal of room in the world. For you are very big, aren't you? I liked walking beside you the other night, because you made me feel so delightfully little. I'm tired of towering over men—in fact, of looking down on them. One could never look down on you!'
We were both endeavoring spasmodically to 'make' conversation, and her very embarrassment thrilled me with a delicious sense that my presence had the power of disturbing her serene self-control. Or, perhaps—I told myself suspiciously, even then—she merely assumed her confusion for a purpose.

'Shall I find your name in the book?' I questioned.

'Yes, if you take the trouble to look.'

Silently I searched the pages, and discovered it presently, with a distinct shock of disappointment. It was the same characterless, prim 'back-hand' I had seen in the hotel book at Martenhead, and desired to attribute to the companion rather than the mistress.

'You don't like my poor scrawl, I can see,' she said; and, though she spoke playfully, there was an inflection in her voice and an expression in her eyes which told me that, for some reason, she had attached a certain importance to my opinion of her handwriting.

'You were surprised to find me here?' she asked, when I had turned the page.

'I hardly know. The hint you gave my uncle at Martenhead has caused us to be a little gayer in a social way than we would otherwise have been. We have continually been expecting to meet you, and allowing ourselves to be disappointed when we didn't. But your first appearance this evening was slightly—or—disconcerting, to say the least.'

She laughed. 'Ah! I have a dramatic instinct.'

'You have indeed.'

'That sounds like a reproach. But I hope you don't mean it. Perhaps it did seem rather a vulgarly lurid exhibition; but Mr. Lord-Lorton tempted me. He was telling me the other night about this trick of his, which, it seems, he has often successfully performed, and he flattered me by saying that I would be a very able assistant. Well, that put the idea into my head. It occurred to me that it might be decidedly entertaining to—to—in stage parlance—'make an effective
entrance.” And I did, didn’t I? It was all for your uncle’s amusement. You ought to thank me.

‘Is “amusement” precisely the right word?’

‘Why not? But you look as though you would like to lecture me. Let us talk of something else, pray. That escaped tiger, for instance. Who knows but its baleful eyes may be glaring at us through that half-curtained window over there? Ugh!’

‘If you give me the choice,’ I said, ‘I should much prefer to talk of you—the “Lady,” and not the “Tiger.” I was surprised, if you like, to hear that you were an American, and the writer of a story which is among the few I shall never forget.’

‘Thank you. I can easily understand why you might be surprised that I had written anything. That’s not a compliment, is it? But why were you surprised to be told that I was an American?’

‘Because you neither look nor speak like one.’

‘Oh, that is a superstition! Take Miss Traill, for instance. Would you suppose her to be an American?’

‘She might be almost anything,’ I returned grimly.

‘Oh, I wonder how you mean that? It’s a pity she isn’t here to question you. But I gave her a little holiday. She has relatives in—in some outlying county. And she has gone to them for a few days with the precious mongoose.’

I replied with some courteous murmur, no vaguest presentiment in my mind of the way in which I should make acquaintance with those relatives of Miss Traill’s.

‘But you,’ I went on boldly—‘is it true that you are an American?’

‘Do you doubt Lady Towers’ word? She and I met in New York a year ago. We’ve been great friends ever since—that is, as one has friends in society. I have only one real friend in England, or perhaps in the world; probably you will meet him one day.’

A pang of jealousy shot through my heart.
There are so many questions I would ask you if I could—if I dared,' I said quickly. 'They begin with a white chrysanthemum.'

'Ah! do you regard that flower as a key to a riddle?' she asked, with an emphasis which, in telling me a part of that which I wished to know, only pricked my eager curiosity the more keenly. 'Well, it may be that in the future I shall have time to answer many of your questions, provided only you put them in the right way; but in the meantime don't forget the song I sang just now to you—and to the others.'

Forget the song? I knew that it would be better for me if I could do so—and the revelation which had come to me with the singing of it. I could scarcely keep my lips from speaking out the thought. But, by an effort, I was silent, and she continued in an odd, half-pleading way:

'Do you remember my saying last Friday to Sir Wilfrid Amory that perhaps, one day, I should have a very great favor to ask him? Well, I have asked it to-night—only a few moments ago in the conservatory. And the scent of the flowers was so friendly and persuasive that unconsciously he was influenced by them, and induced to say "Yes." Last week I—I didn't dream, of course, that I should have an opportunity of asking him so soon. But most things come to one unexpectedly, I have found. Haven't you?'

'Yes—of late,' I was drawn to admit in a low voice.

'And Sir Wilfrid was most kind. He has promised that while he is here—while his secretary is unable to work—I shall be allowed to assist him. And then, later, he is thinking, it seems, of giving Mr. Jerome a holiday. If he does so, I am to be secretary pro tem. Now, at all events, I have surprised you.'

'You have done nothing else from the first moment I beheld you.'

'But now? You are not—displeased? It would not vex you, or—Miss Wynne, that Miss Traill and I should be, for
a time, guests in your uncle's house, fellow-inmates with yourselves?—for it would, of course, amount to that.'

She rested her lovely dimpled elbow on the table, her chin in the rosy hollow of her right hand, and gazed steadily up into my face. I wondered desperately if she realized and counted upon her own power over me.

I knew not what to answer, and for a moment I was dumb. 'Please tell me,' she said childishly.

'I—I can answer for myself that it would be a great delight,' I stammered. But even as I spoke I told myself that, with the knowledge of my own heart, which this night had given me, it would be impossible for me to remain, day after day, under the same roof with her, and—my affianced wife. Some excuse must be made. While this extraordinary contract between my infatuated uncle and the woman who—in seven days—had made herself mistress of my life was being carried out, I must find a home for myself other than Sir Wilfrid's house. But that arrangement might be waived for the present, and considered later.

'You cannot answer for—Miss Wynne?'

'How could that be possible?'

'I know,' Miss Hope went on, with a new meekness, 'that she doesn't like me. It has not been difficult to see that. Why should she like me? And yet, why need she be angry? I should do her and her prospects no harm. I shouldn't interfere with her in any way. You—and she may think that I am not in earnest about really working for Sir Wilfrid. You may think that I don't know how, and that my desire is simply to visit in the house of a great man, and become intimate with his family. But I swear to you, Mr. Darkmore, that, whatever my motive may be, it is nothing so vulgar, nothing so sordid as that. I should not have dared to propose this idea to your uncle, even for the little time that he is to be here, with a secretary who is ill, and unable to assist him, if—if I hadn't written "A Fly in Amber," and he hadn't read and liked the poor little book. Not that I
boast of it as an achievement; but at least it can go to prove that I am not an actual ignoramus; that I have the average intellect. And your uncle, Sir Wilfrid Amory, has no great political secrets in his keeping just now which he would be afraid to trust to a woman. Besides, in America I was once, for three or four weeks, private secretary to the Senator for Louisiana, the State in which I had lived. I was a friend of his wife’s, and I stayed at their house in Washington. So, you see, I have had practical experience, and it was my own fault that I didn’t hold the position longer. Oh, I mean that the next few days shall prove that I can work!'

We had been absolutely absorbed in each other. She in me, because she wished to convince me, to win me to her side of her own argument; I in her, because I had simply forgotten that there was any other woman in the world. And therefore Lady Towers’ voice came upon us with a sense of sudden awakening.

‘Those men have got back,’ she said, ‘the men who were sent out in chase of the tiger. Fancy a tiger-hunt in one’s own private park, in the heart of Surrey! They’ve been beating about everywhere, but not a trace could they find, much less the tiger itself. So I think we are safe for to-night, at any rate. And perhaps, you know, poor Mr. Jerome, not being very well, might have imagined the whole thing. Maybe he had heard the story, and if he had, why, in the darkness, and rain and wind, one might easily imagine every bush to be a tiger—or an elephant, for the matter of that. And besides, Mr. Barnes, the menagerie man, believes he has got news of the beast ten or fifteen miles away. I thought I would come and tell you, to save you from bad dreams to-night. And ten chances to one the horrid thing will be recaptured by to-morrow.’

‘Do you know, I rather envy Mr. Jerome that tiger of his,’ laughed Miss Hope.
CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT I SAW THROUGH THE WINDOW OVER THE STAIRS.

Our second day at Hazelmount passed for me like a troubled dream.

In the morning, Paula quarrelled with her uncle over the arrangement he and Miss Hope had made for work together. My peacemaking attempts were ill received by her, and she delighted in distressing me by vague threats of a forthcoming revenge.

At luncheon there was a good deal of bantering talk over the 'Amber Witch's' new situation. She had been doing some splendid work for him, Uncle Wilfrid announced, and was even more highly competent than he had fancied.

As he thus spoke, I saw her give him a quick, almost pathetically-appealing glance across the table. She was paler than usual, and there were faint blue shadows under her eyes. I had not the opportunity—even if I would have taken it—to exchange a word with her on the subject; but I was convinced by that look which passed between them that the quarrel with Paula had only placed Miss Hope and Uncle Wilfrid upon a more confidential footing than before.

* So much, and no more, had Paula yet been able to accomplish. True to her threat, she did not speak to her uncle. Once during luncheon, and again at dinner that evening, he addressed her, but on both occasions she feigned not to hear, without attracting any general attention to their estrangement.

It was intended that on the following morning we should
have some shooting, the weather being crisp, with a light frost; and after dinner I, with all the other men, adjourned to the gun-room. It was on the ground-floor, with a door opening upon the lawn, and another into the hall, close to the foot of a stairway, in the main portion of the house. Half-way down these stairs a small window had been cut, which looked into the gun-room and lighted the hall, which otherwise would have been rather dark.

The stairs themselves afforded a short-cut to the bedrooms above, and were a good deal used by everyone in the house, including the guests; but until this evening—though I had caught glimpses of the interior of the gun-room through the window in going up or down—I had not happened to go inside.

To-night a huge fire had been lighted, and was roaring up the chimney, throwing a wavering ruddy glow over the two or three pieces of armor, the guns, the mounted foxes' heads, the sporting pictures, and the branching antlers proudly displayed on the wall.

The gun-room, though it was exactly the place for a man to wish to lounge in, was not particularly large, and the enormous fire soon made the atmosphere intolerably hot. The little window over the stairway was, as usual, open, and an attempt was made to raise one of the two others; but something had gone wrong with the locks at the top, and neither sash could be lifted. The door leading out on the lawn was therefore set slightly ajar, with no smallest premonition of the strange event destined to follow upon so trivial a circumstance.

Sir Thomas had collected a few quaint and interesting specimens of old firearms, of which he was extremely proud, as several pieces had been obtained with difficulty, and were very rare. We were all expected to admire these, which were got down for our benefit apropos of our discussion concerning guns; but I could not call up the enthusiasm I might have felt had I owned a lighter heart, for I recalled, with
some anxiety, Paula's threat of the morning. 'Wait until to-night!' she had said, with intensest malice in voice and eyes. And 'to-night' had now arrived. Already it was after ten o'clock.

At last I made some excuse for returning to the drawing-room. As I approached the door, my heart bounded with a great sense of relief, for I heard the sound of the piano and Miss Hope's rich contralto voice ringing out in the grand strains of 'The Erl King.' Nothing had happened, then, after all! I waited until the singing had ceased; then I opened the door and went in.

'We were just thinking of joining you all in the gun-room,' said Paula. 'You were really wanted here.' Somehow, there seemed a hidden meaning in the way she smilingly spoke the words. ' Didn't Miss Edwards sing that song charmingly?' she went on, turning to Lady Towers.

'Miss Edwards? Miss Hope, you mean, my dear,' corrected our hostess carelessly. 'Yes, she did indeed!'

'I beg your pardon and hers,' said Paula suavely, fixing a blank stare upon the girl who still sat at the piano. 'I forgot for the moment that she preferred to use her writing name here—"Consuelo Hope." Each syllable seems to mean so much, doesn't it? Still, Fanny Edwards is not a bad name at all. It sounds simple and unassuming, you know. There was a pretty girl of that name, a maid at a strange old family place of ours, Lorn Abbey, once. She had to give evidence in a murder trial—oh, years ago! She would be quite getting on toward thirty now, I suppose. Tall and blonde, with a lot of fair hair—much your own style, Miss Ed—Miss Hope, I mean: for I mustn't forget again, must I? She went out to America ever so long ago. Perhaps she may have lived in your neighborhood over there? You may even have met her, Miss Hope?'

When she paused at last, finishing with a question, the stillness in the drawing-room might almost have been felt.

As for me, I was stricken dumb for one or two tremendous.
seconds by the sense of her words. Could it be possible that this beautiful woman, with the grace of a lily and the accent of one 'to the manner born,' was of peasant blood—the servant, Fanny Edwards, who had not, according to the account I had heard, scorned to coquet with the village swains of Martenhead?

I, too, had been guilty of various speculations regarding her identity. But of late, for the past day or two, I had been content to pin my faith upon Lady Towers' assurance that the girl was indeed an American, was what she gave herself out to be—Miss Consuelo Hope, of Louisiana.

My past surmises now flashed through my head, and I reproached myself with sharp remorse for having harbored them. I hated myself, and I hated Paula. I could almost have struck her as she sat there smiling defiantly, wickedly complacent, hatefully handsome.

What would Miss Hope say to her, and to the others who waited some explanation of the sudden storm-cloud which had discharged its electricity?

I, too, waited. But Miss Hope only laughed, and shrugged her lovely shoulders among their nestling laces.

'Dear me, Miss Wynne!' she exclaimed at last, with a pretty little drawl, 'do you mean to be melodramatic, or only amusing?'

She leaned back in her chair, gently waving her fan, from which flashed spangled fire as she moved it.

'Of course, I have heard all about the Fanny Edwards you mention, but not in America. It was at Martenhead near Lorn Abbey, the "old family place" you spoke of just now, and where we met last week. Perhaps you even think— and her words were interrupted by a little rippling laugh—'or perhaps I'd better say mean to convey, that I am Fanny Edwards in disguise? How funny! I see that I'm not the only woman in the house with what I call a "fine dramatic instinct." But I never make scenes; I only act in them sometimes, when they have been made. There's such a difference!'
'You act very well, certainly,' retorted Paula, quivering. 'Indeed, you would do most things you undertook well, I haven't a doubt, even to making up beds and washing dishes, which was Fanny Edwards' work at Lorn Abbey.'

'Poor girl! how she must have hated it!'

'Yes; no doubt it's pleasanter to write story-books.'

Miss Hope laughed again. 'What a battle of words! And I see that everyone is dying, but afraid, to separate us. If you will tell us all, Miss Wynne, exactly why you fancied I privately rejoiced in the "simple, unassuming name of Edwards," I will get dear Lady Towers to answer for me regarding my genealogy as far as she knows it.'

'Do you really wish me to tell—here, before everybody—why I believed, and do still believe, your real name to be Fanny Edwards, not Consuelo Hope?'

'Ah, my dear Miss Wynne, you admit it at last! Come, that's something to go upon. Yes; please give the particulars, by all means.'

'You are very—brave.'

'The courage of innocence, I assure you. I never agreed with Joseph Surface that the "consciousness of innocence" was inconvenient. In fact, I think it's the most comfortable thing in the world. And—here come all the absentees, just in time. Don't you agree with me, Sir Wilfrid?'

For my uncle (with the other men whom I had left in the gun-room) had now made his appearance at the door.

'It's a foregone conclusion that I do,' he responded gallantly. 'You may therefore take it for granted, whatever the subject of discussion.'

But he had glanced at Paula, and his face looked troubled. 'Miss Wynne is just about to tell us her reasons for "filching from me" my good name of Hope. No, no; you must not speak, Sir Wilfrid; I shall be angry if you do! Now, if you please, Miss Wynne.'

Paula was red and white by turns in her anger at being thus baited where she had thought to score.
'You are not "Miss Hope," then, if you will have it," she cried. 'I know, on the authority of as clever a private detective as can be had in London. Oh, I'm not ashamed to confess it! And if you all guessed the slyness, the machinations—'

'My dear, my dear," interrupted Lady Towers, 'I'm afraid you haven't quite outgrown that naughty temper you had when you were the little girl I remember so well. But you mustn't, you know—you really mustn't; and as to the detective, that's really quite too dreadful! Of course you're only joking, but we mustn't let it go too far. When you get Paula alone, Sir Wilfrid, you must really scold her.'

Paula had risen, trembling and ashen pale to the lips waiting for another opportunity to speak, as poor Lady Towers babbled on.

'He will never "scold" me, as you call it, again," she cried at last. 'I have told him that I shall neither speak to him, nor live under his roof, until he has learned to see that woman as she is, and I care not who hears me say so! I have done what I stayed in this house to do, after a quarrel with my uncle, this morning. And now au revoir. I wish you joy of your Miss Hope, and I—'

'Paula,' uttered Uncle Wilfrid's stern voice, 'I forbid you to say another word. You bring upon yourself treatment only fit for a child. Leave the room. You shall hear from me later.'

The tone in which he spoke was so icy, so cutting, that I think, in Paula's place, I must have withered under it.

I had not sat down, but had been standing since the moment of entering the room. I was not far from the door, and as Paula, with her head held erect on the splendid white column of her throat, swept down the room on her way out, I mechanically took a few steps forward, and held aside the portière for her. But she went by me without a look.

'Lady Towers,' began my uncle, and for the first time in my life I thought his voice sounded like that of an old man,
'I hardly know how to apologize to you and Miss Hope—to everybody here, in fact, for the deplorable rudeness of which my niece has been guilty. I actually know not what to say. But I beg you to believe—'

'We believe it's all nerves and nonsense and a bit of hysterical temper, such as most young ladies are subject to—more's the pity!' exclaimed Lady Towers. 'She'll be sorry to-morrow.'

'Of course it began with a joke, and I was very stupid to have kept it up for a moment,' Miss Hope added. 'It is I who ought to apologize; and, by way of penance and to make you all forget, I'll sing you the funniest song I know before we say good-night.'

She walked hastily to the piano, and began singing a bright little French chanson with a voice that trembled slightly through a verse or two. As she finished and was running her white fingers over the piano (the left hand still conspicuous in its pearl sheath), preparatory to commencing again, a footman came into the room, carrying a small silver tray with a twisted bit of note-paper upon it.

'I beg your pardon, my lady,' he pleaded, as Lady Towers, with an impatient gesture, would have prevented his interrupting the player, 'but I was particularly directed that this was important and immediate.'

'Oh, very well,' remarked his mistress, and the tray was presented to Miss Hope.

I essayed a commonplace remark to Mrs. Lord-Lorton, anything being better than remaining under the pall which had fallen upon us, or staring at Miss Hope. She answered something, to which I did not listen; and then I yielded to temptation, and glanced across at the girl as she read the note.

She was gazing at it as though perplexed, or at a loss: what she must do, and she started a little when Sir Thomas expressed the hope that we were not to be cheated out of a second song.
'Oh, if you will forgive me, I will sing to-morrow instead,' she said brightly. 'You won't think me rude, will you, Lady Towers, if I bid you good-night abruptly, and run away to —to—answer this note? It's really rather important.'

It was late, as it happened, for no one had given thought to the flight of time, and, with an evident general sense of relief, 'good-nights' were speedily exchanged on all sides.

Something was said about an adjournment to the smoking-room among the men, and two or three of the party disappeared in that direction across the big square hall. But Uncle Wilfrid went straight to his own part of the house.

I was, however, in no mood for bed. Uncle Wilfrid's face haunted me. I began to feel that I could not think of attempting to forget my own perplexities in rest without first having seen him, and at least shown him that if he wanted me I was ready, and not neglectful of him.

I had been for twenty or thirty minutes in my room, and now, when I opened the door again, it was to find the passage deserted and dark, save for the faint flame of a lamp, which kept the stairway from being dangerous to any who might wish to go up or down during the night.

Doubtless the smoking-room was still occupied by the men who had betaken themselves thither half an hour ago, but all was quiet, with that stillness of midnight and after, when a country household is asleep.

I began going softly down the stairs, meaning to find my way to the wing where my uncle slept, and tap at his bedroom door; but as I slowly descended, a flicker of firelight, penetrating the small window on the stairway, drew my eyes to the gun-room.

The electric lights were out there as well as in the passage, but there was a ruddy glow which wavered over the walls, chased by vaguely shaped, grotesque shadows, and in the midst of the red dusk I saw a white figure standing.

At first, so did the lights and shadows change and melt into one another, the glimpse of whiteness might have been
an optical illusion; but as I paused for an instant, looking deliberately down, to my surprise, I saw that it was unmistakably Miss Hope, in her fleecy dinner-gown, the snow of her neck and uncovered arms shining up to my eyes in the fitful illumination of the fire.

I believed then, and do honestly believe still, that I had banished (at the moment when I had learned to know my own heart) all wish to pry into her private life and its affairs. But I loved her with an intoxicating knowledge of my own passion, and a half-hearted revolt against it, and it was something higher, yet, at the same time, more insistent, which forced me to stop on the stairs and gaze down upon her, myself unseen.

As I did so, the firelight flashed up for a second, and showed me distinctly the expression of her face. It was that of a brave woman who knows herself confronted with some deadly peril, yet, undismayed, will not flinch before its approach.

What was there in that room to bring to the beautiful face a look that belonged alone to some terrible crisis? Who was with her, menacing her, or whispering to her, perhaps, a knowledge of her secret? Had the note I had seen her receive taken her to the gun-room? Had——

And then something drew my eyes to the big, old-fashioned mirror, shaped like a shield, which hung over the gun-rack, and directly opposite the window on the stairs.

At such an angle was the glass suspended that it reflected (as I looked down at it) the floor of the gun-room rather than the wall in front of it. Miss Hope, who faced me with her back to the mirror, and a trifle to one side of it, was not imaged in the shining surface, but it had been the movement of some living thing reflected there which had caught my gaze and held it. A sheen of tawny fur, a pair of glittering eyeballs, a sinuous form crouching, as if about to spring!
CHAPTER IX.

A FIGHT WITH DEATH.

A sickening wave of horror swept over me with a realization of my own apparent helplessness.

What could I do? How could I save her? If I so much as uttered a groan, I might only too surely precipitate the tragedy I would give every drop of blood in my body to prevent.

The beautiful, silent woman down there seemed instinctively to know that a cry for help would be but the signal for the crawling yellow mass to gather itself together and leap upon her. Then—afterwards! But my soul turned from the awful picture that glared upon my retina for an instant of agony, with a desperate fear that brought the sweat out like cold rain on my forehead.

Somehow she must be saved. No time to speculate as to how this thing had come about. And there was no cost which I should count as such for myself.

With my eyes I measured the window through which I leaned. It was small, but not too small to prevent the passage of my body.

If I could leap down to the floor of the gun-room, only ten or twelve feet below, I should alight behind the tiger. Provided I could accomplish this feat noiselessly until the sound of my fall, all might be well, for the animal, hearing so sudden a noise directly at its back, would naturally turn, and Miss Hope might be given time, while it was engaged
with me, to rush through that open outer door which had given ingress to the danger.

At all events, it seemed to me the only chance, and therefore worth trying. Though I had lived a lifetime of agony since the flare of firelight had first shown me those glaring eyeballs shining in the mirror, in reality scarce the space of a second could have passed between that moment and the next when I had arranged, and was carrying out, my plan of action.

Fortunately for my necessity, the window over the stairs was a casement, and already, as usual, was parted. There need be, in consequence, no noise of opening.

I drew myself upward until I knelt crouching down on the sill; and then, with a dizzying vision under my eyes of a slow, striped, and tawny length crawling across the floor (it would have a table to cross or skirt round before it could reach Miss Hope), I dropped my feet over and let myself go.

Until then I had made no sound which was heard in the room below. But I came down to the polished floor with a great crash, measuring all my length as I fell.

For an instant, or the fraction of it, the shock half stunned me. A myriad of stars seemed to fall in a cataract out of the darkness, and a roaring of the cataract was in my ears. It was not so much of a jump—ten or a dozen feet—if I could have taken it in the right way; but I had fallen anyhow, actuated solely by the desire to drop, in what manner it mattered little; yet in less time than is occupied in telling I had staggered to my knees, and would have been on my feet had I not had to reckon with the tiger.

There had been a sharp cry from Miss Hope which I had heard, hardly conscious of hearing it; but when I would have looked for her through the falling stars, the room was blotted out by the dark shape that had whirled and loomed over me. A curious, pungent stench was in my nostrils, and, with a blind impulse bidding me clutch at the creature's throat, in the instinctive desire for self-preservation which
never quite leaves us, I went down again under the blows of
the great sledge-hammer paws.

There was a grinding pain in my arm and shoulder, a
sense of stifling under hot, ill-smelling fur, a rebellious,
though scarcely terrified knowledge that this moment would
be my last on earth, that I was grappling with death in
grimmest form, and being overmastered by it.

That was all. And in the midst came a shot, fired so close
at hand as to be deafening, a spurt of thick, warm blood
over my face, and a yell of mortal anguish.

The crushing pressure which had held my shoulder was
relaxed. Another shot, and I fell with a momentary uncon-
sciousness under the dead weight which choked my breath,
and seemed to heap itself upon me—a mountain of twitch-
ing, palpitating flesh.

The free air rushing once more into my lungs brought me
to myself, for the huge beast, struggling and writhing in a
death agony, had rolled over on its side, and my body was
relieved of its enormous weight.

Blood—not my own—dripped over my eyes, and I dashed
it away with the one hand I could lift. My left hung help-
less, and for the moment life seemed far away and utterly
undesirable.

Then I felt her soft fingers grasp my arm with all the
will, if not the power, to bring me to my feet again, and the
sight of her face so near my own, the sound of her panting
breath in my ear, gave me new strength and inspiration.

'Thank God! thank God!' she was crying.

I dragged myself up from the floor like a man of eighty;
but I could not stand, and, reeling back, I leaned against the
table, my breath coming in hoarse sobs. Something I had
stumbled against as I staggered across the floor. And now
I saw that it was a gun, still smoking.

The tiger lay still, a supine mass stretched out at length,
half on its back, the soft white fur of its belly dabbled with
the blood in which it would wallow no more.
'I have killed it!' she said. 'We are saved! But, oh, the horror of it!—the brains and the blood oozing together, and those awful eyes! Shall I ever forget—ever cease to see them as I do now?'

'Don't think of it—don't look!' I panted, scarce knowing yet what I said, and feeling still in imagination, the throbbing of torn muscles, the death-grip of the tiger on my body. 'You saved my life with magnificent courage, and—and—I—'

'And you? It was you who saved mine. But oh, Mr. Darkmore, it's over now! The strength has gone out of me. Will no one ever come and—take that awful thing away? I must look; I can't help it. And I'm so deadly, deadly sick!'

I sprang forward, forgetting my weakness and my pain. On my right arm, which was uninjured, I caught and held her up. She lay against my breast, her exquisite body soft and pathetically yielding in unconsciousness, and I felt my strength coming back to me with a rush of fire through my veins. For one moment of strange, enraptured intoxication the world had no inhabitants save this fair woman and myself, no responsibilities save love, and no barriers to shut me out from it.

Then there were sounds on the stairs and in the hall outside, with a loud rattling of that door of the gun-room which opened into the passage.

'For the love of Heaven, what's happened here?' Sir Thomas's bluff voice was exclaiming. 'Whoever's in there, unlock the door!'

'I can't get to it!' I cried out in return. 'Come round to the door on the lawn.'

As I shouted my answer, I felt a delicate thrilling and stirring of the girl's body in my arms, and a faint sigh told me that her senses were returning.

'They've come—at last,' she murmured. 'But—but she had locked the door on the outside!'
'Locked the door on the outside?' I asked, in amaze.

'Who could have done such a thing?'

But Miss Hope gave me no answer. She lifted herself away from me, and stood alone; and Sir Thomas was still calling to me from the other side of the door. Someone, too, was on the stairs, looking down at us through the window. But the tiger and the stains of battle on the floor must have been from that point invisible.

I walked unsteadily across the room, and found that it was even as Miss Hope had said. At all events, there was no key inside.

'Tell them not to be alarmed,' I replied to Sir Thomas's questioning, hearing the terrified voices of women in the distance. 'Miss Hope has—killed the tiger—that's all, thank God!'

There was a general outburst of exclamations, but no one cared to stop for more inquiries. The obvious thing to do was to take my advice, and satisfy all curiosity by coming to us as speedily as possible through the other door. A few moments later we could hear the soft patter of feet as they ran over the frozen lawn, and then the gun-room was invaded by the men of the house and several servants in various stages of déshabille.

'I think,' said Miss Hope, gently breaking in upon a babel of exclamatory ejaculations and questionings, 'the best thing to do is to get away from this room as soon as possible. I never want to see the inside of it again. And perhaps you don't understand that, after a heavy fall from that window up there, Mr. Darkmore was, besides, nearly killed by the tiger before I could reach the gun and run over close to them both and shoot. See, there's blood on his arm, and his coat is in rags. I—oh, if you ask me another question I shall go mad or faint!'

Her voice was hysterical. Yet, when there had been danger, and danger of the deadliest for her and for me, she had been absolutely calm and unfurried. Indeed, it had
been her presence of mind as well as pluck which had saved
us both, though now she was weak and frightened as a child.
But—sphinx of mystery as she chose to appear in my eyes
—she was a woman, which explains all.

Everybody in the house had gathered in the smoke-room,
with only two absentees—Paula and the invalid Jerome.

One of the grooms had been sent off post-haste to the
village, a mile away, for a surgeon to dress my wounded
shoulder, despite my protestations. I had proposed that
Miss Hope should be taken upstairs and put to bed, a prop-
osition which Lady Towers—curlless now, with her hair
dangling in a curious manner from startingly long pins—
heartily seconded. But still she—and the others—lingered.
There seemed a strange fascination for them all in asking
the same questions over again, and receiving the same
answers.

Feverishly ready to talk as Miss Hope had apparently
become at last, there was still one portion of the engrossing
subject on which she remained oddly reticent, and this led
me to think that her volubility on all others had in it a cer-
tain method.

She evaded inquiries as to how she had happened to go
into the gun-room, trying to make it appear that she had
seen the firelight, and chanced to wander in for a moment
before going upstairs to her room.

‘Then,’ she hurried on, as though to make the listeners
forget that her explanation had been unsatisfactory, ‘I
walked over to the fire, and, as I stood looking into it, I
heard a noise at the other end of the room, something like a
purring of an enormous cat. I turned my head and saw a
pair of big eyes glaring at me. I couldn’t believe there was
anything for a minute. I thought I had stared at the blaze
too steadily, perhaps. But it wasn’t long before I knew just
what was there; that it must have crept in through the open
doors on the lawn before I came into the room. I don’t know
if I was exactly frightened. An odd, still feeling came over
me, and I kept my eyes fixed on the thing, wondering when it would spring, or if (should I only have the courage) I might keep it away, as I had read stories of people doing, by a firm, undaunted look. Only the firelight sometimes died a little, and the darkness seemed to make it worse. So it was with me, when suddenly I heard a great crash, saw that a man had leapt through the window over the stairs, and that the tiger had turned on him. I didn’t know who it was at first, though I think I must have suspected it to be Mr. Darkmore even then—for there’s nobody else in the world so tall as he! But I was sure he had made that leap to save me, and now it was my turn to do something for him if I could. Quite through selfish motives, you know, for I fancied the tiger was equal to disposing of us both, all in good time. Luckily, I know something about firearms, and, far more fortunate still, the gun I snatched was loaded, else I should have had to beat the tiger about the head, which mightn’t have been so successful, and——’

‘I forgot, you know, to take the cartridges out after I’d been explaining the advantage of that new sort,’ expounded Sir Thomas, for the moment interrupting. ‘Thank Heaven I did forget, and left the gun on the table! But I beg of you go on, Miss Hope.’

‘That is all—all my part, and Mr. Darkmore is too modest to speak of his,’ she said, with a voice that trembled between tears and laughter.

‘But the locked door? I don’t understand that,’ pondered Sir Thomas persistently,
CHAPTER X.

A NEW COMPLICATION.

'You must take care of yourself and lie low for a few days, or that arm of yours may give you serious trouble,' the surgeon had observed, intimating at the same time that 'taking care of myself' meant keeping my room.

But I would have none of such counsel. The coming day would be too full for me to let myself be left out of it. Besides, the evening had been the time set for our departure, and, strong as was the temptation for the wretched moth to linger near the light which had singed his wings, I did not wish this plan to be disarranged on my account.

Before I disobeyed the doctor's orders by going downstairs I decided I would tap at Paula's door, and, if she was still in her room, I would ask her to step out, when she was ready, and have a few words with me. Perhaps, I went so far as to tell myself, if I had shown greater tact in my dealings with her yesterday the deplorable affair of the evening might have been avoided.

My injured left arm at last neatly strapped up in a sling, I started out upon my mission. Thrice I knocked at Paula's door without receiving an answer, and was about to turn away, when Lady Towers herself came toward me, looking, I thought, rather flurried.

'My dear boy,' she exclaimed excitedly, 'you up and out! I'm surprised at you? Then, you know—you've heard all about Miss Wynne?'
‘I've heard nothing. What has there been to hear?’ I hurriedly questioned.

For answer she held out a crumpled bit of paper. ‘Dalton found this on the floor in the gun-room, and gave it to me just now. It’s signed “Paula Wynne,” and I thought you must have dropped it there last night.’

As my eyes fell upon the written words, I tried to hide from my understanding their too probable meaning. It was a mere pencilled scrawl, evidently written in haste, but unmistakably by Paula’s hand:

‘I ask as a favor that you will meet me in the gun-room as soon as the way is clear. Unless you are afraid you will come, and you will find me waiting for you.

‘Paula Wynne.’

‘This was found in the gun-room this morning?’ I asked thoughtfully.

‘Yes; all crumpled up in a ball. I made sure it must be yours—or possibly Sir Wilfrid’s. But, then, you had been to the gun-room, and he hadn’t, except with the others after dinner.

‘Thank you for—returning it to me,’ I said vaguely. And, folding the paper, I placed it inside my coat.

‘Ah, it was you, then? I suppose you must have seen Miss Wynne again, in that case, after she left the drawing-room last night in—if you won’t mind me saying so—in such a temper? Don’t tell me if you don’t like, of course; but Sir Thomas and I are so uncomfortable and vexed that she should have run away like this, and feel we must in some way have been remiss.’

‘Run away?’ I echoed. ‘Do you mean that she has left the house?’

‘Yes; early this morning, it seems. Hadn’t she told even you? Do you think Sir Wilfrid knows, or—dear me!—have I got to tell him? What a disagreeable thing to have happen in one’s house! Really, my dear Terry, what with fainting young men and angry young ladies, and tigers and—
and things—and blood all over one’s floors, I never was so upset in my life as I’ve been these last few days."

‘I suppose,’ I ventured, ‘that she felt conscience-stricken, and hadn’t the courage to face the music this morning? I only hope——’ But I checked myself suddenly. Not being anxious to confide our family annoyances to Lady Towers, I changed the sentence, and finished by saying that I hoped, with her well-known good nature, she would forgive my cousin.

‘Nonsense! Don’t talk about forgiveness,’ she returned, with bobbing curls. ‘Come and have breakfast, since you would be reckless and leave your room.’

I obeyed, and, hurrying through the meal, I started at once for my uncle’s room.

To my surprise, he was not there. I learned afterwards that he had gone to inquire after me before proceeding to the breakfast-room, and so we had managed to miss each other. Then I decided to wait for him in his study, where I might hope to get him to myself, and decide quietly what should be done about Paula.

The fire was lighted and crackling away cheerfully, but the room was empty, and I sat down in a big chair drawn up by the hearth, took out the paper which Lady Towers had given me, and began pondering intently. I had never for more than an instant supposed the words it contained had been addressed to me or intended for my eyes. On the contrary, I was certain that it had been this note which, the night before, had been handed to Miss Hope by one of the servants, and which had taken her so suddenly from the drawing-room.

What could have been the object Paula wished to attain by inducing Miss Hope to enter the gun-room? And above all, was it Paula who, according to Miss Hope’s hasty admission, had locked the gun-room door on the outside?

As I put to myself these questions, appalled by the thought of what might have been Paula’s motive in luring
the woman she ‘hated with the hate that kills’ to that par-
ticular room, a knock sounded at the door, and I roused my-
self with a start to say ‘Come in!’

It was Miss Hope who stood on the threshold, hesitating
to enter at sight of me.

‘I thought,’ she said, ‘that Sir Wilfrid might be here and
needing his new secretary. Ought you to be out of your
room?’

‘The doctor says not. But I’ve found, with medical men,
obstinacy is the best policy. I beg of you to come in; I was
wishing much to see you.’

She signified assent by stepping into the room; but she
did not sit down: she only faced me, waiting for what I
wished to say.

‘Have you been told,’ I asked, ‘that my cousin has gone
away?’

‘Lady Towers mentioned it. But let us not talk of Miss
Wynne. Have I half thanked you for saving my life last
night?’

‘Don’t!’ I said shortly. I dared not look at her, lest she
should read what was in my heart and eyes. ‘We passed
two or three terrible moments together in that gun-room. I
—I hope that they may only cement a friendship between
us.’ I had more to say, but she broke in suddenly:

‘Do you want to be my friend?’

‘I do, with all my heart!’ Then, abruptly, I added:

‘Why did you go to the gun-room last night, Miss Hope?’

‘Why? Didn’t you hear the explanation I gave Lady
Towers and the others?’

‘Yes, I heard. But I beg of you now to tell me the real
reason. It is not out of mere curiosity that I ask.’

‘I—can give you no other than I gave them.’

‘You mean you will not?’

‘Will not, if you like.’

‘I know, then, that you refuse because you wish to screen
the one who sent you there.’
'You cannot know that!'
'I do know that my cousin, Paula Wynne, wrote you, asking you to meet her there. What I wish to know is, whether she, having looked down as I did through the window over the stairs, saw what was in the gun-room, and deliberately sent you into a trap.'
'Mr. Darkmore! Why do you say such a thing?'
'In the desperate hope of hearing you pronounce that it's untrue. See, here is a letter to you which you dropped. I read it, for there was no address, and I thought it might be meant for me. But I soon realized my mistake:
"I ask as a favor that you will meet me in the gun-room as soon as the way is clear. Unless you are afraid you will come, and you will find me waiting for you.
"Paula Wynne."
She had to sign it, or you would not have gone. You did not go. And can you assure me upon your honor that it was not as I think—as I fear?'
'Hush!' she cried suddenly. 'Don't you see—Sir Wilfrid?'
I turned and saw him standing in the doorway, his face grey-white and strangely set.
'Answer him, Miss Hope,' he said. 'Are his suspicions true?'
When alone with me she was a veritable woman, conscious of her power. With him she was a girl—young, yielding, and ingenuous. Now she threw out her hands with an imploring little gesture of self-surrender.
'But how do I know—how can I answer?' she exclaimed tremulously. 'I got the letter, yes. It would be no use to deny it, because Mr. Darkmore has it there in his hand, and I went rather than have her think me afraid of anything she could say or do. I opened the door; I could see nobody. Then it was shut again behind me, and locked. I heard the key, and—and someone—'
Go on,' said Sir Wilfrid, in the same quiet, toneless voice. 'I thought I heard someone say "Good-night." I might only have imagined that.'

'And did you think it was my niece who spoke?' 'Yes; and I called, but no one answered. That is—all I know.'

'Did you see her pass by the window on the stairs on her way to her room?'

'I—saw someone pass.'

'Did she look down at you?'

'Ah, Sir Wilfrid, spare me! Don't you see that, after what passed in the drawing-room last night, it is doubly hard to be called upon to answer your questions?'

'I insist upon your answer, Miss Hope. Did she look down upon you?'

'Yes.'

'She must, then, have taken the key with her, as it was not in the door. Tell me this also. How long was she at the window? Had you seen the tiger before she went away?'

'I am not sure. Besides—I do not think you have a right to question me.'

'Perhaps not. In such a moment one does not stop to consider right,' my uncle answered sadly. 'It is Paula who must be questioned, and in your presence. Ring the bell, Terry; I shall send for her and let her answer for herself.'

'But she is not here,' I said, having forgotten that he did not know—that I had promised Lady Towers I would be the first to break the news. 'She has gone—early this morning, taking her maid.'

'Ah, I might have known it! Her threat had passed out of my mind. Coming as it does, it amounts to a confession of guilt that she should thus absent herself.'

'For my sake, since you have extorted so much from me,' implored the pale girl, 'give her at least the benefit of the doubt.'
CHAPTER XI.

FREE!

I had thought it not impossible that on our arrival in London we might find Paula at home in Portman Square. But we learned that she had only been in the house long enough to superintend her packing, and had had her luggage sent to her friend, Mrs. Annesley's. Next morning, somewhat to my surprise, I received a note from her requesting that I should call at five o'clock, when she would be alone. At that hour, therefore, I presented myself at Eaton Terrace, and Paula almost immediately appeared, dressed for walking.

'How are you?' she asked coldly. 'I hurried home to you from the solicitor's to whom Mr. Annesley has introduced me. I suppose you can imagine on what subject I wanted his advice?'

'No, I cannot,' I answered gravely, for her flippant tone was offensive to my taste.

'Oh, well, it doesn't matter, though I'm surprised you're so dull. You used not to be so. Will you ring for tea?'

'Shall we have a talk first?' I suggested persuasively.

'Certainly not. How like a man! The talk can wait, tea can't. It grows bitter if it stands. Ah, what a comfort, here it is!'—as a footman, all calves and flour, made his appearance with a tray. 'Do you know,' she went on, 'very shortly Mrs. Annesley and I are thinking of going abroad—South of France and Italy. Perhaps you would learn to appreciate me, dear boy, if I were out of sight for awhile.'

107
She laughed softly, showing her little sharp white teeth, which added a certain semblance of cruelty to her face.

'It's very amusing—quite as much as a play,' she said, 'to stay away from Portman Square just now, and watch the result of my absence. In the first place, one danger is removed. Even so eccentric a young woman as your friend Miss Hope can't very well visit two unprotected bachelors; or, I forgot, Uncle Wilfrid is a widower, isn't he? But les convenances remain the same. While I am away, she can't be near, and the secretaryship must be vacant, unless poor little Jerome be kept on.'

I set down the untasted tea she had given me, and looked her straight and earnestly in the eyes.

'Your absence will not prevent Miss Hope's visit, Paula,' I said. 'What Uncle Wilfrid means to do I don't know. Whether he will have some irreproachable chaperon in the house, or how he intends to manage it, I cannot say. But she will be there.'

Paula sprang to her feet with a slight, inarticulate cry of anger.

'Oh, that woman—that fiend in woman's form!' she ejaculated. 'What a curse she has been, and will be, to us! And yet you—you could not let well enough alone the other night. Fate itself had intervened to put her out of our way. There might have been an end to it all, with nobody to blame, but you had to interfere. Oh, I heard of it, though I was not one of the crowd to congratulate her on her escape. You were a fool—a fool!'

'My God, Paula! Do you know what you are saying?' We were both on our feet now, staring into each other's eyes.

She shrank a little from what she saw in mine, and her lips grew pale; but she did not speak. I had not intended to accuse her. I had waited, meaning to let the words we must say to each other shape themselves. But now, aghast at her wild audacity, I lost my self-control.
"It is, then, as I thought!" I said, between shut teeth. "You are a would-be murderess!"

"Ah, how dare you?" she cried. "Let go my wrist. You are unmanly! You are hurting me!"

I had not known that I had touched her.

"Paula, how could you?"

"Well, it was for you, as much as for myself. Besides, I—I did nothing. She went there of her own accord. It was not my affair to warn her. And then, afterwards, when I learned how you had interfered, I was not afraid of her. She dare not accuse me openly, whatever she may suspect. And she can’t know that I saw what was in the room. I should swear that it was not so, if she did. And you, spy though you be, you will be too loyal to betray me. I trust you, at least, for that. She will say nothing. I know too much about her. And I tell you, Terry, deny it though she may, she is Fanny Edwards. I am sure of it. Besides, there is something worse than that. Mark my words, she’s got some dark secret on her mind."

"Not, at all events, so dark as that which you must carry with you to your grave," I said.

"It is not for you to reproach me," she retorted, "when I have told you that it was for your sake. You watched me, you spied upon me, and you let it go on. And now you turn upon me, and defend her. Ah! perhaps you, too, are bewitched by her? Why didn’t I think of that before? You —— Oh, how easy it is, now my eyes are opened, to read it in your face! Traitor! You come here and accuse me because—you love that woman yourself!"

I stood before her, silent, angry, and miserable.

"Well, why don’t you answer me? You will not? I don’t doubt you’d have me believe it’s because you stand upon your dignity, because I’ve no right to question you, or some man’s nonsense of that sort. But I know, and you know, it is because you cannot. Well, go to her; I give you your prom-
ise back again. You never loved me any more than I loved you, which was not at all, and now you're free.'

Before I had had time to answer her she had flashed by me, white with anger, and the door had opened and shut violently behind her. For a few moments I stood still, half expecting her to come back, or to send some message. But I was left to myself, scarcely knowing what to do.

What had I accomplished by my coming? In one sense nothing, for I had extorted no sign of softening or penitence from Paula. In another sense, much. She had confessed her guilt; and though the knowledge of it would, I believed and hoped, remain only with three people in the world—my uncle, Miss Hope, and myself—there was, underlying the shock of it, a certain calmness of mind in feeling that no injustice had been done to her. And, besides, there was the delirious joy of freedom from a galling chain.

Had I a right to accept this freedom, I asked myself, flung at me, as it had been, in a moment or two of unreasoning passion? Was I justified in taking her at her word? Or, guilty as she was, unloving as she had announced herself, ought I not to cling to her in this dreadful crisis of her life, when the affection of her best and oldest friend had fallen away from her as her punishment?

Time passed unheeded while I stood thus alone and self-arraigned. But half an hour may have slipped by when Mrs. Annesley returned. On this occasion I was glad to see her, glad to have her come. Her arrival settled one question for me. It would be useless, with her in the house, to attempt another interview with Paula. The last word had been spoken, after all, and—I was free!

* * * * *

Paula had gone completely, as it seemed, and voluntarily, out of our lives. Jerome, Uncle Wilfrid's secretary, was also absent, ostensibly on a holiday; yet the weeks passed, and the Woman in Grey did not even return to town, as she
had said she meant to do. Whether or not Uncle Wilfrid
was in the secret of her goings and comings, I did not
know; but one morning at breakfast I fancied, by the way
in which Wemyss, the butler, was dismissed, that my uncle
had something particular to say to me.

'Terry!' he began, as soon as the door had closed after
the servant, 'I want your congratulations.'

'Shall I offer them on faith?' I asked, smiling.

'Not quite. At last the "Amber Witch"—and he spoke
the little nickname tenderly—'has come back to London.
I have seen her, and she has definitely given me her promise.'

All the blood in my body seemed to rush in a surging
torrent to my head. My world appeared to be falling into
chaos at my feet. There was, I thought, but one meaning in
my uncle's words. And though Paula had prophesied that
this might come to pass, it is impossible ever to be really
'prepared' for bad news. When it comes, it comes as a
blow.

'I—do from my heart congratulate you,' I stammered.
'Is it—at all settled yet when the marriage will take place?'

'The marriage? Good heavens! you didn't suppose—
Why, you young fool! I thought you knew me better. Miss
Hope is to be my daughter. She has consented to allow me
publicly to adopt her, she having no near living relatives of
her own. Under the circumstances, the affair must be con-
ducted publicly, you see.'

'Of course.'

So great was the revulsion of feeling, so intense the sense
of relief, that I scarcely trusted my voice to speak. I
feared, too, that my face would betray me, and I got up
from the table; but I was not to escape. Uncle Wilfrid rose
also, and, laying a hand on either shoulder, looked straight
into my eyes.

'Two questions, Terry,' he gently said. 'Is this plan—
this hope of mine—distasteful to you on your own account?'

'No; I swear it is not.'
I felt my color rising like a schoolgirl's.

‘I’m glad of that. I once made plans for your welfare, and they failed. Paula and you were not suited for each other, and it was well the mistake was righted before it was too late. So now for my second question, which springs from what I could not help reading in your face. My boy, what is in your heart for Consuelo Hope?’

‘Uncle Wilfrid!’ I ejaculated.

‘Forgive me, but—I’m answered! We won’t say any more, Terry; that would be premature. Only, remember you are free—free to be happy. Don’t let happiness pass you by. As for me, I thought all joy in life had been killed when my wife and my only child died, estranged from me; but I know at last that I’m mistaken. There can be an aftermath of happiness, but it must all come to me through you—and her. In a way I owe her to you, Terry. Had it not been for you, I might never have met her; and now, in this moment when our hearts are open to each other without reserve, if you care to hear, I will tell you why, from the first instant I saw her, this girl’s fate seemed inextricably interwoven with my own. I——’

‘Beg pardon, Sir Wilfrid, but there’s a thing more like an imp than a boy in the hall, insisting he must see you on a matter of great importance.’

The magical moment of confidence had been broken like a bubble. Wemyss stood in the door, a look almost of consternation on his solemn old face.

‘I wouldn’t have ventured, Sir Wilfrid,’ went on the butler apologetically, ‘to intrude until you rang for me. But there is something queer about the boy. As near as I can make out, he has some information to give, or has found some valuable property which he supposes you to have lost. He wouldn’t give his name, but said he’d come up from the country on purpose.’

‘You did right to keep him, Wemyss, even if he turns out only to be another beggar,’ said my uncle. ‘Terry, will
you interview him for me? I'm not precisely in the mood for strangers now.'

The fevered brightness had died out of his eyes, leaving a species of uncomfortable self-consciousness. With a slight shrug of his shoulders, and a deprecatory smile at me, he disappeared into the library, which adjoined the breakfast-room at Portman Square.

In another moment Wemyss had marshalled in a brown, eagle-faced, weedy lad of twelve or thirteen years. He had a shrewd and cautious eye, intelligent beyond his age, while a curious, spasmodic working of his features justified the butler’s description of him as 'queer.'

'Well, my friend, what has brought you to see Sir Wilfrid Amory?' I questioned.

'Are you Sir Wilfrid?' he retorted sharply.

'No; but I dare say I can manage your business for you.'

'Perhaps you can, perhaps you can't, guv'nor. I shan't speak a word if you're going to play me tricks. It's about an advertisement in the Witherton paper; I don't mind sayin' as much as that.'

'Ah!' I could hardly repress a start. 'I am the one who inserted that advertisement. Are you the boy who took in the telegram it referred to?'

'I may be. Anyhow, the number of this house was in the advertisement, so I know'd where to find Sir Wilfrid, and writin' letters wasn't no good to me.'

'Why not? You could have lodged your information at the post-office, or the office of the paper, and got your reward if everything had been satisfactory.'

'Ho yes, I dessay I could have got two quid! But I've had more than that a'ready for holdin' my tongue.'

'Indeed! You're a good business man. So you want to bargain with us for what you know?'

'You've hit it, guv'nor. And 'twas me who took in the telegram. I didn't think much of the job at the time, only supposin' somebody wanted to be saved the trouble of hoofin'
it to the post-office. But when I heard about the advertisement, I made up my mind to tell what I know’d. And I would have done, if I hadn’t got the promise of more money to keep it dark. So now the question is, How much’ll you give me to do t’other thing?’

‘Will the sum of three pounds satisfy you?’

‘No! I can get that for keepin’ away from you. Make it five, guv’nor. I can’t look at a penny less.’

‘Nor will I give a penny more.’ I took a five-pound note from my pocket-book, and held it before his eyes. ‘Now let me hear what you’ve got to say,’ I demanded. ‘If you can prove that you carried the message—if you can give a description of the person who employed you, you may have this money, and clear out as soon as you like.’

‘I can prove it all fast enough. ’Twas towards the end of last October, the same night the big clock on the “House o’ Fear” set up strikin’, and frightenin’ everybody near Martenhead. But the clock hadn’t begun when I took the telegram. I’d carried it in, and got ’most home afterwards before it struck the fust time, which was for five o’clock, I remember well. Mother and me keeps a little place where she sells herbs and all kinds o’ roots and bulbs, along the far end of the village, and she and me gathers the right sort o’ thing in the woods. One day—it must have been two or three before the one I mean—a couple of ladies come to the house and asked questions about the Abbey and the folks that used to live there. The young one was tall and hansome, dressed in grey, and had white skin and light hair. The other was a regular figger o’ fun, and in her arm she carried an odd sort of beast—I never seen its like anywheres else—just as outlandish as she was herself. They was awful curious to hear about mother’s herbs, and she didn’t mind talkin’. She never does mind! I heerd her tellin’ them of some kinds o’ roots you could kill folks with, but they wouldn’t believe till she showed ’em some she had by her—only she never sold that sort. They bought a few
things that was good for headache and such-like, and then they talked to me. The young one gimme half a crown, and mother was awful took up with her, tellin' her all about the gal who murdered old Mrs. Haynes at the Abbey, and who lies buried in the grounds there. Well, a day or two after that I sees the old 'ooman walkin' along the road. She was hurryin' for dear life, but spyin' me, she panted out, "Would I go to the post-office and leave a telegram?" She out with half a crown, said I was to keep the change, and, if I sent the message all right (which she'd find out for sure that night), I might expect she or her friend would send me two bob more in the mornin'. I was willin' enough to go; and next day—just as she said—there comes by post a note with a florin wrapped up in it. I thinks no more of it, only to spend the money, when I hears folks talkin' about a "false telegram" and a reward. Of course I pricks up my ears, but before I could get down to the office comes another letter, to say if I would keep mum, and not answer the advertisement (which no doubt I had seen), at the end of four weeks I should get three quid, instead of the two that had been offered. They'd kept their word about the florin, so I thought they would about the gold. But, thinks I to myself, I might jest as well have your money too. There now, guv'nor, that's the end of my story. I'll take the money, please.'

Without answer or comment I handed him the bank-note. A dark depression was upon me. So heavy a load weighed down my breast that I was conscious of a sensation of physical sickness.
CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGER BESIDE THE GRAVE.

Three months went by, and brought an early spring. For some reason, known only to herself (or possibly to that strange being Miss Traill), the Woman in Grey had insisted on the public announcement of her new relationship with the ex-Home Secretary being delayed until Lorn Abbey should be fit for a home-coming.

Repairs there had been pushed forward in all haste. A regiment of men had been working at the house, inside and out, while everything was being done according to plans prepared by Miss Hope and approved by Sir Wilfrid. Half a dozen gardeners had been employed about the place, and, altogether, the results, considering the short space of time, were little short of marvellous.

'When you begin life at Lorn Abbey,' she had said, 'your home may be my home, if you will, but not before. It is only a whim, but I have a strange yearning for that house. I want the new order of things to commence there.'

Meanwhile she lived with Lady Towers at Queen's Gate; but though she sometimes played at helping Uncle Wilfrid with his work, a feeling grew upon me that she wished to avoid me—that she was not quite happy in my presence. 'Society' had taken her up, and her beauty—the aroma of mystery which hung round her, and the odd, striking story she had written, all combined to make her 'the fashion.'

I wondered often if Paula, in her travels with the Annes-
leys, knew what was happening at home. But we did not hear from her. Her influence upon our lives began to seem relegated to the past. Regularly her allowance was sent to the solicitor she had so ostentatiously employed, and that was the only communication between us.

The formal adoption of Consuelo Hope as the daughter of Sir Wilfrid Amory was to be celebrated by a dinner and a ball, which would also constitute the 'house-warming' at the newly purchased, newly decorated Lorn Abbey, one night during the second week in April.

I had taken chambers in Whitehall Court, conveniently near the Home Office, and to spend Saturdays and Sundays at the Abbey when I chose. But it had been a whim of Uncle Wilfrid's, and possibly of Miss Hope's, that I was not to see the old place until the night of the ball, when all the alterations and improvements would be complete and the house at its best.

Uncle Wilfrid had gone down the night before, following the staff of servants, and Lady Towers had promised to take Miss Hope on the day of the 'house-warming,' herself remaining afterwards for a week or more.

An odd sense of being in the midst of a dream was upon me as I got out of the train at the railway-station at Martenhead. I sent on my luggage and decided to walk up to the Abbey, having purposely failed to specify the train by which I would arrive.

In town the season was already in full swing, and here, in the river-country, the delicate intoxication of mid-April was in the air. A lark rose, singing, from under my feet, as I trod the field-path which was a short-cut from the station to the village; and all the visible world seemed a virginal wilderness of pinky apple blossoms and a premature snow of hawthorn blossom.

Presently I crossed the last stile, and found myself in the straggling outskirts of the village. Then on past the laburnum-bowered cottages and smart new villas, and along the
road leading to Lorn Abbey, already arched over with the green and white of chestnut-trees in bloom.

A short distance ahead lumbered a furniture-van, which, after clumsily blocking up the long emerald vista for some time, stopped at length before a pretty little cottage, almost directly opposite the Lorn Abbey gates.

I remembered noticing on my first visit to the place in the autumn, that the cottage, which was called The Nest, was 'To let—unfurnished,' but now it had evidently been lately taken. The name was not an inappropriate one, for the small, low building looked cosy and inviting. It was well retired behind a neatly clipped hedge, and, from its upper windows, all who went in or out of the tall gates on the other side might readily be seen.

I glanced carelessly up, wondering if the new inmates of The Nest (who would be Uncle Wilfrid's nearest neighbors) would prove to be acquaintances or strangers, when a sudden flash of vivid scarlet color between the curtains of a central window caught and arrested my eye.

A woman, dressed in red, was peeping out at me. But hardly had I gained an impression of dark eyes and hair before the muslin curtains were pulled tightly together, only leaving visible a faint sheen of scarlet gown.

Surprised at this evident desire for concealment, for an instant my eyes were not withdrawn from the house; and, as I still gazed, the front-door was thrown open, as though to admit the furniture which had just arrived at the gates.

Above, the gleam of scarlet in the window had disappeared.

I walked on thoughtfully. Why had my uncle's new neighbors thought it necessary to hide themselves from me?

I had reached the tall Abbey gates, and seen a couple of little children playing at the door of the long empty and deserted lodge, when a whim seized me to enter by another way. I was not expected at any particular time, therefore a slight détour could inconvenience nobody.
I walked on, past the high wall and long stretch of hedge, newly trimmed, until I had left behind me the limits of the park and reached the outlying meadows which on that side bounded the estate. At the corner of a triangular-shaped field was a stile, and I leaped over, skirting along the hedge within. In the distance gleamed the river, and half-way between loomed the tall tree which sheltered the grave of the murderess, Florence Haynes.

I had no wish to see the spot again, and I had not ceased to resent the fact that Lorn Abbey land should afford a rest-ing-place to such a woman as she had been. But the desire had taken hold upon me to pass that way once more, and so to the house by the Abbot’s Walk.

Now, to my surprise, I found that someone else had been before me. The tall figure of a man was silhouetted against the sunny, yellow-green background, and I could see that he was standing still, with bent head and hands behind him, close to the spot where the stone indicating the low grave rose above the grass.

His back was toward me, and my footfalls on the springy turf did not warn him of my approach. I had got close enough to see that he was young, dark-haired, and well dressed, before the crackling of some small twig under the pressure of my boot caused him to start and glance over his shoulder. That movement showed me a face, which, once seen, and only for an instant, would never be forgotten. Even had he not turned to regard me deliberately as I drew near to him, I should have known the man again after a lapse of twenty years. It would have been impossible to fancy a handsomer face. It was too handsome, indeed, to belong to anyone save an actor, worshipped by foolish girls, or an artist’s model; and yet there was a certain latent suggestion of strength in it, too.

For a moment I thought that he intended to speak to me, and paused, expecting him to do so. But, after half opening his lips, with the vividly blue eyes fastened questioningly
upon me, he dropped his head, and, with his hands still
grasping a small stick behind his back, walked rapidly away.
He took the direction from which I had come, and when he
had gone some distance, I could not resist slowly following.
I was possessed with an unreasonable but keen desire to
know which way he would choose when he should have
reached the road.
Without a backward glance, he vaulted over the little
stile, where, presently, I stood looking after him.
The road was long and straight. His was the only figure
visible upon it, and, walking smartly as he did, I very soon
had my curiosity so far satisfied as to see him turn in at the
gate of The Nest.
Then I retraced my steps, and went slowly on toward
the house.
The curious old trees, cut in fantastic shapes, which lined
the Abbot's Walk, were straggling and unkempt no longer.
The water in the moat was covered no more with a thick
green coat of slime. The place looked as it might have
looked a century or so ago, perhaps, when Lorn Abbey was
in its prime. Beyond lay the lawn, smooth and green as
emerald velvet, jewelled with great beds of crimson tulips.
Flowers grew at the foot of the sundial, and though the old
grey stone house still loomed up with stern and forbidding
aspect, incongruous among the dainty beauties of spring,
there was, in spite of all, an indefinable air of festivity
about it. Of what this consisted I could scarcely have told
at first. But as I approached the open front-door under
the tower, seeing the glimmer of great blue-and-white china
vases through the duskiness, against a rich background of
oak, I realized that there were filmy curtains in all the win-
dows, with here and there a dash of vivid-colored silk; that
near the house was a marquee, covered with red-and-white
striped canvas, and that a strip of crimson carpeting had al-
ready been laid from the carriage drive to the big, iron-
hinged, carved doors.
A STRANGER BESIDE THE GRAVE

Inside somebody was playing the piano. A tinkle of music floated out to me, and as I stood still for an instant to listen, I started to hear the great clock in the tower suddenly begin to strike. Five times it boomed out, with a dull, echoing sound at the end. As it finished there was a sound of laughter overhead, and in a small oriel window below the clock two heads appeared close together—my uncle's and Consuelo Hope's.

* * * * *

Dinner was over. The health of Sir Wilfrid and his beautiful adopted daughter had been drunk, and many pretty little speeches had been made.

Out on the lawn bright-hued Chinese lanterns hung like jewels against a purple sky. The marquee was brilliant with light. From some unseen place soft music of harp and violin floated. The scent of flowers was everywhere, and the pale loveliness of roses and yellow tulips shone against dark panellings of oak.

Each moment carriages were driving up and depositing such guests as had chosen to come early to the ball. Every bedroom in the Abbey would be occupied for the night, and all those at the inn would also be in request. But no one would begrudge me the haunted chamber in the tower.

The huge room which, in the days before Queen Bess, had been the refectory of the Abbey was now the ballroom, with a hundred brilliant lights reflected in the polished floor. Beyond was a modern conservatory, which connected with the drawing-room as well, and in the great hall between the two doors, outlined against a newly-placed background of palms, stood Consuelo Hope beside Sir Wilfrid.

Never had she been so beautiful. As usual, she was a 'Woman in Grey'; but now it was the shimmering, transparent pearl-grey of summer moonlight. What her gown was I do not know, but it floated about her like a soft mist, out of which her wonderful face and neck and arms gleamed
with almost unearthly fairness. I could scarcely take my eyes from her.

'Shall you dance to-night?' I asked, when I had stood near her for a time in silence.

She turned her luminous eyes upon me.

'I do not know. I must not forget that now I have undertaken new duties, new responsibilities.'

'If you do, will you dance for the first time with me?'

'I should like to say "Yes"; and Sir Wilfrid would like it, I think. Yet, do you know, there is something supernatural about me to-night. I——'

'I always thought that,' I interpolated.

But she did not appear to hear my words.

'I seem to know things before they happen,' she went on.

'For instance, I knew that you were going to ask me to dance the first dance. But I know, too, that something will prevent my doing so, even if I accept. Isn't that strange? I am feverish with many presentiments.'

'Are you not happy to-night?' I asked, looking deep into the eyes that were shadowed under the long lashes.

'Happy? How ungrateful I should be if I were not! I am as happy as I can be—as happy as one who has toiled up a pathless mountain, and stops to rest awhile, though seeing all the time that a higher mountain still towers above which must yet be climbed. You don't understand me. But, somehow, I can't resist speaking out to you things that were better left unsaid.'

If I read her face aright, it expressed a longing for sympathy, a sudden desire to drop the veil of mystery she had always worn.

'If you need help,' I exclaimed, 'and I could give it you?'

'Ah, if you knew how I needed help! But there is no one who can give it to me, not even the friend who has been kindest to me in all the world.'

'You mean my uncle?'
"No; for I have not known your uncle so long. I mean a man of whom I spoke to you once, saying that I had "one good friend." I did not tell you his name."

I remembered, with the same miserable pang of jealousy that had stabbed me months before. But I did not speak.

"I think you know him," she went on in an oddly apologetic way. "I heard you mention him. It was when you spoke of that wicked or unfortunate woman who died in prison, and lies buried out there in the lonely field by the river—Florence Haynes. He defended her in court during her trial for murder, I think you said."

"Do you mean Tom Gordon?" I inquired, in the unreasoning anger of jealousy.

"Yes, I mean Tom Gordon. Sir Wilfrid knows he is my friend. He asked him here to-night. I hope, but I am not sure, that he will come."

"Does not your premonition go so far as that?" I said, almost sullenly.

I felt that I hated the man Gordon—hated all that was finest and cleverest in him, and which would therefore most appeal to her.

"No; my premonition only tells me that something disturbing, something unluckily for, perhaps distressing, will happen in the midst of all this pleasure, this triumph (for I admit this night is a triumph for me, in a way). I wish I did not feel it; it has set every nerve throbbing, like that heart-breakingly sweet music of the harp over there."

"At least, say you will give me the first dance," I pleaded obstinately. "I will take the risk of your not being able to fulfil your promise. And if I am not to have it with you, it shall be with no one else. Will you make the same bargain?"

"You mean, promise not to dance it with anyone but you?"

"Yes; if Gordon comes, for instance, don't give it to him."

The Woman in Grey usually hid her changes of feeling or emotions under a veil, which I was not astute enough to
penetrate. But now, to my surprise, a rich wave of rosy color swept over the face which had been so pearly fair.

'Mr. Gordon does not often ask favors of me. He demands them as rights. And I—must grant them.'

For a moment I lost my head. I forgot that I, at all events, had no 'rights' over her. I was conscious only of my love for her, the pang of jealous agony which smote me, and the desire to be put out of my misery.

'What is he to you that you, who rule other men, should be ruled by him?' I broke out. 'What has he done to——'

The look on her face checked me, and the words died on my lips.

'Finish your sentence. You must, now,' she said in a half-whisper.

'Forgive me; I know I have no right. I was going to ask if you had given him a promise—to be his wife.'

'Oh no; not that.'

She smiled again, as if relieved, and turned abruptly away. Then a stream of guests began arriving. I had had her to myself for three minutes; it was all I could expect. But later, when the dancing was about to begin, I came and stood before her, waiting.

'I claim this valse,' I said, with a certain seriousness beyond what the occasion warranted. Somehow, I did not stop to question why her consent or refusal seemed to mean a great deal beyond the mere promise of a dance to me.

'You claim it? Isn't that rather arbitrary? But, after all, my presentiment does not seem likely to be fulfilled.'

The music of 'Life is a Dream' throbbed in the air. People were beginning to dance. I boldly laid my arm round her waist, and her pearl-hidden hand was on my shoulder.

In another instant we should have moved away together, but a harsh voice broke in upon the charm.

'Consuelo—quick! Come with me! There isn't a moment to lose. There's something I must tell you.'
It was Miss Traill, hideous in black and scarlet satin—Miss Traill, her idol-eyes goggling in a wild emotion, her podgy hands pulling at Miss Hope's gauzy sleeve.

The Woman in Grey started away from me.

'What do you mean?' she murmured.

'Don't stop to ask. Come where I can talk to you—you must be prepared—think what to do.'

As she spoke she dragged the half-unwilling girl from my arm, which had still clasped her waist. My presence was disregarded. I do not think that Miss Traill so much as remembered it.

Miss Hope, with one backward glance, allowed the elder woman to lead her away, still talking rapidly, excitedly, scarce taking thought to modulate her voice.

'Of all the people in the world, he has come—just at this moment of success. Can you meet him safely? Or what is to be done? If you could get into the conservatory and train yourself to calmness before he sees you! It is those others who have brought him. Can it be a plot?'

'I don't understand you. "They," "he"—whom do you mean?' murmured the beautiful lips.

'Ah! it's too late! They're coming!'

My first thought was of the masterful barrister, Tom Gordon, whom, it had seemed to me, Consuelo Hope either loved or feared. I looked round expectantly, but, as my eyes travelled farther toward the great open folding-doors, I could hardly bring myself to believe what they told me.

Was it possible that the tall, dark, beautiful woman pausing between hall and drawing-room, leaning on the arm of some man I could not see, was Paula?

Yes; there were the Amnesleys, just in front, and as I stood staring at the three, whom I supposed to be far away in Italy or France, their names were loudly announced by one of the bowing footmen: 'Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Amnesley, Miss Wynne, Mr. George Haynes-Haviland.'

They moved up the length of the drawing-room, where
my uncle stood among the guests who were disinclined for
dancing, Paula’s head held high, a defiant smile on her red
lips, yellow satin draperies billowing around her, diamonds
 glittering in her black hair. Her hand was slipped lightly
through the arm of the man I had seen a few hours before
bending over the grave of Florence Haynes the murderess
—the man whom I had watched afterwards until he disap-
peared into the gate of the newly-let cottage, The Nest.

I saw them meet. I saw Uncle Wilfrid’s shoulders square
themselves in a way I had sometimes observed when he was
gathering his mental forces for a tremendous effort. I saw
Paula, smiling still—not a pleasant smile—and introduc-
ing the stranger with the handsome foreign face. But I waited
for no more. I walked from the ball-room into the adjoining
drawing-room, where they stood, and held out my hand
to Paula.

Partly I was influenced by the old wish to be at my uncle’s
side through all disturbing crises, and partly, perhaps,
though less consciously, animated by the desire to give a
little longer time of preparation to the Woman in Grey.

What was her fear, what her need of preparation, I did
not know. But I loved her, and felt strongly possessed by
the blind impulse to shield her when I could.

‘You have chosen to give us a surprise, Paula,’ I said in
a low voice, as she barely touched my extended hand.

‘Yes, I suppose it is—rather a surprise’—with quick
eagle glances round the room and into the ballroom beyond.
‘We came back to England—er—somewhat unexpectedly,
and heard there was to be a ball. It seemed hardly neces-
sary for me to wait for an invitation, did it?’

‘Not if you chose to come.’

‘Besides, Mr. and Mrs. Annesley, who are fond of the
river, and know I like it, have taken a cottage in the neigh-
borhood. It’s called The Nest.’

‘Ah! Then it was you I saw at the window there in a
red gown this afternoon?’
‘Did you see someone? If you had recognized me or Mrs. Annesley, then it would have spoiled the effect. I would not have missed this for anything. By the way, let me make you and Mr. Haynes-Haviland known to each other. Mr. Haynes-Haviland is the gentleman of whom Uncle Wilfrid bought Lorn Abbey last autumn; but he has added to his name since then, for family reasons. We met at Nice, and he came back with us to England a few days ago.’

I knew now why Paula had chosen to bring this man to England in her train, why she smiled at him, with beguiling in her eyes. She had made up her mind that he would be able to recognize the Woman in Grey. He was the stepson of an ex-servant. That alone I thought would have been enough to ban him in her eyes, had she had nothing to gain from his acquaintance. Now she was still leaning on his arm, with a certain air of confidence and good-fellowship.

‘Uncle Wilfrid has told me that he is ready and willing to forgive and forget,’ Paula said, looking up at me with a peculiar burning glance. ‘I asked him, though it was hard, for I don’t like humiliating myself. Now I ask you—will you do the same?’

‘Gladly, if you consider that I have anything to forgive you.’

‘Not that I mean to beg Uncle Wilfrid to take me back,’ she went on. ‘I am emancipated; and, besides, to-night he has formally and publicly filled my place. But we can all be friends. Don’t mind my saying this before Mr. Haynes-Haviland. He has been with us so much of late that our affairs are no secret to him. And now there is someone else who must forgive me for past rudeness, else my state of beatification will not be complete—I mean Miss Hope. Take me to her, please.’

‘She is dancing, I dare say,’ I answered confusedly. ‘There are so many old friends of yours here, Paula, who will be glad and surprised to see you. Better stop and greet them first.’
'No. They can wait.'
'I will take you, then,' I said. 'But Mr. Haynes-Haviland should not be compelled to lose a dance. I will introduce him to a partner.'
'Mr. Haynes-Haviland is going to dance with me by-and-by.' And Paula looked up at him bewitchingly.
'Miss Wynne has excited my curiosity in regard to this wonderful Miss Hope,' said he.
At that instant the great clock in the tower solemnly tolled the hour of eleven. As the first deep note was struck the shock of it seemed to vibrate through the whole body of the man. The saintly beauty was gone from his face. There was an agony of listening in his pose.
'Eight, nine, ten, eleven!' boomed the clock.
For the fraction of a second suspense appeared intensified in each faintly twitching muscle. Then, as silence fell, Mr. Haynes-Haviland smiled, with a sigh like that of a man who awakens from an awful dream.
'Ah,' he said, 'the sound of the clock surprised me for a moment. I remember there used to be a sort of secret about the winding of it. I never knew it. And my poor stepmother, who was rather fond of her knowledge of its workings, was chary of revealing the mechanism. But, then, I forgot; the place is again in the hands of the original family, the Amorys.'
This explanation of an emotion which he must have known could not pass unnoticed, seemed insufficient to me. For some reason I fancied he had dreaded to hear the clock strike twelve. Finding that it finished with one stroke short of midnight had afforded him intense relief.
'I am sure that it will be interesting to know who gave the information,' Paula said. 'Apropos of that or nothing, mon cousin, will you or will you not give us your aid in finding Miss Hope?'
'I cannot help you,' I answered. 'I don't know where Miss Hope is to be found.'
‘Ah, if you won’t, Uncle Wilfrid will.’

She almost pushed past me, clinging still to the man whom she appeared completely to have subjugated. I did not wait to see what they would do. An uncontrollable impulse bade me go to Consuelo, if she were still in the ballroom, and stand ready for any emergency that might arise.

At first I looked for her in vain. A dance had ended, and another one begun, but she was not visible among the valsers.

The floor of the ballroom was crowded already, and I got myself hastily into the now apparently deserted conservatory out of the dancers’ way. Then, feeling that my mission had been taken from me, I sat down in a retired corner, into which a rustic seat had been pushed under a palm. It was a nook evidently set apart for purposes of flirtation, out of sight of either door, almost hidden among tall Easter lilies, but I felt that it would answer my purpose as well. No spot could be more convenient for a few undisturbed moments of quiet reflection.

I had scarcely occupied the hidden nook for sixty seconds, however, when I became conscious that someone had passed behind me, having entered from the outer door. There was a rustle of silken skirts along the floor, accompanied by the step of a man, and then followed the creaking of a seat as one or more persons subsided upon it.

I began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. It would not be pleasant to overhear a snatch of love-making, perhaps even a proposal of marriage; but where I sat I was completely hemmed in. As I hesitated the man spoke. Instantly, though I had not met him for years, I knew that I was listening to Tom Gordon, the famous barrister who had pleaded the innocence of the dead Florence Haynes.

‘What are you going to do?’ he had questioned.

‘I do not know,’ answered the voice of Consuelo Hope.

‘Strange that it should come at the moment of your triumph—if it has come.’

‘But life is strange. My life stranger than all.’
If I stand by and see that there's danger for you, what
will you do for me if I can save you?'
'What could you do?'
'Ah, you'll find I'm never quite without resources. Other
people have had occasion to learn that before.'
'I know. I should be grateful, whatever you did for me.'
'Gratitude! We've got past that, Consuelo. I want more
from you. Give me my answer to-night. And there's only
one answer possible from you to me.'
'Mr. Gordon! Do you mean to threaten me?'
'No, no. And yet, I don't know. I think sometimes
there's a devil in me, a mad, desperate devil, which would
send me to the world's end to work for you if you loved
me or to work against you if you didn't. By Heaven! I
don't know of what I should become capable in such a case,
so don't try me, I warn you.'
'Oh for a friend—a true, disinterested friend!'
'Nonsense! Women of your sort don't make "disin-
terested friends" among men. Let me kiss you once, and
I'll stand between you and danger, as I've done before.
What! you won't? I'll take it, then, by Jove!'
I could bear no more. I had held myself in leash, feeling
that, after the first words had been uttered between the two,
it would hurt her worse to have to know that she had been
overheard by me than for me to remain hidden from her.
But my fingers in my ears had not sufficed to drown the two
voices rising with the pitch of each one's emotion, and, my
blood tingling as though I had been struck by him, I sprang
from my seat, and, with a crashing of flower-pots round me,
strode out of my ambush. I stood there, eyeing him, my
breath coming hard.
Then, when through the dim rosy light of Chinese lan-
terns she had made out the face of the eavesdropper, with a
little involuntary cry which cut straight to my heart, the
Woman in Grey moved close to me—away from him. For
the fraction of a second her hand lay on my arm, and I
could feel the electric quivering of her slight body. A wild, passionate joy surged over me. She had come to me for protection from him. In an instant she had remembered herself, and recovered her spirit; but she could not rob me of the subtle delight that had been.

Gordon had leaped up from the bench where they had sat together, and faced me, frowning and silent for the moment. He was a tall man, though less in height than I, and older by ten years or more, brawny, dark, muscular, with a bold, large-featured face, heavy brows, grey eyes, deep set and flashing, and a head of magnificent proportions, covered with a thick shock of grizzled curly hair.

'By Jove!' he ejaculated in a peculiar, meditative, yet angry growl, glaring at me the while. 'By Jove!' he repeated, still more emphatically and thoughtfully. 'Terence Darkmore, of all men! What a fool I've been that this never occurred to me before!'

Without another word he put down his great shaggy head, and with arms folded across his chest, the fingers of each hand nervously twitching and drumming, he went past us and out at the door through which they had lately come—the one that opened on the lawn.

'Consuelo!' I said—never before had I dared to call her by that name, but now it came to my lips without volition—'forgive me! I was caught in a trap; it all happened in so few moments. I tried not to hear; but now I can't regret that I did. Let me be that friend for whom you cried out, and, some day, more to you than that. I—'

'Hush!' she said, with a strange, almost unearthly solemnity. 'God knows what this night's work may end in for me!'

She moved away from me a little, as though she did not see or had forgotten me, towards the door of the ballroom, through which the white light of a thousand wax candles streamed, and a cold air seemed to blow between us, shutting me away from her, barrier-like. I could not attempt to keep
her, and I should have stood still as she passed me by had not the doorway from the drawing-room suddenly been blocked by a group of people—Paula, Uncle Wilfrid, and the man who called himself Haynes-Haviland.

The crisis, whatever it might be, had come; and, with my blood returning on my heart with a great rush, I stepped forward to the side of the Woman in Grey.

'Consuelo,' said my uncle, 'I have brought you one who wishes for your forgiveness, and would not be content to wait when I urged that another time might be more suitable than this.'

'Your forgiveness for many things, Miss Hope,' went on Paula glibly, holding out her hand. 'I have been wondering if I can partially atone by introducing to you an old friend of your own. It is always so pleasant to meet old friends from whom one has been separated, so delightful to be the one to bring them together.' And she indicated, with a little bend of her head, the handsome, saintly-faced man at her side.

If such a benign face could be the seat of malice for the space of a second or two, it sparkled and snapped from his vivid blue eyes, utterly transforming them for the time being. Then, as they fixed themselves upon the Woman in Grey, a curious, puzzled bewilderment took the place of passing malevolence. Again the whole face quivered with a nervous eagerness—a look which would, if it could, have pierced to the very soul of Consuelo Hope. This expression, in its turn, was followed by a steady, intense, compelling stare.

A quick glance at Paula told me that she had also been breathlessly watching the countenance of her new friend.

Hardly did I dare intrude with a look even of solicitous curiosity at Miss Hope, yet anxiety drew my eyes towards her. I might have spared my fears for her outward calmness, at least. She was apparently exquisitely unconcerned.

'I don't quite understand,' she gently breathed. 'An old
friend, you say. Why, have we ever met before?'—smiling, childlike, at him.

'I don't know what to think. I—I—am at a loss,' he stammered.

'And I,' sweetly said Consuelo Hope, 'never until to-night heard of a Mr. Haynes-Haviland.'

'I'm disappointed,' exclaimed Paula with an effort at lightness. 'I fancied I was bringing about a meeting of old acquaintances. But, at all events, you both know Lorn Abbey. You will have much in common. Come, Mr. Haynes-Haviland,' very playfully—'shake hands with Miss Hope, and be friends.'

Obediently he put out his slim brown hand, sleek and snaky-looking as an East Indian's. Once more that blue light of malice flamed forth from the saint-like eyes. His fingers touched Consuelo's as she slowly extended her hand to meet his, and then with a gasp and a shudder she drew back.

'Take me away,' she whispered to Uncle Wilfrid, with a sob catching her voice. 'This dance—I—I must go—I have promised it.'

'My God!' I heard Haynes-Haviland mutter, and I turned on him. His very lips were white and hung apart, while his eyes were rivetted on the hand under the sheath of pearls.
CHAPTER XIII.

THE NIGHT AND THE DAWN.

Everybody said that the ball was a great success. Lorn Abbey had been transformed into fairyland. But I went through it all as one who has been hypnotized.

The hours were long in passing, and somehow, as I looked out into the purple night, past the jewelled shining of the colored lanterns which ringed the Abbey in, I thought of that lonely grave down by the never-silent whispering of the river.

The clock in the tower struck the hours regularly now, and as it boomed out dully for half-past two, the last carriageful of guests drove away, the sound of wheels dying as they rolled along the avenue.

Twenty minutes later I was in my own room—the haunted room of the tower. I had dressed hastily for dinner in the evening, and had scarcely had time to bestow a moment's thought on my new quarters until now; but as I shut myself in at this still hour of the night a quick flash of recollection brought back to me a picture of the place as I had seen it last. There could scarcely have been a stronger contrast than between its present and past appearance.

All the musty and faded hangings, redolent of tragedy, had been removed. The old-fashioned furniture and that dreadful canopied bed, where the murdered woman had lain, had been replaced with modern and artistic fittings. The dark-panelled walls were hung with favorite water-colors and engravings of my own. There was a great white fur
rug before the fire-place, a bookcase in one corner, a writing-table under the window, bright flowers on the dressing-table, where my belongings had been laid out by my uncle's man.

All was bright and cheerful, seeming to laugh at ghosts and gloom; and yet, as I lay in bed, watching the red coals which fell in a dying fire (kindled, doubtless, to take the night chill from an unused room) a gruesome sense of the horror which had set this room apart from any other once and forever grew upon me and kept other thoughts at bay.

I could not sleep. Strange shadow-shapes loomed fantastically across the wall with the wavering glow of the fire. An eeriness that was a part of the night and silence and remoteness crept over me, chilling my flesh.

Suddenly I gave a great start, and leaped up to my elbow. The fire had flickered for the last time, and a pall of darkness curtained the room. Something was moving and breathing stealthily over the head of the bed. I could hear a board creaking faintly under a sly footfall; yet I was positive that I had locked my door, and there was no other mode either of ingress or egress.

In another instant, it seemed, the presence—whatever it might be—would have touched me. I should be feeling those long, sighing breaths fanning my very face. With a shudder of something nearer supernatural horror than I had ever known before, I sprang out of bed, and, feeling through the darkness for the mantel, struck a match.

The flame of the wax vesta flared up brightly for an instant, making a circle of light for a few yards around me; and, as the first fitful flicker broke into the gloom, I had an impression—rather than actually saw—that some small object moved along the wall, halfway between the floor and ceiling. I took a couple of quick steps towards it, and as I did so it disappeared, actually seeming to melt into invisibility.

So like a flash had the presentment come and gone again that I could scarcely have said I had seen anything at all,
and yet I knew, without the slightest vacillation of doubt, that a hand, or the semblance of a hand, had flitted along the dark polished panelling of the wall.

I waited a moment or two, motionless, and then, as the match burnt my hand, I involuntarily blew it out before lighting the dressing-table candles, as I had intended to do. No sooner was I once more in darkness than a sound, between a sigh and a moan, jarred the silence.

I was not a superstitious man, and in such crises as had so far come to me during my twenty-nine years of life I had not shown myself a coward. I was certainly not afraid of danger, and yet the thought of that grey, groping hand, crawling spider-like along the wall, and the sibilant hiss of that long-drawn breath in the darkness, did check the healthy current of my blood.

My bed stood in the place once occupied by the other, and as I lighted the candles for a second more thorough inspection of the place, I could not forbear a glance at the pillows I had so lately quitte, with a thought in my mind of the bleeding wraith of the unfortunate Hannah Haynes, said to have appeared more than once to intruders in this haunted chamber. There was nothing more formidable to be seen, however, than the fresh indentation of my own head, and the disarranged coverings which trailed upon the floor, or so I thought when I glanced toward the bed from a distance; but, as I walked round the room, one of the candles from the dressing-table held above my head, and thus chanced to approach a little nearer, I saw something which made me fancy that my eyes or brain had played me a vicious trick.

All across the lace-frilled pillows on which I had uneasily sought slumber a few minutes ago lay a stain of crimson which had not been there before. Great round drops, big as those which fall in a summer thunder-shower, were spattered over the white linen, in some places having run together. I held my candle above the place, staring at it, almost ready
to doubt the evidence of my own eyes, and the spots glistened wet in the wavering light.

There was no sleep for me during what remained of that night.

To a certain extent my nerves were under control, but forgetfulness would not come, and I gladly welcomed the first steely knife-blade of dawn that cut the darkness at my window-panes.

As the sky slowly flushed with ineffable rose, and a gold delicate as drifting feathers from a canary's breast, I bade farewell to bed, and in the tingling cold water of my bath found a tonic which banished the mysteries of the dark hours to the region of all unsubstantial nightmares.

To be sure, they had happened. I had dreamed nothing. The crimson spots on the pillow, and a streak which I had found on my handkerchief, sufficiently attested that. But each phenomenon, viewed by the light of day, seemed to lose the ghastly import which had belonged to it at the time of occurrence.

I was fully dressed before six o'clock, and moving softly through the passages and corridors and down the two flights of stairs which divided the tower-room from the great hall. I quietly unbarred and unbolted the heavy oaken door, and stepped out into the sweet air of the morning.

Mechanically I took the way which led to the water, and as I neared the shining expanse, my eye was attracted by the new boat-house.

It was not completed as yet, and no boats were supposed to be kept there. But someone had used one yesterday; and it had been left, fastened insecurely, as though challenging the honesty of the neighborhood.

I took up the sculls and pushed gently out from under the shelter of the roof.

All along the river's edge grew willow-trees and chestnuts, with depending branches that overspread the water, making an arbor of spring green.
Slowly I feathered the sculls, delighting in the peacefulness of the place. The sweet ache of a first great love was in my heart, intensified to a delicious pain by the tender beauty of the world, in which I seemed to be alone.

My eyes wandered over the meadow (where the dew sparkled like a dust of diamonds on the cobwebs), and suddenly they were arrested by a moving figure, dressed in white or palest grey. It was Consuelo Hope. There was no mistaking that slight, supple form, taller than the generality of women.

She was walking swiftly, as though with a purpose, and I rested on my oars to watch her, in sheer pleasure at the grace of her light, springing steps. It did not occur to me to wonder where she might be going at this unusually early hour of the morning. Being dressed and out of doors myself, it appeared the most ordinary thing in the world that others should have followed my example.

But, as my eyes dwelt upon her, I began at last to realize that she was going straight, and with an air of assured determination, toward the grave of Florence Haynes, the white headstone guarding which I could just see from where I sat.

Then indeed I did wonder, and my early morning dream was changed to thoughts not so idyllic. What was there about the grave of that dead woman which had more than once drawn her to it by some subtle and mysterious attraction?

She had reached the place at last, and was kneeling down beside it, with her back turned to me in such a way that I could no longer see what she was doing.

I lifted the sculls again, all the ineffable spell gone from the hour, and would have moved on, had I not seen another figure approaching the same spot.

It was a man coming from the direction of the stile where I had yesterday left the road and walked across the meadow. At first Miss Hope had evidently been unconscious that
she was about to be disturbed. But suddenly she rose up quickly, and, after standing with a certain curious rigidity in her attitude for a moment, began walking from the grave and toward the house again.

The man who was hurrying towards her, with an unmistakable intention to overtake her, whether by her will or no, was no other than Haynes-Haviland.

I had only to comprehend so much of the situation before making up my mind that I would not take myself and my boat away. I would wait until I should be made sure that the Woman in Grey would not need my presence or protection.

She fled on before him for a few yards, and then, as if telling herself that escape was hopeless, she wheeled suddenly, and stood erect, awaiting his coming. In a moment or two more he had joined her, and my heart quickened its beating as I watched them.

He took off his hat—the same soft felt hat (particularly becoming to his picturesque features) that he had worn yesterday. Then he held out his hand as though to take hers, and I saw her, with a gesture of repulsion, put hers both behind her.

For some minutes they stood talking quietly together, and at last, just as I was beginning to think that my interference would not be necessary, her right hand and arm went out with a quick, direct movement, as though to push him away from a threatened closer contact. Her hand was pressed against his breast, holding him at arm's length, the other still hidden behind her. But I waited to see no more.

Without even stopping to moor the boat, I made one leap for the shore, sprang up the low bank, and ran toward them.

She was struggling with him now, and I thought he was trying to snatch the hand which she held behind her back; but, though she was in deadly earnest in her wish to free herself—it was plain to see that—not a cry did she utter. She was not the sort of woman to scream in emergencies.
Both figures were turned to me, in profile, and I was within a few yards of them before I was either seen or my footfalls heard on the soft, dew-wet grass.

As he started and loosed Miss Hope at sight of me, my hand was on Haynes-Haviland’s shoulder, falling there with something of the vicious, eager grasp with which I have seen a cat pounce upon a mouse.

I felt my own physical power, as I pinned him tightly, conscious of yielding flesh and muscles under my fingers. I towered over him by more than half a foot, and he appeared a pitiful, slight thing to grapple with.

Scarcely did he attempt to struggle after the one nervous shiver which ran through his frame at the unexpectedness of my attack. But, as I held him, all my sense of pride in my superior strength seemed to ooze through my fingers’ ends. Suddenly I had remembered the words which the Woman in Grey had uttered when I interposed in much the same way between her and Gordon in the conservatory only the night before.

What if my efforts in her behalf were received as coldly now? Would she think that I was always spying upon her —always ready to interfere in affairs with which I had no concern?

But there was no anger in her eyes.

‘Thank you, Mr. Darkmore!’ she cried. ‘You have saved me from a most unwarrantable annoyance. This gentleman, whose very name I had never heard until last night, has behaved with the most unpardonable rudeness. I really think the only charitable explanation of his conduct is that he is not in his right mind.’

He was staring at her with a curious, baffled expression. He seemed to be listening to the inflections of her voice, as though expecting the repetition of a haunting echo, rather than attending to her words. But suddenly he turned his eyes to me.

‘Good heavens, Mr. Darkmore!’ he exclaimed; ‘are you
the strong man of the county? It's not fair for Brobdingnag to fight with Liliput, and I cry "Peccavi!" I've made a mistake, and I must apologize. But, by Jove! I wish you'd been just one moment later in coming up!

"You must apologize to this lady, not to me," I said, with a species of subdued savagery; 'and you shall apologize—here and now!"

"To her?" he echoed. "To her? No—not yet—not till I am sure." And his eyes shot blue lightning at her, which would fain have penetrated to her soul. "No man shall make me do that!"

The insult in his words and in his look maddened me.

"Here is a man who means to make you do so," I said.

Hardly had the words left my lips when I saw in his face that he was a coward. He was afraid of me—afraid of my superior strength.

"No further discussion is necessary!" he broke out suddenly. "I was wrong. I will apologize to this lady for any discomfort or inconvenience I may have occasioned her. My excuse, if I have any, lies in the fact— But no! Why dwell on that? I don't wish to be on unfriendly terms with any of Sir Wilfrid Amory's people. I therefore beg that Miss Hope will forgive—all that there is to forgive."

"It is enough," she said, with hauteur.

"And for Mr. Darkmore?"

His face looked like an angel's when he smiled.

"If Miss Hope is satisfied."

"Thank you. I had a fancy for an early stroll over the old place I once knew so well, when nobody should be abroad. I did not dream of this meeting. But I trust, since I have made what amends I could for my—er—impulsiveness, the memory of it will be to neither of you less agreeable than to me."

He bowed in a graceful, foreign way, with a sweep of the hand which held his soft hat.

After all, he had contrived a more or less effective exit. I
watched him for a few moments as he went off across the field. Then I turned to Miss Hope, and with a shock I realized that her proud bearing had been a sham. She leaned against a tree, with closed eyes, her cheeks and lips milk-white.

'Consuelo!' I exclaimed, with passionate solicitude.

This time she did not repel me. Her lashes quivered, rose, and fell again.

'Are you going to question me?' she said. 'It will be torture if you do; for I am at my weakest. Just what you have saved me from you do not know—nor do I, perhaps, in full. I was not ready for him, or the crisis he may bring with him, though I hope triumphantly to be ready, more than ready, by-and-by. You came in a moment of need. And now I am at your mercy. Question me if you will, and I will answer you, though I repent it in bitterness throughout the remainder of my life.'

I gazed at her in silence. Then I said slowly:

'I ask you no questions, I desire no explanations. Don't you know that I love you?'

'You—love me?'

'Yes, with all that I am—all that is best and worst in me, all that is maddest and sanest—with my heart and mind and soul. I would live for you if you would let me. To die for you would be enough reason for having lived at all.'

'And this—this in spite of knowing nothing of me, save mystery and—and some things which might have roused your hate, or, still worse, your contempt?'

'In spite of that—in spite of far more, should there be more. Last night I asked if you would let me help you. And now you have shown me that you need a strong arm. Promise that mine may be that arm. I ask nothing more. You are yourself a queen among women. And the queen can do no wrong.'

'Ah, you are loyal!' she murmured. 'I wonder how great a test your loyalty would stand?'
'Try me!' I implored.

She did not seem to hear me. Her eyes looked far away, over the grave which billowed above the grass at a few yards' distance, and over the shimmering river.

I would have raised her hands to my lips, but her gaze followed them in my grasp, falling upon the sheath of pearls, and with a strange, eerie cry she wrenched them from me.

'Love is not for me—the love of a woman for a man! I am vowed to a cause. What will be the end God only knows! But, meanwhile, do not think of me as of a woman at all; feel towards me as though, instead of flesh and blood, I was as the "stuff that dreams are made of," an idea—a means towards a great end—nothing more—or nothing more to you!'

She took a rapid step away from me, then turned and came back.

'God knows I thank you for your trust and loyalty,' she said brokenly. I need the courage which both give. But tell me that, from this hour, everything shall be between us as though these words of yours had not been spoken. That you will forget—'

'Possibly, when I die, but I think not even then,' I answered.

'Ah! you "think"—men think! Say, at least, that you will not speak of it to me again!'

'I will not speak if you can tell me now that there is not, and never can be, any love in your heart for me!'

'I dare not have a heart. Some day I may find that I have the right to a soul, and a body, too. But if not, I shall be as a bubble that vanishes, and is as though it had never been, while you gaze at it. My breath is drawn with certainty but for a day. There may be no to-morrow for me. And yet I smile! I enjoy the sunshine and the flowers, and I talk with the only real, the only happy people—those who have commonplace lives. Now you are answered. I have no heart—for you or for any man!'
CHAPTER XIV.

TAKEN BY SURPRISE.

Hours passed. And it came about that by the grave of the murderess I fought a great battle with myself. I dare not say I won. That was for the future to decide. Despite her decisive words, I had not abandoned all hope for the future.

The pain of my disappointment would not have been so hard to bear if I had had some great and absorbing work to do. And into the midst of my heart-burnings came the recollection of a thing I had forgotten for the moment—my experiences of the night before. When I had finished the ceremony of farewells with such friends as had remained after the ball, but were leaving in the morning, it was a relief to plunge at once into the exhaustive examination of the tower-room which I had promised myself, though the affair had now lost its importance in my eyes.

The search, however, was destined to end in disappointment. To all appearance the panellings were guiltless of secret doors or openings of any kind. Needless to say, I had every intention of keeping the strange disturbances to myself. In the first place, they were now naturally relegated to the background of my mind. In the second, if there had been jugglery, it would be well not to give the instigator the satisfaction of learning that his tricks had been successful.

I kept my own counsel, therefore, planning to watch and wait for any further manifestations which might occur. I would have been thankful if I could have got away from the
Abbey without exciting my uncle's surprise. But I knew that I must remain until the appointed time of my departure, Monday—and perhaps it was as well that I should be given an early opportunity of testing my strength. It came that very evening. At dinner we were a small party, a fact which was remarked, after the gaieties of the night before. Beside Uncle Wilfrid, the Woman in Grey—who was now a daughter of the house—and myself, there were only Sir Thomas and Lady Towers, and Miss Traill.

An uncontrollable longing drew my eyes to the beautiful face opposite my uncle, and whenever I looked that way I was again and again surprised to find that I, too, was being regarded with a curious, searching gaze. There was a question in it—a question unmistakably demanding an answer. And I determined that, as soon as I could decently join the ladies in the drawing-room, that answer it should have.

Before dinner was at an end, however, I had occasion to observe that I was not the only one who had noticed the questioning glances of the Woman in Grey. Miss Traill had seen them, and, I thought, was both puzzled and displeased. When at length the ladies rose, she almost ran after Miss Hope, catching her up at the door, and hooking her hand through the fair, reluctant arm, the inevitable mongoose sitting in the long train of her gown, which whisked along the floor after her.

A decanter of rare old port stood near Sir Thomas's elbow, and I knew what that boded for Uncle Wilfrid. But it was not long before I availed myself of my own lack of responsibility, to leave the two sitting over the table together alone. Before I could reach the piano, where Consuelo sat dreamily playing, Miss Traill had intercepted me, holding the mongoose hugged in both her arms. I subsided into a chair beside her, not too eagerly, and she began chattering away about the mongoose. At length it occurred to me, merely by way of keeping up my end of the conversation, to ask her where she had obtained the animal. To my
surprise, a flush mounted to the dome of forehead showing between the two black falls of her wig.

'Ah, Mr. Darkmore, you are too bad!' she exclaimed. 'I can see by your face that you know where I got the mongoose, and that you're only waiting to see whether I mean to tell you. But I'm too smart for you. I don't intend to fib.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to disclaim all knowledge of the mongoose's antecedents, all desire to trick her into any admission, but I suddenly changed my mind. I therefore only smiled meaningly, allowing her to interpret my look as she might.

'You've been there,' she went on, goggling up at me.

I wondered where I had been, but I merely answered by a question: 'Well, and if I have?'

'You mustn't believe everything that little wretch told you, that's all. It was but an innocent trick, when everything's said and done, and harmed nobody, sending the telegram. I confess 'twas I who thought of it. Consuelo wouldn't have it, and was very angry when she heard what had been done. I do hope that now that little beast has betrayed us (probably telling lots of lies about us into the bargain), that you won't say anything to your uncle. He—he might not understand, you know, and would think hardly of me for playing tricks with him, even though it brought about his happiness.'

Her great prominent, slanting eyes were almost starting out of her head in her eagerness. Still confused, still at a loss to understand, I knew at last to what she was referring. Somehow she had learned that the secret of the false telegram had been betrayed, and was doing her best to save herself and Miss Hope from any disagreeable consequences. Purposely refraining from answering her appeal, I said:

'Yes, Miss Traill, I quite see your point. But what has all this got to do with your acquisition of the mongoose?'

'I'm sure, as you were told so much,' she responded slyly,
'you must have heard that I bought dear mongoose of the boy's mother, the old herb-woman. But that was years ago, before he could remember. She advertised the sweet little darling in a paper, wishing to sell him. My people knew that I had always wanted a mongoose ever since I saw one in a menagerie, and fell in love with its dear, clever face. So they sent the paper to me, to the—er—the place where I was living then, some years ago, and I ran down into the country here and secured my pretty pet. So it was that we happened to go, Consuelo and I, to the old woman's again when we were staying at the Martenhead Inn—last October, you remember?'

She would have continued, but, seeing that Consuelo had risen from the piano, she sprang hastily up, and made some excuse about putting the mongoose to bed. As Miss Traill vanished, Consuelo beckoned.

'I want to ask you something,' she abruptly said. 'You will answer me frankly, I know. You remember,' she began, 'that, among other things I said to you on the first day we ever met (though it was not by any means the first time I had ever seen you), I advised you to select the tower-room as your bedchamber when you should come here to live, and hinted that you could not do better than devote your time and attention to—learning your catechism. Did these words of mine that day suggest anything to your mind?'

'No,' I returned, making the strongest effort to speak as though the scene by the grave had never been. 'That is, until, next day, we all walked over to the Abbey, and made rather a strange discovery in the house here.'

'Ah! what was that? What did you find?'—sharply.

'It was my cousin, Miss Wynne, who found something. On the bed in the room which now, as you know, is mine, lay a fading flower. Under it was a tiny key of brass; and that key, as Miss Wynne rather rashly took means to ascertain, fitted a small receptacle in the wall which contained, among other things, a Bible and a catechism. Perhaps you
have heard of the "Amory Catechism," though I never had until that day."

'Perhaps. Well, what else was there?'

'I scarcely remember. A few books—one concerning old country houses of England, I think, and—'

'Ah! I should have examined them all if I had been you. I should do so yet, if they haven't been destroyed.'

'What was that you wished to say to me to-night?' I questioned. 'Had you something more to tell me?'

'Nothing to tell you. What there is to know, you must find out for yourself. It was a question I wanted to ask. Have you begun taking any steps toward following my advice?'

'No. I—'

'I thought perhaps you had. I fancied that a certain chart might have come into your possession. If it has, now that I have given you this one small hint of its ownership, you can see that it would be scarcely fair to keep it.'

'This, then, is the meaning of the searching looks with which you have puzzled me this evening!' I exclaimed. 'You thought I had, and was keeping, something which was yours.'

'And you have not?'

'No—I swear it.'

'You needn't. Your word is more than enough. Well, then, the thing that has happened is perhaps far more dangerous for you—and Sir Wilfrid—than I thought. For I have lost something which I would give almost anything to regain. And more depends than I dare tell you upon the person who shall find that chart.'

* * * * *

I had noticed during my conversation with Miss Traill that her hands were as formally gloved as though she had been at a dinner-party, instead of having merely dined en famille in a quiet house, which was, in all probability, to be
her future home; and at breakfast next morning I observed that her right wrist was bound round and round with narrow strips of sticking-plaster.

‘Isn’t it a shame?’ she apologized. ‘Naughty mongoose has scratched me with his sharp claws. Last night I managed to hide it with a glove, but at breakfast that will hardly do. I hope nobody minds the sight; it’s sure to be quite right again in a day or two.’

I thought that the wrist seemed badly swollen, and an angry red showed between the strips of plaster, while Miss Traill herself looked far from well.

I had never known before quite how to classify her chronologically, but this morning I should have set her down as at least fifty years old. She must have had a bad night, I concluded, though, as for me, I had not been disturbed a second time. At luncheon she did not appear, and I heard from Lady Towers in the afternoon that she was ill, had taken to her bed, and the doctor had been sent for.

Miss Hope was sitting beside her friend, perhaps; at all events, she was not visible when Uncle Wilfrid expected her to pour his tea, and Lady Towers chattyly officiated instead.

‘Poor Miss Traill!’ the little woman exclaimed excitedly. ‘I waylaid Dr. Hasbrouck on his way downstairs to ask after her. I really felt I couldn’t go to her room, for that mongoose has such a trick of swarming up my ankles under my skirts, like an exaggerated rat, don’t you know. I thought she’d only a headache, or the like, but it seems that it’s those scratches on her hand which are causing all the trouble. Dr. Hasbrouck says that she has torn the flesh on some bits of rusty metal, and that, unless her blood’s in a better condition than he fears it is, the consequences may be serious. Isn’t that odd, too? for I heard her say only this morning they’d been made by the mongoose. Of course, after that, I had to go up and see the poor creature. She was in such an excited state, especially when she heard I’d been talking to the doctor. She asked me to be sure and
not mention what he'd said about her, and so I won't; of course, to anybody but you three. Consuelo was with her, but Miss Traill made some excuse to get her out of the room for a minute or two, and I supposed she meant to question me as to what Dr. Hasbrouck had said about her chances of getting up soon without worrying Consuelo. But no; she simply muttered something about being a prisoner to her bed for an indefinite time, and hoping she wouldn't go out of her head if she got worse; she had a horror of that sort of thing. Then she asked me, very quick and hurried, to tear out the pocket of the dress she had last taken off. It was hanging over a chair, as though she had expected to get up shortly and put it on again. "Tear out the pocket!" said I. And, I must confess, I thought, and think still, she had already gone off her head! "Why not let me give you what's in the pocket?" She glared at me as though I'd made an insulting remark, and then said no; it must be the pocket itself, and before anyone should come into the room. It was a fancy, and I knew, didn't I? that sick people must be humored. I assure you I didn't lose any time tearing out that pocket, and handing it to her. She snatched at it, and tucked it under her pillow, and in an instant more Consuelo had come in with the lavender smelling salts. I couldn't help wondering what was in that pocket (now, would I have been a daughter of Eve if I hadn't, Terry?), and I did give it a tiny squeeze. But something cracked a little between my fingers. After all, it couldn't have been that there was anything particularly interesting in the pocket. It was only a poor sick woman's flighty, silly whim.'

'No doubt,' agreed Uncle Wilfrid, courteously steering clear at last of the flood of gossip. 'May I have another cup of tea? No sugar this time, please.'

Tea had been early that there might be a drive, for which Lady Towers, who had once known that part of the river-country, had especially petitioned. Miss Hope was to
have been one of the party, but now she did not wish to leave her companion alone for so long, and I was asked to take her place.

The thought of a couple of hours of Lady Towers' chatter, in my then mood, was intolerable. I threw an appealing glance at Uncle Wilfrid, who did not urge the point. I went out to the carriage with them and saw them drive away. In the house, beside the servants, there was now no one left, save Miss Traill and the beautiful girl who had chosen to watch over her. I did not return to the drawing-room, nor did I go to my own. A great restlessness was upon me. I thought of going into the library, which now was one of the most beautiful rooms in the house, or into a little smoking-room, which Uncle Wilfrid had allotted to me as my own particular 'den,' and finally decided upon the latter.

It was a low-ceiled, square room, one end of which was entirely occupied with a huge window, whose richly-colored stained glass displayed the Amory crest and the blazoned motto of the family, 'Dare all, or die.' The opposite end was given up to a gigantic fireplace, with a high, narrow mantel wonderfully carved. The hearth was shut in by a curious angle, and a pair of high-backed, stationary oaken seats, on which one could recline and be unseen by those who might be in the main body of the room. There was but one way of entrance (unless one wished to spring through the big window, two feet from the ground), and that was through a low, beautifully-panelled door, almost at the end of a long, spacious hall, which did noble duty as a picture-gallery. I turned the handle, unconscious of the drama in which I was soon to play one of the principal parts. As I opened the door I distinctly heard the words:

'Go—go at once, and don't be so distrustful of me! I've given you my word!'

A woman was standing at the open window, bending eagerly out. Only the middle portion, wide in itself, was apart, and the view of the terraced garden was hidden from
me by the billowing sleeves on two graceful arms, extended from frame to frame. Someone quickly ran past. I could see a dark form showing shadow-like for an instant through the closed stained glass. But it would have been impossible, in that quick glance and from that distance, to say who it was, or even whether the figure was that of a man or woman.

But she who stood at the window turned hastily, and I saw, to my surprise, that it was Paula, dressed in black. Even the gown she wore was to prove an important factor in the strange play which was to be enacted, though she had not chosen it with an eye to such an end. It was black, as I have said, and seemed to be all of some fleecy, jet-embroidered netting over silk.

'Paula,' I exclaimed, 'how did you come here?'

'Through this window,' she said. 'I wished very much to see you, and I thought you would come here sooner or later. I watched Uncle Wilfrid and the others drive away. Don't you remember, when you and he and I came into this great, empty, desolate house last October, you took a tremendous fancy to this room, and Uncle Wilfrid said you should have it for your own special den?'

'Who came with you and jumped out of the window just now?' I inquired, ignoring a certain unwonted softness in her voice.

She looked astonished.

'Nobody came with me,' she replied. 'Nobody has been here since I came in alone.'

'At least, you spoke to someone just as I opened the door—someone who ran past the window.'

'No; you are mistaken, Terry. You know, perhaps, that I have always had a bad habit of talking to myself aloud when I am excited, and yet quite alone. Perhaps I was doing so then, though unconsciously. And now I have found you. Yet it is difficult to speak. Oh, Terry can't you guess what I've come to say?'
Her voice was gentle and cooing as it had never been before. From her earliest girlhood she had been remarkably self-possessed, almost self-assured in manner, without any of the soft timidity one associates with budding womanhood. But now her mantle of composure had fallen from her. She took a few swift steps across the floor and came to my side, where she stood, clasping and unclasping her hands in apparent agitation, never raising her usually bold, bright eyes to mine.

'I cannot guess, Paula,' I said, trying not to speak with too marked a coldness. 'I am afraid you will have to tell me what you want of me.'

She laid her hand on mine, and its palm was dry and burning.

'I want your love, Terry!' she cried in a thick, choked voice. 'I've come to beg you to take me back again—yes, even on my knees, if need be! Oh, yes, I know what you would say. I know I told you that I had never loved you. I may have thought so then, for I was mad with jealousy and hatred of that other woman who had come in my way. But I had always loved you, though I was cross enough sometimes, I know. When I had sent you from me, when I had gone myself, and was in Italy, I began to think what I had thrown away. After a time I felt that I must come back—that I must see you again; and Mr. Annesley found out about The Nest. I planned to surprise you at the ball, and I did. Everything went well, according to my scheme, except myself, Terry—except myself. When I saw you with that woman, when I saw how you intervened to protect her from any harm I might wish to do her, I felt sick—sick! I knew what I had only been half sure of before—that I adored you, wanted you above everything and everybody in the world, and must have you. Oh, Terry, you are above other men in everything, even as you are in inches—the handsomest, the bravest, the noblest, the strongest! Take me back, or I shall die!'
‘For God’s sake, what are you saying, Paula?’

To my horror, she was on her knees beside me, covering my hands with kisses hot as fire.

‘Don’t say that you have given your love to anyone else. It isn’t so long since I went away, since we were bound to marry each other. I will be gentle, sweet—anything you like, if only you will say that all shall be as before.’

‘Not on your knees to me, Paula! Rise, I beg of you!’

And I would have lifted her to her feet, but she would not have it so, clinging round me, and weeping tears that seemed to scald my hands as they fell upon them.

‘I will not get up until you have forgiven me for everything, and promised me your love. After all, no harm came of my sin—for sin it was, I know, and knew it then. I shall kill myself if you won’t take me back! Yes, I will do that, for it can hurt nobody but myself; nobody would care! Uncle Wilfrid doesn’t love me any more; and even in this little time, though I used to believe myself a power in society, people have forgotten me. Terry, can’t you see that my heart is breaking? Why don’t you answer me?’

‘I can’t answer as you wish,’ I gently said, trying to raise her. ‘You don’t know what you ask.’

‘Why not? Is it so hard for a man to love me? There is Mr. Haynes-Haviland—handsome, rich, clever, and of good enough birth on one side. At one time I thought, out of ennui and sheer spite against you and Uncle Wilfrid, I might consent to marry him, as he has begged me a dozen times to do. But you—you love Consuelo Hope.’

‘It would do me no good if I did.’

‘Ah, what a cruel answer! Now I know why you turn against me—why you refuse to save me from myself. You think only of her.’ She stood up and faced me, looking straight into my eyes. ‘Cold as ice!’ she cried. ‘And for this, as for all the other troubles I have known, I must thank that woman—Consuelo Hope.’

She turned and was gone like a flash, springing out of
the open window on to the grass. Most probably she had expected me to follow her, but it was the one thing which at that moment I could not do. I walked to the window, and looked out after her—no more.

There was a rustling in the thick curtain of vines that had draped the house for generations as I stood there, and involuntarily turned my head with a wary glance, thinking that possibly there had been an eavesdropper, and our conversation had been overheard. But I saw nothing, and in another moment the insignificant circumstance had passed completely from my mind.

Mechanically I walked back the length of the room, and stood, with folded arms and bent head, gazing unseeingly into the huge fireplace, where a rainbow-hued blaze played over piled logs of ‘driftwood,’ a pleasant fad of Uncle Wilfrid’s.

I was lost to everything save the memory of the scene I had just passed through. I heard a faint creaking of the floor in the main body of the room, outside the ingle where I stood, another close behind me ere I could turn, and a sharp, deadly pang shot like red-hot iron through my back and side. I fell forward on my face, striking my temple a violent blow, and knew no more.
CHAPTER XV.

THE SECRET OF THE PEARLS.

I cannot tell how long I lay there between the fireplace and the high oaken seats which presented their carved backs to the main portion of the room. What at last roused me to consciousness again I do not know. But I waked suddenly, as though from a long sleep, with heavy-lidded eyes already staring open.

When Paula had fled from me through the window, the room had been filled with the long, level rays of the afternoon sunshine. Now the shadows of approaching evening brooded in the corners and evaded the upward leaping spurts of firelight. At first it was impossible for me to realize what had happened. I tried to move, but could not, and a pain darted through my left side. Then I remembered, and my brain began gradually to clear.

I had followed Paula to the window, then I had come back to the fireside, and had stood there, expecting nothing less than an assault from an unseen, unknown foe. I had been stabbed in the back! Who could have been my enemy? Who had struck me? Would it ever be known? Then I began to wonder at the strange condition in which I now lay.

Although I had never been seriously wounded before, the study of surgery had interested me. I had read somewhat, and had talked much with men who made it a profession, particularly those in the army, who naturally knew most about wounds and the like. The cut of a knife would cause pain such as I felt, no doubt. It might even, if deep
enough and close enough to a vital spot, have produced syncope (though mine, I reflected, might have been brought about by the blow on the temple in falling). But how account for the strange powerlessness to move or raise my voice, accompanying, as it did, the keenest consciousness of pain and of my surroundings?

They would bury me like this, I thought, and I went through all the horrors of slow suffocation underground. Hours seemed to pass. Yet it may be that my torture was measured by moments. I cannot tell. But at length I heard the sharp opening of a door.

'Thank Heaven!' I said mentally. 'Someone has come—one of the servants, perhaps—and will see me lying here. I shall be got away from this place.'

I could see no one, but in an instant I heard Paula's voice speaking. She had come back again! Perhaps she had never gone at all.

'It was good of you to come with me,' she said, in a soft tone that yet did not somehow ring true. 'I wanted him to tell you himself. It would have been his wish as well as mine, but he is not here. Ah, I am disappointed!'

'Is there anything, then, that you yourself would care to say to me, Miss Wynne, or shall I go, and wait till another time?'

It was the Woman in Grey who spoke, and I felt instinctively that Paula meant to lie to her.

'No, stay, if you please,' uttered Paula shortly.

'Well, Miss Wynne?'

'I wish to tell you that my cousin, Terence Darkmore, and I will probably renew our engagement. If we do, shall we have your good wishes?'

'Yes.'

'And yet you schemed to part us—you did part us for weary months. You tried to win his love away from me for yourself.'

'Miss Wynne, you insult me!'

'I insult you—you? Why, you cannot be insulted! Oh,
if I could only prove half the things that I suspect against you, what a triumph that would be for me!

I had heard her voice rising higher, coming nearer to where I lay, and suddenly she was close to me, having moved with long, panther-like steps to the fireplace. As she wheeled again and faced outward (doubtless toward that other whom I was powerless to protect), the thin, black net over-dress floated out and hovered for an instant like a dark filmy cloud above the brightness of the fire. A cry of warning, in common humanity, rose choking to my lips. But they were sealed; I could not utter it.

'Prove them!' she was repeating with passionate emphasis. 'I will prove them—now! What do you think Mr. Haynes-Haviland, the stepson of the old woman murdered in this house, said to me? I thought he would know you—he had lived here so long, until the time of the murder, and I was sure that you had been here, too, that there was some mystery shrouding your connection with this place. But fate favored you. He thought you might be one of two women, either of whom would prefer to hide themselves, perhaps. Yet he saw you and could not be sure. There is something horribly supernatural about you. Sometimes I believe you are an evil spirit, not a woman at all. You might have risen up, like the ghost of some long-hidden sin, from under the green water of the moat out there. I heard him mutter "My God!" as he looked at you, and I questioned him. I would give him no rest. Then he said at last, "Let me once tear off that glove of pearls she wears, and we should stand on equal ground." I will tear it off, Consuelo Hope, as you call yourself. I will know the secret of the pearls, and cry it out to all the world!"

She had not seen me lying there on the floor among the shadows, though her dress had brushed against my hair. Now she rushed past again.

'Stop!' said Consuelo in a voice that rang clear as a bell. 'Touch me at your peril! That glove upon my hand means
not so much a secret as a solemn vow, and I would give my life sooner than it should be torn away until my mission be accomplished. Remember that we are both women.'

'I remember nothing save that you have stolen from me the love of the only man in the world for me. It has been a trial of skill between us two before; now it is a question of sheer physical strength. I will know why you wear those pearls!'

Scarcely had the words left her lips when there came a cry from Consuelo Hope. For an instant I believed that Paula had thrown herself upon her with the intention of forcibly carrying out her threat. But the cry was not one of personal fear—rather did it sound like a warning.

'Ah!' it was a suppressed scream of horror. 'You are on fire! Your dress is in a blaze!'

Even I, lying like a dead man under the bench, in the gathering darkness, suddenly grew conscious that there was a new light in the room—a strange, wavering glare of red. Again, for the hundredth time, I fought to free myself from the power that held be in its grasp, but my spirit and my body seemed to have parted company.

Shriek after shriek cut through the still Sabbath air. It was Paula, who had been made aware of her own peril. The red light moved here and there along the ceiling, flitting over my eyes. I knew that the miserable girl had lost her presence of mind, and was running to and fro.

'Help! help!' she was crying. In a moment more she had aimlessly rushed within my line of vision, and, to my horror, I saw that she was enveloped from head to foot in little writhing flames. She was retreating from before the Woman in Grey, who swiftly followed.

'Are you coming to kill me?' Paula screamed.

'No, to save you!' replied the clear, calm tones of the other. 'For your life, stand still!'

There was a whirl of some large, dark object, and she had firmly enveloped Paula in the folds of a great Indian rug.
'Lie down on the ground and roll yourself in it. It is your only chance.' The voice was stern, and compelled obedience.

The tall, grey, goddess-like figure that for a moment had shown itself to me, and the other struggling, muffled one, had passed out of my sight once more. I could hear low, sobbing moans of pain and fear, and the sudden falling of a chair or some small article of furniture. After the outcry this comparative silence seemed ominous. I forgot my own pain in the intense strain of listening.

'It is all out,' Consuelo said at last. And there was a strange quiver in her voice, as though she were suffering and controlling her utterance with an effort. 'See! not one flame now that I take the rug away. You are safe. Not a scar upon your face. Are you in pain?'

'I don't know. Everything is whirling in my brain. Oh, I would far rather have died than been saved by you! How dared you—how dared you save me?'

'It was not wholly for you. It was for my own sake that I did it. You need feel no gratitude to me.'

'Nor do I feel any. Oh, I am ill indeed! I do not think I am burned, and yet it seems as though I should die. I can't express the horror of it. Why was not Terry here? Why should it have been you? Go, find him for me. But no—you shall not! Ah, you, too, are burned. Your hand! The pearls are gone!' Her cry degenerated into a veritable snarl of hateful triumph. 'Now—now you shall not escape me! I shall find out all!'

'What! are you less than human, Paula Wynne? I take no credit to myself that I have saved you, but the fact remains—I did it! Would you at this moment, when I am faint and suffering the misery of burns which I got in helping you, take advantage of me? It can't be! You would not be a woman if you could do such a thing.'

'I can do it, and I will! I am suffering, too. We are equal, then. I have not a scruple in the world. Oh, you
tigress, how you fight me! Help! Terry! Ah, I have done it! I have seen—I have seen! You are at my mercy now!'

There fell a silence—a silence as ominous as the lull in a tropical storm. Then Consuelo spoke, and a stranger would scarcely have recognized her voice.

'Yes; you have seen. You intend to profit by what you know; but you are terribly mistaken. It is not I who am at your mercy, Paula Wynne. You have done that which an angel from heaven would find it hard to condone. At your mercy! Why, it is you who are at mine!'

'What do you mean? Why do you look at me like that?'

'I mean,' and Consuelo Hope spoke slowly, each syllable ringing clear as a silver bell, 'that you shall never leave this room until you have sworn, by such an oath as even you will not dare to break, that you will tell to no one the secret you have been vile enough to force from me.'

Paula laughed defiantly.

'How will you keep me? I have just shown that I am as strong as you are—stronger, perhaps.'

'Still, I tell you that you shall not go. How do I mean to keep you? You shall see!'

I saw nothing, but I heard the flying rustle of skirts, the quick flight of high-heeled shoes across the polished floor, the turning of a key in the lock of a door, and the slight metallic grating as it was drawn sharply forth.

'She will go out now by the window!' was the thought which swiftly crossed my brain. And I was sure that the Woman in Grey had only just intercepted her at the door. But again there was a silken rustle and rush, and the window slammed violently shut. It locked, as I remembered, in a very curious, old-fashioned way. But did either Consuelo or Paula know this?

By pulling a chain which hung suspended at one side, a long, elaborately chased brass bar could be made to descend, which crossed the entire width of the window, fastening with a bolt and a large brass key as well. Huge as was the extent
of the window, with its four separate sashes, opening inward, the panes themselves (with their beautiful stained and emblazoned glass) were divided into small portions, with strips of carved woodwork—too narrow to admit by any possibility the passage of a human form, even were anyone reckless enough to attempt plunging headlong through the glass.

Once fastened, therefore, by the bar, which shut down midway, the window was practically impregnable; and the question I had asked myself as to the knowledge of its mechanism was answered by the sounds which reached my strained hearing.

First, the crashing together of the middle sashes which had stood open; then the rattling of the chain, and loud descent of the bar across the window; at last, the sliding of a bolt into its place, and the turning of the key. This, and the fastening of the door, had together scarcely occupied half a dozen seconds.

'Give me those keys,' Paula said doggedly, as though between set teeth.

'I will not give them to you until I have made you swear an oath you cannot break. Nor can you take them from me, try as you may. You know that. You have only to look in my face to see it.'

'You are more devil than woman. But I am not afraid of you. What if you have shut me in? You have shut yourself in also. I will scream for help. Someone must hear me, and then——'

'At present there is no one in the house, for you yourself said that Mr. Darkmore had gone away. And, being Sunday, all the servants are probably out until dinner-time.'

'When they return from their drive——'

'Ah, then, unless you have given me your promise before, you will not scream for help. It will be forever too late.'

'Do you mean, fiend, that you intend to kill me?'

'I do not know what I shall do; but you shall not leave
this room until you have done my bidding. I will give you five minutes to decide. No more.'

'Help! help!' Paula was beating on the heavy oaken door. But I knew that there were ten chances to one against her being heard. Outside was the long picture-gallery, where (within my knowledge of the house thus far) people did not often come. It was not likely that anyone would have occasion to enter there in the dusk of a Sabbath evening. But what meant that ominous threat of the Woman in Grey? What had she intended to convey to Paula's mind by saying that it would shortly be 'forever too late'?

There had been a ring of desperation in her voice when she so spoke, and I remembered it, fearing for what she might be driven to do.

Nobly had she intervened to save her bitterest enemy from the fire, burning her own flesh, that the other might go free from the flames. Instead of gratitude, she had had treachery and revilings; and now she stood at bay, resolved at all costs to shield a secret of which I dared not think. No help from outside could avail her. What was to be done she herself must do.

Surely there was not murder in her heart! No, not that—not even in this crisis, when she had cried out in protest against Paula's baseness, as a shame to their common womanhood. But I felt sure that she would now be tingling with that absolute assurance of her own physical strength and mastery over the other which none but a creature at bay can know, and urged on by the additional impetus of the conviction that her cause was right.

It had come to a duel between the two. And it might be that, in her not ungenerous passion, the Woman in Grey would blindly deal justice upon her foe in a way that would leave its mark while life should last. I lay there in the deepening shadows, supine, helpless, agonizing at my own impotence.

'Give me those keys, or I will tear them from you!' Paula
cried in the unmodulated, fierce voice of an undisciplined child.

'Take care!' the other spoke in a mere whisper. But so vibrant was it that the words reached me more clearly than those which Paula had screamed. 'It will be far better, far safer, for you that you do not touch me. Repeat after me the oath with which I would bind you, which would haunt you night and day if you broke it, and I will give you the keys. Swear that—'

'I will not swear at all! I warn you (and I feel such joy in warning you as I have not known since I first saw your face) that when I leave this room I give your secret to the world, beginning with Uncle Wilfrid and Terence, whom you love, deny it though you may.'

Again fell that awful silence that seemed to herald something worse to come. And then there rang out a short, stifled cry from Paula, and there was the sound of a fall. At that, with an effort which seemed to bring an ooze of blood, like sweat, through every pore of my skin, I burst the bonds of that strange and dreadful spell which had held me in a living death. A groan broke from my lips. At last I was enabled to move. I tried to rise, but fell again, knocking down to the floor a pile of books which only that morning I had left lying upon the ingle-seat; and consciousness ebbed from me for the second time that day.
“Mr. Darkmore—Terence, speak to me! Ah! who could have done this thing? Page 165.

—A Woman in Grey.
CHAPTER XVI.

WHERE IS PAULA?

Mr. Darkmore—Terence, speak to me! Ah! who has done this thing?'

The words seemed part of some vague dream of pain and renunciation. I wished to open my eyes, but a leaden weight pressed them down. Then I became conscious that my head was supported by a warm and supple arm. A curious impression passed slowly through my poppy-steeped brain that so must the plants feel when, after the long chill stupor of winter, life once more stirs within them at the first touch of spring. And as I so thought the power came to me to lift my heavy lids.

It was as I thought—Consuelo Hope was bending over me. My eyes fell upon her hand, which had once been covered with the sheath of pearls. Round it was wound a lace handkerchief.

‘Can you speak to me?’ she said again. ‘You have lain here in need of help, and we did not know. You are so pale, so deadly pale, that I am frightened for you. And there is blood—someone has done this—who—who?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, in a voice that sounded hoarse and odd in my own ears. ‘Don’t think of me—now—but of yourself. Where is—she—Paula?’

Still supporting my head, and kneeling as she was, she looked over her shoulder, with a beautiful, fearless turn of the white throat.

‘Do you want her?’ she asked. ‘She can hear you as you
speak. She should come to you. This place by your side is hers by right, and she shall have it.'

She spoke, not to me, but as though for the information of a third person, beyond her sight and mine. Yet no one answered. There was no sound of an approaching footstep. She waited in silence for a moment, and then began again:

'Come, Miss Wynne. Your cousin asks for you. Do not let our quarrel stand between you. Someone has done a terrible and cowardly thing. Your cousin has been struck by an enemy, in the back. Surely you know nothing of this? No feeling of guilt is keeping you from him, silent, and hiding where I cannot see you, in the dark? All that I said just now I take back. Go free, and do with the knowledge you have gained of me as you will. Only go, and get help for Mr. Darkmore, if you will not come to this place beside him. Here are the keys!'

She put up her free hand to the bosom of her dress, and took out the keys from their place of concealment, holding them at arm's length for Paula to come and take them from her. But Paula made no sign.

'If it is that you do not wish to come near me, you need not be subjected to that discomfort,' the sweet, calm voice went on again. And Consuelo threw the keys to a distance, so that they fell upon the floor with a jingle and a crash. Still Paula did not take them. And there was not the rustle of a movement, or a sound of any kind. The stillness was suggestive. I remembered the fall I had heard just before I had fainted. What if Paula were not now able to take the Woman in Grey at her word? What if, as Consuelo had threatened, it were now indeed 'forever too late'?

'Why—does she not come?' I managed to gasp, fighting with the horrible weakness which sat like a great soft, living weight upon my breast. 'What has happened?'

'Do you hear that he asks for you, Miss Wynne?' questioned Consuelo of the shadows which now shrouded the room in thickening gloom. 'Oh, I think you have a heart of
iron, with no warm blood beating in it; will you not come, and prove to him that I am not keeping you from him now?'

But there was no answer to her appeal. Only stillness, as before.

'Mr. Darkmore,' said the Woman in Grey, after a moment of silent waiting, 'I will lay your head down very gently. See, I will reach this cushion from the ingle-seat, and you shall have it for a pillow. Then I will pick up the keys, and go out to find some of the servants, who will carry you to your room and ride for a doctor, even if Sir Wilfrid and the others have not yet come home. No doubt when I am gone Miss Wynne will show herself to you. She will wish, perhaps, to tell you the secret she has learned. Well'—with a certain note of defiance—'she may do so. Fate has taken it out of my hands.'

Softly she laid my head down upon the pillow, slipping it slowly along her arm, and then rose up, with a searching look round the room.

'Your cousin hides herself,' she pronounced contemptuously; and then, as if scorning to seek for one who childishly persisted in concealment, she picked up the keys she had thrown down, and went swiftly to the door, which she unlocked and threw wide open, with a backward glance, as though half expecting Paula to make a rush past her for liberty.

In my changed position, with my head upon the cushion, I could see the door, and I lay stupidly and watched it, my eyes trying to pierce the duskiness of distant corners in the room, expecting to see Paula steal from some hiding-place behind a tall chair or the projecting shelter of a cabinet. Dark as it was, if she had gone out, I could not have failed to see her. But there was neither sound nor motion in the room—only the heavy, monotonous ticking of the tall old clock that stood in the far corner of the ingle-nook.

Presently, when five, or possibly ten, minutes had passed,
footsteps came running along the picture-gallery outside, and there appeared two of the servants in the doorway—Wemyss, who had come down from Portman Square, and my uncle's own man, Harris.

'Before you touch me,' I said, 'search this room. Don't let a corner, or any possible lurking-place, be forgotten. I must know whether anyone besides myself is here.'

They obeyed reluctantly, for Miss Hope had ordered them to remove me, if I felt able to go to my own room; and Wemyss (who had been in my uncle's service since my boyhood) was inclined respectfully to argue that there ought to be no delay.

However, I was not to be thwarted. And in a moment I had the satisfaction of seeing the room lighted and hearing the two men briskly stepping about, here and there moving some articles of furniture.

'No, sir,' said Wemyss, returning to bend solicitously over me; 'there's not a living creature in this room the size of a mouse. And the window's barred across, so he couldn't have got out that way, the brute! He must have gone through the door into the picture-gallery, sir; but, thank goodness, there'll be a hue and cry out after him before long. Could you give any description of what he was like, sir? Or no—perhaps it would be better if you kept quiet, and didn't try to talk.'

I did not think it necessary to explain to Wemyss that it was not the would-be murderer for whom I had bidden him look.

As the old man spoke, Consuelo again appeared at the door, and gave a comprehensive glance round the empty room.

'She has gone!' she exclaimed aloud.

But, as the two men gently lifted me between them, I answered:

'I will take my oath that, since you went out, no one has left this room.'
The words, as they fell from my lips, seemed to bring with them, as though another had uttered them, a strange and terrible suggestion. If Paula had not left the room since my return to consciousness (and I was absolutely certain that she had not done so), how had she been disposed of during my swoon?

Surely, I told myself, there would be forthcoming some simple and reasonable explanation of the seeming mystery. I was weak now from shock and loss of blood. When strength returned, the power of logical deduction would return with it.

As I closed my eyes in a momentary spasm of pain, I heard the roll of wheels along the avenue below, and knew that at last Uncle Wilfrid had returned.

In a few moments more he had been told of what had happened, and had come to me, ashen pale, but calm in manner, as he usually was in a sudden emergency.

‘Consuelo told me,’ he said. ‘So do not try to talk. Presently the doctor will be here. And to-morrow we shall have you almost yourself again, no doubt.’

A servant had been sent on horseback to Martenhead, by Consuelo, at the time Wemyss and Harris had come to me, and it was not long before he rode back only a short distance in advance of the doctor he had gone to fetch.

I was given some restorative cordial, and my wound was hastily but skilfully examined.

‘Rather a close shave,’ pronounced the medical man, who appeared to know his business. ‘Whoever struck this blow meant to kill you. It was done with some peculiarly fine, sharp instrument; long—or your wound would not be so deep—but scarcely thicker than a huge pin. In fact, the smallest of poniards, no common weapon—which accounts for the apparently slight loss of blood.

‘In a way, that circumstance was the saving of you. Lying as long as you must have done, unattended, you might otherwise have bled to death. But had the aim of the hand
that struck been a trifle surer, death would not have been a question of blood loss. It would have been instantaneous. No doubt you heard something, and turned, just as the weapon was poised to strike, which was your salvation. As it is, you have the matter in your own hands. Obey instructions, keep perfectly quiet, eat and drink what you are told, and you will be up in a week. Not a day before.'

'I am willing to obey instructions, provided I am not forbidden to talk,' I said. 'There is something which must be cleared up here, and I shall fret myself into a fever if I am to lie silent.'

'Talk till you are tired—and then stop,' said Dr. Hasbrouck, with a smile.

I took advantage of this permission, and began by describing the curious symptoms which had so quickly followed my receiving the wound. Dr. Hasbrouck listened intently, as did Uncle Wilfrid.

'There is only one way in which I can account for that,' he returned. 'The dagger must have been poisoned. A mixture of curare and granil, the Indian herb, might have accounted for what you felt, and the object in charging the weapon with it would merely have been to provide for your silence and powerlessness in case death should not be immediate. Thus an alarm would be avoided, and the murderer have time to escape, had he partially failed in his undertaking—which was doubtless to kill you outright. Some of the poison would have been rubbed away in passing through the cloth of your coat and so on (fortunately for you, as granil, particularly, is not exactly beneficial in its effects upon the constitution); and there I shall be able to find and analyze it, proving whether or no I am right in my deductions.'

My first thought was now to see Paula, and I somewhat astonished my uncle by insisting that a messenger should at once be sent to The Nest, with the earnest request that she would come to me immediately.
WHERE IS PAULA?

I said nothing of our renewed relations. It would be time to do so after I had seen her, and learned her intentions toward Miss Hope. I had convinced myself that, during my swoon, she had passed out of the room, most probably because of some arrangement agreed upon between her and Miss Hope, though I reflected that it was not an absolute impossibility that she might have had in her possession a duplicate key to the door. She could not have vanished into thin air, and there was no way of escape from the room, save by the door or window. Therefore, she must by one of those means have obtained exit, and when she came back to Lorn Abbey at my summons, as I was morally sure she would, I meant to have the mystery cleared up.

At the end of half an hour, the messenger dispatched to The Nest had returned, with a note from Mrs. Annesley to the effect that Miss Wynne had been out alone, she knew not where, all the afternoon, and had not yet returned. They were, in fact, beginning to grow very anxious about her, and would be glad of any intelligence as to her whereabouts.

Restlessness and anxiety brought on some fever, and I was able to do no more talking that night. I was not even permitted to speak to the members of the local police force, who had called at the house to learn what they could of the ins and outs of the mysterious affair. Late at night, by the last train, arrived the nurse who, much to my annoyance, had been sent for to London, and I was presently under a system resembling a species of mental quarantine. I could not even satisfy myself by inquiring whether Paula had returned to The Nest, or whether, on the contrary, any steps had been taken to find her. But next morning I was better, and both Uncle Wilfrid and the man who had been got down from Scotland Yard, Mr. Marland, were admitted.

The detective Marland was a small, thin-faced fellow, approaching middle age, who would have appeared absolutely insignificant had it not been for a good chin and a
pair of remarkably bright, keen eyes. I soon found that he had been already primed with all the circumstances so far as my uncle knew them, and was besides in possession of certain others which set me tingling with wonderment as to how he had obtained them—whether by detective acumen, or through a conversation with Miss Hope.

'Do you know what the theory of the villagers and peasantry round about is in regard to the stabbing affair yesterday, Mr. Darkmore?' asked Dr. Hasbrouck. 'The poor bodies are inclined to the opinion that you were attacked by no mortal foe, but a ghostly one—one out of many supposed to haunt this place.'

The detective smiled, and so did I, though I was not in a mood for laughter. Yet I could not help telling myself how finely would the theory of the Martenhead folk be confirmed, could they learn of my strange experience on the night after the ball—the blood which had dripped from nowhere in particular upon the pillow and my face; the wrinkled hand which had limped, without the visible accompaniment of an arm, along my panelled wall. After getting me to describe to him exactly the place where I had stood just before I was wounded, the position I had assumed, what I had heard, and so on, the detective paused.

'You are aware of having no enemies?' he asked. 'Anyone who would, so far as you know, have an object in putting you out of the way?'

'None whatever; I am utterly in the dark.'

'A good deal may depend upon such information as you are able to give me,' he went on. 'For it may even be that the disappearance of Miss Wynne is directly or indirectly connected with this case. I have already informed Sir Wilfrid that it was considered best at headquarters I should undertake both, one appearing so likely to fit into the other. Nor is this the first time I have been called to Lorn Abbey. I was engaged upon the Haynes murder case, which is the particular reason why I was sent down again.'
As he spoke, he looked about him with a subdued curiosity, as though he cherished certain associations with the room, and wondered at my choice of a bedchamber. But I had little thought to spare for his cogitations. Only five of the words which he had uttered lingered distinctly in my brain, and they seemed to be printed there in letters of fire.

'The disappearance of Miss Wynne?' I echoed. 'Has she not been found?'

'She was not seen at The Nest, as the cottage is called, after four o'clock. She went out in a thin dress, with no cloak, took nothing away, not even her purse; and her maid, as well as her friends, was ignorant that she had any intention of leaving the house. She has been seen by nobody, so far as I have yet been able to discover, since six, or some time shortly after that hour, last evening.'

'And then?' I interpolated, my heart quickening its action.

'Then she was with Miss Hope, Sir Wilfrid Amory's adopted daughter, who informs me that they conversed together in the room where you lay unconscious, though they were not aware of your presence until you were heard to move. Now, the question I should like to ask you, Mr. Darkmore, is whether you also saw and talked with Miss Wynne earlier in the day?'

'I did,' I said, deeply pondering the fact that Consuelo had already given her testimony, and ardently wishing I could find out how much or how little she had said.

'Was your conversation of a kind which in your opinion could possibly have any bearing either on what afterwards happened to you, or upon her own disappearance?'

'None whatever,' I said hastily. 'We merely discussed an old arrangement which had existed between ourselves. And Miss Wynne left the room, saying that she must return to The Nest, as Mrs. Annesley, her friend, would be wondering what had become of her. She sprang out of the window, which, as you have no doubt observed, is only a short distance above the ground, and ran away across the
grass. After watching her for a second or two, instead of following her, as I possibly ought to have done, I went back and stood looking into the fire. In a moment more, as near as I can judge, I was stabbed, and fell, as I have told you.'

'Miss Wynne did not return to warn you of the approach of any suspicious person, then? That was not her motive for coming back again later?'

'No. I think it must have been some time before she returned. I know that to me it seemed very long?'

'Could any person have concealed himself or herself in the room during your conversation with Miss Wynne?'

'Yes, it is just possible that someone might have come in through the window, which at that time was open, while we were talking, and our backs were turned. Indeed, I suppose it must have been so, for the thing happened so soon after Miss Wynne had gone. A man would scarcely have had time to enter afterwards.'

'You say, Mr. Darkmore, the window was open at that time. Did you, then, know that it was closed afterwards?'

I was nonplused as to what it would be wise to answer, and what little blood I had left in my body seemed to mount to my head. I was silent for an instant, reflecting, and Marland began again, with a glance which impressed me uncomfortably with the conviction that the reason of my hesitation was patent to him.

'Miss Hope has already explained how the door and window came to be shut,' he said. 'I merely wished to hear if you knew that it was so.'

'I heard the noise when they were closed,' I replied slowly.

'Ah, in that case you must have overheard much of the conversation as well.'

'Something of it,' I said evasively. 'But it would not be fair to trust to my memory, or what I might have fancied in a semi-conscious state.'

'Will you tell me what you did hear?' he questioned bluntly.
‘No,’ I returned. And we looked each other full in the eyes. ‘I am unable to recollect.’

‘That is a pity,’ said Marland, with an affectation of indifference. ‘It will leave Miss Hope’s word unsupported upon a very delicate, nay, dangerous, matter.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ I muttered mechanically.

‘I only mean to say that Miss Hope admits a quarrel between herself and Miss Wynne—admits locking Miss Wynne into the room, making it—as she herself adds that she supposed—impossible for her to get out. Your evidence goes to show that Miss Wynne did not leave the room after the door had been opened by Miss Hope. The quarrel supplies a motive for—er—but you can see how the case stands. I am not a lawyer. I am merely a detective. But I want to fathom this mystery. Do you still refuse to help me—to throw any light, by what you heard—what you were led to suppose by all that passed?’

A curious, nervous trembling seized me, and shook me from head to foot. Every phase of the affair seemed to imprint itself on my mind as if with a flash of vivid electric light.

‘I—I understand how unfortunate it is that I do not remember what passed,’ I stammered. A haze, ruddy as blood, came floating before my eyes, flecked with sparks which burst, like fireworks, into a million smaller ones.

It would have been impossible for me to speak another word, even if silence had been an offense punishable with death. I could no longer see either Marland or Dr. Hasbrouck, but I heard the latter saying, as though his voice reached me from a great distance: ‘Ah, you see he has fainted! This was what I feared.’
CHAPTER XVII.

A PIECE OF PARCHMENT.

A week passed, and I knew little that had been going on outside my room. Exciting intelligence had been carefully kept from me, and the very fact that it was so rendered me irritable and nervous.

I had two or three feverish days, but began to mend more rapidly than Dr. Hasbrouck had seemed at first to expect, and on the seventh day was able to leave my room.

The wound had healed, and, though I still felt weak, and unlike myself, I was practically well again.

It was about three or four o'clock when I went slowly downstairs, attended by Uncle Wilfrid, who insisted upon supporting me as though I had been a child.

'Consuelo has sent you a special invitation to come to her boudoir,' he said. 'She will give us tea. I have been going to her there for the past three or four days—as Miss Traill, though she is better, has not yet felt like going so far from her own quarters as the drawing-room.'

'Ah, she is still on the sick-list, is she?' I inquired, without any very great solicitude.

'Yes. She has really been seriously ill—at one time, perhaps even dangerously, Hasbrouck thought. But good care pulled her through, and Consuelo's devotion was most untiring. She would allow no other nurse save herself to go near her companion, whom she scarcely left night or day, though Lady Towers and I both urged her to spare herself a little, especially during the first day or two, when Miss Traill was
delirious, and Consuelo’s presence could not have mattered to her.’

Consuelo herself came to greet us at the door.

‘Come in,’ she said. ‘I am glad that you are better, Mr. Darkmore. He has never been in my boudoir before, has he, Sir Wilfrid? Lady Towers—who ought to have stayed until she could see it with her own eyes—asked me particularly to tell her your first impression of this room. Here is a lounge especially for you, as we insist upon your still playing the invalid, and I am sure you will think that no place could be more appropriate.’

I started a little as she indicated a sofa, drawn up by the fire, and covered with a magnificent tiger-skin.

‘Is this what Lady Towers meant?’ I asked.

‘Yes. I thought you would guess. It is the tiger-skin, which Sir Thomas sent to me as a surprise. Look at this head peering over that white and gold cushion. That you should lie upon it, after what passed, seems a sort of poetical justice, does it not?’

She was talking rather fast and nervously, as though she was anxious to bridge over an embarrassing moment. And I humored her, feeling guiltily happy as she arranged the embroidered cushions behind my head. As she pulled them this way and that, I saw that her left hand was again covered with a pearl mitten, in all respects resembling the one which had been burned. Did she, I wondered, keep several of these curious adornments ready for such emergencies as had lately occurred?

She gave us tea in dainty Dresden cups, and we all three conscientiously made conversation, not yet having referred to the strange occurrences of the past week.

As we talked, there came the tinkling of a little bell from a room adjoining, or near, and Consuelo sprang to her feet with a movement sudden for her.

‘It is Miss Traill,’ she exclaimed. ‘Her room is only separated by one other from this, and I left the door open
that I might hear her if she rang. You will forgive me if I go to her for a moment?"

It was scarcely so long before she came back, and I thought that her face showed surprise.

'Miss Traill is anxious to speak to you, Mr. Darkmore,' she said. 'It is some whim of hers; but if you feel equal to it, do you mind humoring her?'

'Of course I will go to her!' I exclaimed. And Miss Hope watched me as I rose with a certain wistful anxiety.

'You are to go alone,' she answered, 'through that little bookroom which Sir Wilfrid has given us, and there you will find Miss Traill in a sitting-room of her own.'

The 'bookroom,' as she called it, was a mere passage-way, lined with volumes behind glass doors, and beyond were Miss Traill's quarters.

I tapped, and entered with a slight hesitation, but the harsh voice bade me 'Come in,' and I obeyed, to discover Miss Traill half sitting, half lying on a lounge, with the mongoose curled upon her shoulder.

'Well,' she said, with an affected cheeriness, 'so we've been companions in misery, and both suffering from wounds. You mustn't believe a word that stupid doctor says about my having torn my hand on bits of rusty metal. That's all nonsense! Have you any theory about that stabbing affair of yours?'

I sat down in a chair beside the lounge, and glanced at her bandaged wrist.

'I have no theory,' I returned. 'Have you one with which to supply me?'

'I might have,' she said mysteriously. 'But it wasn't for that I called you in. Look here, Mr. Darkmore: when do you expect to be about again?'

'I mean to get out in a day or two, whatever they may say,' I returned.

'Ah! then by the last of the week you will be going back to town?"
'Yes; by that at latest. What can I do for you when I go?'

'What I want needn't be done in town. But I begin to see that I shan't get well until it is off my mind. Now, will you do it?'

'I shall be only too pleased,' I began; but she cut me short.

'Don't say the conventional sort of thing,' she ejaculated fretfully. 'I know you don't like me. But I haven't got anybody to trust, and I believe if you said you'd do a thing you'd do it, without any tricks.'

Her ingratitude towards Miss Hope, who had nursed her so faithfully, nettled me.

'As I said, I shall be glad to serve you,' I reiterated. 'But you must not say you have no one to trust. Miss Hope——'

A look of incredible slyness crossed her idol face.

'Ah, yes! But this is to be a surprise to her. I can't explain everything just now; but the honest white truth is that I want to benefit her in spite of herself. I promise you, Mr. Darkmore, that if you help me in this you will really be helping her too. It might make her a rich woman, and—kind as your uncle Sir Wilfrid is—she isn't that at present.'

I did not trust Miss Traill, and, in spite of her assurance that I should be benefitting Miss Hope, I would not give her an unconditional promise. I must know what was required of me first.

She was offended at my hesitation, I could see; but evidently my aid was too valuable to be lightly thrown away.

'I can't do anything for myself,' she said peevishly. 'All I want to do is to write a letter, and I can't, because this hand of mine is so bad. I can't ask Consuelo to do it; and I daren't ask one of the servants, even if Consuelo ever left me alone—which she doesn't. She won't suspect that I would ask you this—that's my safeguard. For pity's sake! find me a large foolscap envelope, out of the desk over there by the
window—the left side. Thank you. Now sit down and address it: "Mr. Jonas Heckleberry, The Spider Farm, Near Market Peyton, Hants." Thank you again. Now, please, give it to me."

I did as she requested, still warily awaiting the climax of the commission she intended me to execute.

When she had the envelope, she examined the address carefully, and seemed satisfied. Then, with a sidelong look at me, she began fumbling with her uninjured hand for her pocket, which at length she found, and drew out something which appeared to be a bit of folded rag. For a moment or two she worked over it, all eagerness, evidently wishing to remove two or three clasp-pins, which held it together, but being unable to do so on account of her bandaged hand and arm. At last she gave it up in despair.

'I can't manage it!' she exclaimed angrily. 'For goodness' sake do it for me! Take out what is inside, and slip it into the envelope as quickly as you can.'

She held out the parcel of greyish-brown stuff, and no sooner had I got it into my hands than I saw it was a pocket torn out of a woman's dress, and carefully pinned around its contents. I remembered then Lady Towers' story of the pocket which Miss Traill had so peremptorily bidden her to tear from the gown to which it belonged, on the first day of her illness.

According to her directions, I drew forth a small square of yellow parchment, doubled over, like a sheet of writing-paper, several times. As my eyes fell upon it, I felt a dim impression of having seen it before; but without giving me any time to linger over an inspection of it, Miss Traill impatiently motioned for me to pass it to her.

'Quick, quick!' she cried. 'Someone may come—Consuelo, perhaps. Here is the envelope. I have sealed it. You are to keep it for me, please—treasure it as though it were so much gold, and as soon as you are well enough to attend to it yourself, have the thing registered at the post-office and sent
away. I shall be dying of anxiety until I shall hear that it’s been safely received.’

Scarcely had the words left her lips, when Consuelo came into the room.

Miss Traill’s face was dyed with a deep red, and involuntarily she reached out as if to take the envelope from me. Then, remembering herself, she drew back and feigned indifference. But her prudent thought came too late. She had betrayed her interest in the letter—betrayed, too, her wish to conceal it from the Woman in Grey.

I had not absolutely decided to carry out Miss Traill’s commission, and I now made no attempt to help her in her apparent difficulty, though doubtless she expected that I would.

Consuelo’s beautiful eyes dwelt upon the envelope, raised themselves questioningly to mine, and then turned with a sterner look to Miss Traill.

‘Naomi,’ she said—and I had never before heard her companion’s Christian name—‘I see now that you have deceived me. Mr. Darkmore, I beg that you will tell me what is in that envelope?’

‘You place me in rather a trying situation,’ I returned.

‘You are right. Well, I will not question you about it. I will tell you, instead, that I believe Miss Traill has asked you to dispose of for her—in ignorance of its value, in ignorance of the fact that she has no right to it—a thing which I will not say was stolen from me, but which I lost. You may remember that one night, not long ago, I spoke to you of my loss, and wondered if it were possible the thing had come into your hands. I am morally certain that it is in your hands at this moment.’

‘What am I to do?’ I asked, not wishing, as the children put it, to ‘tell tales’ upon Miss Traill, yet determined I would have no hand in helping her with any piece of treachery against the Woman in Grey. ‘Miss Traill, it is true, asked me to do her the small service of addressing an
envelope for her, as you see. And the contents, she has told me, belonged only to herself.'

'And so they do—so they do!' she protested, with the reiteration in which she so often indulged. 'Post the letter for me. It has nothing to do with Consuelo.'

'If it has not,' said Miss Hope, 'then prove it by opening the envelope and letting me see. I have the right to insist upon this, and if I find myself in the wrong I will humbly beg for your forgiveness.'

'Hide it, Mr. Darkmore! Don't let her have it!' shrilled Miss Traill, rising to her elbow, with little gasps of impotent rage.

Consuelo did not utter a word. She only looked at me. But it was enough. I could not give her the envelope which had been sealed by Miss Traill, nor would she have desired it. I laid it down on a small table near the invalid's sofa, and, bowing, would have left the room. But Consuelo called me back.

'Don't go, Mr. Darkmore.' She turned again to Miss Traill. 'Once more, Naomi, I ask you to open that envelope and show its contents to me!'

Two great querulous tears rose in the slanting eyes, and fell over the cheeks. The hand which was not swathed in a bandage made a snatch for the envelope that lay within its reach.

Consuelo did not make a movement to prevent her taking it; but as she gathered it up, and would have crumpled it into the pocket of her gown, she said decidedly:

'I have borne much from you, but this I will not bear! Choose between obeying or leaving me forever!'

Miss Traill paused in the act of slipping her treasure into a place of safety, and stared amazedly at the Woman in Grey.

'You must be mad!' she said harshly. 'As though we could ever part! But don't go too far. Take care what you say, what you do, or I may——'
'You may do what you will! Injure me, if you choose; ruin yourself. For you know very well that you fall with my fall! But give me that envelope.'

With a burst of hoarse sobbing Miss Traill threw the object of the dispute far from her across the floor.

'Have your own way, you quixotic fool, you!' she ejaculated, through her scalding tears. 'But I warn you, you shall never know another easy moment under this roof. You wouldn't benefit yourself—you wouldn't let me benefit. I will see Sir Wilfrid. I will tell him how he has been decei—'

Consuelo's eyes burned a scornful reproach into hers. And the woman stopped, with a word broken in two, stammering, and impotently spiteful.

With a swift step or two Miss Hope had bent and raised the now crumpled envelope from the floor.

Then, looking straight at her companion as she did so, she tore open the end and drew out the folded parchment, which a short time before had been slipped in by Miss Traill.

'It is as I thought,' she said. 'How could you, Naomi? And you swore to me that it was not you who had taken it. Mr. Darkmore, I am only anticipating what, lately, I have meant some day to do. This piece of parchment is for you.'

While I still stood, half bewildered, she had placed the parchment in my hand.

I knew now that it was the 'chart,' as she had then called it, which she had taken from the bosom of her dress to examine that first night, before we went through the gathering darkness to the grave of Florence Haynes.

'I cannot understand you,' I exclaimed. 'I don't know why you should say that this is mine. But, if it is, it is only so because you wish it. And I beg that you will let me give it back to you, without even glancing at it again.'

She motioned it away as I held it toward her, with a strange half-smile that was partly sad, wholly inexplicable.
"Study it, if you are wise," she said, "in connection with other things."

As she spoke, there was a light tap at the door, and, drawing a portière aside, Consuelo revealed to us a footman.

"Sir Wilfrid's compliments, and will Miss Hope allow him to bring Mr. Haynes-Haviland to her in her boudoir? Sir Wilfrid would not trouble Miss Hope, but Mr. Haynes-Haviland has news which he should be glad to talk over in her presence and Mr. Darkmore's."

Consuelo stood as if transfixed for an instant, looking wonderfully tall and straight, while her tightly-closed lips trembled. But in the fraction of a second she had answered in her natural tones:

"Please tell Sir Wilfrid that I will receive Mr. Haynes-Haviland."

Bowing, the footman disappeared, and then she turned again to me.

"I knew that Mr. Haynes-Haviland was in the house," she said. "He arrived after Miss Traill asked to see you, and Sir Wilfrid went down to him. It was then that I came in here."

She did not seem to look at her companion, and yet, though she addressed me, I divined that her words were meant to convey some meaning to Miss Traill's ears as well as mine.

"As you know," she went on, "his conduct towards me was not particularly courteous the other morning, and I was naturally offended. But there was a certain excuse for him. He seemed to have mistaken me for—someone he once knew."

She gave me a confiding glance, and then passed out, leaving me to follow. As I went, I murmured a conventional word or two to Miss Traill, who received my salutation with a grim glare.

"I shall not soon forget or forgive this day's work, Mr.
Darkmore,' she said, 'neither to you nor Consuelo, as you shall both find out. I shall be even with her yet, and with you, too!'

Uncle Wilfrid and Haynes-Haviland had just arrived as I re-entered Miss Hope's pretty boudoir. The latter questioned me, with a show of solicitude, about my wound, and thoughtfully drank the tea that Consuelo gave him.

'Something which Mr. Haynes-Haviland told me downstairs has surprised me greatly,' said Uncle Wilfrid. 'He informs me that he and Paula were engaged—that some weeks before her disappearance she had promised to be his wife.'

Had the floor suddenly given way under our feet, I could scarcely have been more surprised, though I managed to control my astonishment in the consciousness that Haynes-Haviland's eyes were secretly regarding me. Still, I remembered that Paula was a woman to make and unmake promises as she pleased, swayed by a moment's whim, and there was genuine feeling in Haynes-Haviland's voice when he spoke of her.

'You see, Mr. Darkmore, I felt that I must speak to Sir Wilfrid and yourself of the relations I had borne to Paula. I say "had" because—Heaven help me!—I believe that she has been done to death. I wanted you to know that there was one even more interested than yourselves in the search—more passionately eager for its success. Beside all that, I crave your help, and it has struck me, Sir Wilfrid, that not enough is being done.'

'I trust that you are mistaken there,' said my uncle with dignity. 'Mr. and Mrs. Annesley had already sent for a detective before I was even informed of the need, and Mr. Marland has the reputation of being one of the shrewdest, most reliable men in the force. I am employing him upon another matter as well, which may possibly, he seems to think, be more or less connected with my niece's disappearance. He already knows this neighborhood, and it was he
who brought home the guilt of murder to one whom it was your misfortune at one time to know.'

Crash! went some heavy object in the bedroom adjoining, probably the steps provided to reach the higher shelves. Everyone started, though no word of comment was spoken; but we all knew that Miss Traill had been up, and listening to what had been going on in the boudoir. My uncle was silent; but Haynes-Haviland, after a moment's pause, continued:

'I grant that he is said to be clever, but yet not a single clue does he appear to have found.'

'You mean, perhaps, that he has not yet seen fit to reveal the finding of a clue? We must remember that only a week has passed,' said Uncle Wilfrid. 'Believe me, there is nothing we have left undone. But I must say, from my own knowledge of my niece's character, shown through its later developments, that, deep as is my regard for her, I think it not unlikely that she has merely contrived to steal away from her friends for the sake of causing them anxiety.'

'That is very far from being my theory,' returned Haynes-Haviland, with a suggestion of anger in his voice. 'Paula would not, at all events, have treated me so. Dead or alive, she has been removed against her own will, and the first step which I beg to suggest is that the old moat should be dragged.'

'Great heavens!' exclaimed Uncle Wilfrid, rising from his chair, and beginning to pace the room. 'The suggestion in your words is a terrible one—one which I cannot bear to entertain for a moment. What has put such a thought into your mind, Mr. Haynes-Haviland? Or do you merely bring it forward at random?'

'I do not bring it forward at random,' the young man said solemnly. 'In my anxiety I have turned detective on my own account. Since my stepmother's murder nothing seems too horrible to happen in this house. Forgive me for saying that, Sir Wilfrid, but it is true. I will tell you what led me
to think of the moat. As you know, we have had no rain for a week, and therefore any footprints or marks made in the grass on the day of Paula's disappearance might be expected to remain unobserved. Marland, clever as he is, does not seem to have turned his attention to the moat. At least, if he has, he has never mentioned it—never desired to have any search made, and I confess I did not think of the place at first. But I lived at Lorn Abbey for many years, you know, and gradually it dawned upon me that the moat was not an unlikely spot to be chosen for the concealment of—of a body. Paula was last seen in a room in your house. If anything happened to her there, why—the moat is much nearer than the river, better in every way as a hiding-place for anything which must be hidden. I thought of this, and last night, before it was dark, I came in through the field-path, and walked slowly all along the moat on both sides. On that nearest the house, in a certain spot, the grass was very much crushed and somewhat torn. That is all, Sir Wilfrid, but it seems to me significant—significant enough to order the dragging of the moat, if you will permit.'

'It shall be done to-morrow,' Uncle Wilfrid said; 'but I pray God it may end in nothing. I feel that it can end in no other way.'

'Let it be to-day, then,' cried Haynes-Haviland impetuously, springing to his feet with an eager light in his eyes. 'It can be managed at once, without delay. I have already made arrangements, only subject to your approval, that no time might be lost.'

Uncle Wilfrid squared his shoulders in the way that was so characteristic of him when any crisis had to be faced.

'Very well,' he returned, in a grave, low voice. 'Let it be to-day—at once. Let it be got over, and all such ghastly doubts forever set at rest.'
CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DRAGGING OF THE MOAT.

'The men whom I have engaged, provisionally, are waiting at The Nest,' explained Haynes-Haviland with a slight hesitation, as though he feared that Sir Wilfrid Amory might disapprove such high-handed proceedings, unauthorized as they had been. But Uncle Wilfrid's face displayed no emotion, either of anger or satisfaction, and Haynes-Haviland, taking courage, went on to inform us that Mrs. Annesley and her husband had left the cottage and gone back to town. 'They only took the place to please Paula,' he said, 'and now, of course, they could not bear to remain. But I am keeping on the house, having begged them to let it to me, for the present. I shall not go away until something is definitely known, and I can hardly tell how heartfelt will be my thankfulness, my gratitude, if I may be allowed often to come her and talk of her to you.'

He looked from Uncle Wilfrid to the Woman in Grey, as though he craved permission from both. It would have been hard for a stoic to resist him, and though I could see that Sir Wilfrid had not until this moment been particularly drawn to him, my uncle was very far from being a stoic.

'Come when you will. You will be welcome. Is it not so, Consuelo?' he returned.

'You have said it,' she answered gently. 'That is enough for me.'

'I will go with you and see it proved that your suspicions
are ill-founded, Mr. Haynes-Haviland,' said Uncle Wilfrid firmly; but his lips were white.

'And I,' I added quickly, rising as they did.

But Uncle Wilfrid stepped forward and laid his hand upon my shoulder.

'That is not to be thought of, Terry,' he said. 'Remember that you are still far from strong. Pay me the compliment of showing that you regard my authority as you did when a boy.'

I said no more; but, though I yielded to his wish, a dreadful restlessness was upon me. I knew instinctively that, though I was destined to remain within the Abbey walls while the search went on, I must not longer intrude upon Miss Hope.

The only kindness which I could do her was to leave her. But with an ungovernable impulse I turned back from the door and took her hand, pressing it in silence. To my joy, she delicately returned the pressure; and there was a look in her eyes which threw tragedy for the moment into the background, and dizzied me with joy.

Scarcey had the door closed behind me, when the feeling passed, and was superseded by the black depression I had felt before.

My first thought was to shut myself into my room, and then it suddenly flashed upon me that, from the window above, in the space devoted to the works of the great clock, I could see the moat, and all that took place beside it.

Without an instant's hesitation I went up the stairs, beginning with a run, but ending with a slow walk which my miserable weakness rendered a necessity.

It was close upon six o'clock, but the April sunshine still lay golden along the lawn, and it was a scene of exquisite beauty and peace upon which I looked down.

Who, not in the secret, would dream that the group of men moving down by the moat were bent upon the discovery of a dreadful tragedy which the reedy water might hide?
I watched them with a species of hateful fascination from my eyrie. Long moments passed, and the shadows lengthened. There was a golden glitter of reflected sunset on the windows of cottages across the river.

Suddenly the little knot of men stepped back from the edge of the moat. Something had been brought up by their grappling hooks.

Forgetful of Uncle Wilfrid’s injunction, I turned to the door, meaning to join them, when, with a warning groan, the clock began to strike the hour of seven. Nearly sixty minutes had passed since I had entered this place, sacred to the complicated and mysterious machinery of the ancient timepiece.

Never had I mounted into the tower above my own room since the day I had accompanied my uncle on his exploring expedition, and even then I had not remained long enough to hear the striking of the clock. Now the great noise of it surprised me, and absorbed as I was, heart and soul, in the thought of what was going on at the moatside, I involuntarily raised my eyes to the machinery, which was exposed in a species of metal skeleton, not unlike (in an awkward and exaggerated form) the works of some small modern mantel clocks which I had seen.

There was a great whirring noise, resembling the flapping wings of a huge imprisoned bird, and at the last stroke of the hour a circular, disc-like piece of iron set against the wall, yet apparently connected with the machinery of the clock, began moving to and fro in an unexpected manner.

It had once evidently been painted a dull green, and the color still remained in scattered patches upon a larger groundwork of brown and reddish rust.

For an instant I had involuntarily paused, but as the quiver of the disc ceased, I hurriedly moved on again. So doing, I caught my coat on a rusty nail, and in extricating it pulled, not only my handkerchief, but the parchment chart which the Woman in Grey had given me, from my pocket.
I had not glanced at it before, but now I saw that it appeared to be an unfinished plan of a building, with a map encircling it, evidently representing a portion of the ground lying around Lorn Abbey, with the river indicated beyond.

The plan of the interior appeared to be very old, but it was easy to see that the remainder of the drawing had been added at a much later date. Beneath, and finishing only at the bottom of the parchment, was a copy of the ‘Amory Catechism,’ the wording of which I remembered, though I had not examined it a second time.

The first line upon which my eyes now alighted was in the midst of the rigmarole:

‘When that which is green shall move.’

‘When that which is green shall move!’ The words seemed to strike out a spark of fire in my mind, as flint coming into sudden contact with marble.

Only a moment ago ‘that which was green’ had moved. At least, long ago, in the days when the original of this copy had been written, the great disc of iron which had rocked with the striking of the clock had been green—something was left to this day which told the tale. And the man who had invented the workings of the clock had also invented the strange ‘Catechism.’ Could it be that by chance I had hit upon the clue to some mystery undiscovered through all these years?

The thought darted through my brain like a lightning-flash, and then was instantly blotted out again by the dark memory of a slow procession, coming step by step nearer to the House of Fear.

In another moment my mind was a blank where the ‘Catechism’ and the secret of the iron disc were concerned.

Mechanically I replaced the parchment in my pocket, and went down the stairs to meet an awful possibility which somehow must be faced.

Uncle Wilfrid and Haynes-Haviland had almost reached
the door as I went out to meet them. They were in advance of the procession by a distance of twenty or thirty yards.

I had but to glance at my uncle's set face to realize that the search under the waters of the moat had not been wholly in vain.

'Well?' I questioned, in a voice that had an unnatural ring in my own ears.

'I fear that it is not well,' answered Uncle Wilfrid. 'Nothing is known positively as yet, except that—there has been a body found. With the men Haynes-Haviland engaged to drag the moat is one member of the local police force who came to oversee the work, and though he insisted that it was the usual form to have the body examined on the spot where it was brought from the water, I have succeeded in getting that point waived. I could not—a gaping crowd would have been around us, as near as they dared come; you know how such mobs collect, even in the country. And now—it must be brought into the billiard-room—the best, because the lightest, in the house.'

His voice shook a little as he spoke, but apart from that his manner was calm—I fully realized by what an effort.

It was he who went inside to give the necessary orders, and to see that all arrangements were made with becoming decency and respect.

Haynes-Haviland and I were left alone together—waiting.

'It is she, not some unknown woman, as Sir Wilfred would have me believe,' he said. There was a sullen despair in his tone, but as I turned to look at him there seemed to me an expression upon his face which was at variance with his voice.

The corners of his lips were curved piteously downward, like the mouth of a grieved child, and his angelically arched brows were drawn together, raised at the centre in a sombre frown of pain. But the eyes beneath had a steely gleam, and there was a deep flush on the smooth, beardless cheeks.
Was he triumphant that his horrible prophecy seemed about to be fulfilled, or what meant the jarring contradiction of face and voice?

* * * * *

What they had found had been wrapped in a large piece of silken material, which, though soaked and sodden black with water, proved on close examination to be of Indian manufacture.

'This alone does away with your theory of a stray tramp—a suicide, Sir Wilfrid!' cried Haynes-Haviland. 'There are sure signs of murder here. And who knows but this bit of drapery may be identified?'

We were silent, Uncle Wilfrid and I, having already mentally identified the twisted lengths of silk. Scarcely more than a week ago the piece had covered a table in the ingle-room, from which Paula had disappeared.

Now it was tightly knotted, and a broken stick had been thrust through the knot, as though to provide means of dragging the body for a considerable distance along the ground.

The last time that I had seen the Indian drapery had been, I remembered too well, but a few moments after my entrance to the ingle-room on that fatal Sunday afternoon.

Paula, as she turned from the window, where I had first seen her standing, and advanced towards me, had brushed against it with her gauzy skirts, dragging it half off the table, and upsetting a small vase of daffodils which had been placed upon it. Though I had not given the matter a second thought at the time, and had allowed the flowers to fall neglected, the scene now painted itself upon my retina with the distinctness of a picture.

The silk was wrapped firmly round the head and shoulders of the body, but beneath trailed a black dress; and with a fearful, sickening hesitation I took up a fold of the fabric in my hand, as the policeman and Haynes-Haviland worked together at unfastening the knot.
The gown was of silk, and attached by a star of jet embroidery depended a single rag of wilted gauze, having a frayed and charred appearance at the ends.

At this sight my heart fainted within me. Could proof be more positive than this? It was the dress which Paula had worn that Sunday.

'It is her gown, I am sure of it,' Haynes-Haviland was saying brokenly; and then, as my eyes still lingered on the poor shreds of tattered finery, I started at an exclamation of horror which Uncle Wilfrid gave.

I looked up, and followed the direction of his gaze. There was no need to ask what had called forth his exclamation. I saw with my own eyes, which for months had but to close their lids to behold the same sight repeated in every dreadful detail.

The silken drapery had fallen back. The shoulders were uncovered, and a shapeless mass of broken velvet and crushed feathers, which had once been a 'picture' hat, had expanded, when released from pressure, out of the rounded bunch into which it had purposely been moulded. It fell away with the falling of the drapery, bringing with it a dainty pair of high-heeled shoes which had been forced inside the crown; and thus was revealed a hitherto unimagined horror.

The body was without a head!

'Oh for revenge!' cried Haynes-Haviland. 'Deadly, horrible revenge upon the one who has done this thing.'

As he spoke the door opened. We had thought it locked, but it seemed that we had been mistaken, and on the threshold stood the last man whom any among us might have expected to see.

It was Jerome, my uncle's ex-secretary—Jerome, of whose very existence I had grown oblivious.

'They tell me,' he said, in a curious, constrained voice, 'that the dead body of Miss Wynne has been found. I had to come. She was the only human being on earth for whom
I cared. It cannot be that she is dead. Is it true? Sir Wilfrid, I beg of you to answer me.'

'That we do not yet know,' returned my uncle sternly. 'You cannot remain here, Jerome. In good time you shall hear all.'

But Jerome, who in old days had been humble to servility, now cut Sir Wilfrid short.

'I tell you I have a right to stay,' he said. 'She was my only friend. I loved her. And I can prove who did the murder.'

For an instant we stood eyeing him in incredulous astonishment. And he took advantage of the pause to rush to the place where, upon the cleared platform placed for lookers-on when a game of billiards was being played, the body had been laid down.

He fell on his knees beside it, a limp, despairing little figure, and raised a fold of the draggled gown to his lips.

'This was her dress,' he groaned. 'She had it on that last day. I watched her as she went out of the house.'

'What! you saw her on that day?' questioned Uncle Wilfrid, turning quickly on him. 'Where were you?'

'I was at the cottage called The Nest. Miss Wynne had asked Mrs. Annesley to invite me down over Sunday. You can bear me out in that statement, Mr. Haynes-Haviland.'

'Yes,' the other echoed; 'I can bear you out in that.'

'I had a long talk with her after luncheon. She seemed in low spirits, and remarked that a presentiment of some evil was upon her. She let me try to comfort her. But she was restless, and told me she was going for a walk, and wished to be alone. She held out her hand to me, and said good-bye, and I saw the rings sparkling on it. See! there they are now—five rings. It is one more proof of identity.'

Jerome pointed with a thin, tremulous finger. And it was as he said. The rings which Uncle Wilfrid and I had for long been accustomed to seeing on Paula's left hand still sparkled on the poor, bloated fingers. Even the circlet of
brilliants which I had given her, and which she had never sent back to me after our parting, was there among the others.

Hope began to die out in our hearts, and a sickening weight of misery took its place.

'Foully murdered!' cried Jerome. 'The beautiful, gracious woman struck down in the blossom of her youth. Can't you see it all as I do? I tell you, I speak as one inspired with the gift of prophecy. This is the work of jealousy and revenge. But one hand on earth could have been raised to do a deed so base—the hand of the woman who hated her, who robbed her of all she held precious, who even robbed me of my poor rightful place—the hand which hid itself under—this.'

With a wild gesture he snatched from the breast of the dead woman something which might have been concealed there, though as yet we had failed to see it, and held it out to my uncle and to me.

One quick glance was enough to tell me what it was that with a certain hideous triumph he displayed—a torn portion of what had once been a delicate mitten of pearl beads strung on threads of gold.
CHAPTER XIX.

THE CORONER’S INQUEST.

That night Marland, the detective, who had gone to London with the idea of following up some real or fancied clue, was telegraphed for to the address he had told Uncle Wilfrid would always find him, wherever he might be. And, on reaching Lorn Abbey in the morning of the next day, we could see it was a blow to him to learn suddenly that in great probability the body of Miss Wynne had been found in the moat.

‘In that case the theory I had formed falls to the ground,’ he said. ‘And I confess myself gravely disappointed.’ But what his theory had been he was not prepared to say.

The coroner’s inquest was to be held immediately, and it was granted as a matter of courtesy to Sir Wilfrid Amory that it should be held in his house.

The important witnesses to be called were Uncle Wilfred, Haynes-Haviland, Jerome, the Annesleys, the policeman who had superintended the dragging of the moat, Miss Hope, and myself.

There was no use in disguising the fact from ourselves that, taking the already known evidence into consideration, suspicion would point toward the Woman in Grey. What had occurred was known in the household, and throughout it spread an ominous flutter of excitement, reaching upward from the servants’ hall.

The prospect which sat like a weight upon the breasts of most of us seemed only to have exhilarated Miss Traill. She
was up and about again, moving restlessly through the house, her harsh voice sounding stridently as she called to the mongoose.

Once I met her, and against my will she stopped me in the hall.

'You are not looking as well as you did, Mr. Darkmore,' she said slyly, with concealed malice. 'One would think you were racked with anxiety as to the upshot of this affair.'

'I shall be glad when it is over,' I replied.

'Oh, shouldn't I like to be a fly on the wall, and hear all that goes on!' Miss Traill exclaimed. 'Perhaps—who knows?—I shall manage something of the sort. You've no idea how clever I am.'

She looked back at me as she went slowly up the stairs, the hand which held her pet still closely bandaged in narrow strips of lint. In the other, she had evidently grasped a number of scraps of paper, torn in numerous pieces and ready to throw away; but the mongoose giving a leap, as though it would have sprung from her arms, she clutched hastily at the creature, and so let fall a number of the ragged bits.

Three or four fluttered back to my feet, and on the largest I could distinctly see, written in big, rough characters, in the form of a heading, the words: 'The Spider Farm, Tuesday.'

I bent and picked up the slips, meaning to call after Miss Traill, who might prefer to finish the destruction of her letter for herself, and as I did so my eyes fell upon another portion. 'You don't come before next Friday,' I read (the line being torn across at the beginning). 'Will help you. Let the blow fall, and... She deserves...'. Here the three broken lines, whose meaning seemed more or less to be connected, came to an abrupt end, being torn across, irregularly, at the bottom.

Neither ashamed nor regretful, strange to say, of having inadvertently possessed myself of the key to a lock which
was as yet invisible, I looked up, the paper still in my hand, and saw that Miss Traill was coming down again.

'I dropped some scraps of a torn letter,' she said, 'and I hate making a litter in other people's houses, so I've run back to gather them up. Ah, thanks! I see you've saved me the trouble.'

She almost snatched the bits of paper. It was plain to see that I had fallen lower in Miss Traill's good graces than ever.

'The Spider Farm, near Market Peyton, Hants.'

My memory supplied the remaining portion of the address. More than once since I had directed the foolscap envelope for Miss Traill I had recalled the words I had put down at her direction.

When the inquest should be over—safely over, please God!—I decided that I would turn my attention to Miss Traill. I would learn whether she meant to absent herself from Lorn Abbey before the day mentioned in the letter. And if not, rather than calmly stand by and allow that unknown 'blow to fall' upon the beautiful head I loved, the golden head already beaten upon by the storm, I might determine to take some desperate step or other in the affair myself.

The Coroner's inquest was set for twelve o'clock on the second day after the discovery of the body in the moat. The jury was to sit in the great library, and throughout the house there seemed to be a solemn hush when it was known that, one by one, the twelve men were viewing the Thing which lay in grim state in the billiard-room.

In the first place, those witnesses who had seen the body taken from the water were called. Of these Haynes-Haviland was last, but most important, he having alleged that his suspicions had been directed to the place by the torn and draggled appearance of the grass on the bank at a certain spot, shown later to Sir Wilfrid and the constable who had accompanied the expedition to the moat.
After Haynes-Haviland came Uncle Wilfrid. Then the Annesleys, who had been recalled from town for the occasion. Then Jerome, and it was his evidence which I dreaded most, as I feared that his vindictive feeling against Miss Hope—partly on his own account, no doubt, as he believed that it was through her influence he had lost his position as my uncle's secretary, partly on account of Paula's fancied wrongs—might lead him to misrepresent words or actual occurrences.

Time passed slowly, and still he was retained and questioned by the Coroner. I remembered Miss Traill's desire to be 'a fly on the wall,' that she might see and hear all that went on in that temporary chamber of justice, and now I could have echoed the wish. Next must come Miss Hope, and, last of all, Dr. Hasbrouck and myself.

As for Consuelo, the truth, which I knew she did not mean to disguise, might be, unless we could save her by what we had to say, well-night fatal to her interests.

Never did time pass so slowly; but at last Jerome came out, and Miss Hope was called in his place.

I walked restlessly up and down, counting the moments, picturing to myself what might be going on in the room adjoining.

Suddenly my meditations were broken in upon by a knock at the door, which I opened, and found Miss Traill, flushed, excited, sparkling-eyed.

'Here is something for you,' she said. 'Read it—it will explain itself. You may thank me another time. Didn't I tell you I meant to be a "fly on the wall"?'

She was gone before I could reply, and I opened the paper and began reading. It was a strange document—strange as the writer herself.

'Notes taken during the progress of the Coroner's inquest at Lorn Abbey,' the scribed began—'in the book-cupboard between the library and Sir Wilfrid's smoking-room. A woman circumvents the coroner and his men. Miss Naomi
Traill, anxious to inform herself, and willing because of her gratitude to Mr. Terence Darkmore for certain favors (?), received, to satisfy his curiosity, establishes herself at the keyhole, having first concealed herself from observation in the said book-cupboard. When all is safe she lights a small night-lamp, brought for the purpose, which will assist her to write. This she will do from time to time, during the questioning of less important witnesses, or pauses for whispered consultation among the jurymen.

'Ten minutes later. Evidence has been given regarding the finding of the body. Nothing incriminating for C. H. . . . Ah! here is Mr. Haynes-Haviland. He has told of his engagement to Miss Wynne. Has said that she feared and disliked Consuelo. Believed Consuelo had a secret, which Miss Wynne wished to find out, and save her uncle from an impostor. . . . Swears he was able to identify the body and clothing; also a bracelet which he himself had given Miss Wynne the day before her disappearance. Certifies to having noticed a track along the grass, coming from the direction of the Abbey towards the moat. Says it was this which first aroused his suspicions that the body of Miss Wynne might have been sunk in the water. Thinks he saw the silk in which the corpse was wrapped on a table in the room from which Miss Wynne was said to have disappeared. Cannot swear to this, but believes it was on the night of the ball that he noticed it.

'Sir Wilfrid called. (Answers cautiously, like the old diplomat that he is.) They've been at him hammer and tongs for twenty minutes, but they've got nothing out of him he would not wish to admit. He is the first to suggest that the body may not be that of his niece.

'Ah, ha! now comes the test. Here is little Jerome! Swears he has identified the corpse. Noticed the rings on Miss Wynne's hand just before she went out on Sunday. She invariably wore five on the left hand, four on the third finger, including the ring of her betrothal to Mr. Terence
Darkmore—which she had not removed, though he, Jerome, was aware she was no longer engaged to her cousin—and a small one on the little finger. He had also observed a bracelet, with which, she had remarked at luncheon, Mr. Haynes-Haviland had presented her the night before.

'It is evident even through the keyhole, that all this is making a grave impression on the jury. It is a rare treat to watch their faces, whichever way the case may go.

'Jerome, further examined, goes on to say that already Miss Hope had deeply, irreparably injured Sir Wilfrid's niece to promote her own selfish ends, and had robbed her of home and friends; and he knew that Miss Wynne believed that her uncle had altered, or would alter, his will in the stranger's favor.

'He had often noticed the pearl glove on the left hand of Miss Hope, and his curiosity had been excited by it. He had never seen Miss Hope when the glove was absent. To the best of his belief she wore it continually. He would swear that the torn fragment of pearl beads and threads found in the bosom of the gown worn by the dead woman had been a portion of this glove.

'This is the worst piece of evidence yet for C. H. Things are looking very black for her.

'Jerome gone. Consuelo called. The writer must now make haste, that these chronicles may be in the hands of Mr. Darkmore before he be summoned to give evidence. N. T. is very sure that her notes will be safe in his possession, and that they will be allowed to injure nobody. And it will be a satisfaction to her to feel that he will, from these pages, learn the worst, realizing also how very little—worse than nothing, perhaps—he will be able to do for C. H. What he knows, so far as N. T. is aware, can only further incriminate the lady already in danger. Perhaps, in future, C. H. may, at least, be given time to reflect upon the advisability of not offending her best friends, and of sometimes taking their advice. But then, unfortunately, by that time it may be too late.
'Consuelo telling her story. She admits the quarrel. She admits everything. I cannot wait here longer, but already I see the verdict in those twelve pairs of solemn eyes.'

Hardly had my eyes devoured the last line, when my own call came to stand where Consuelo had lately stood.

As I took my place, with those 'twelve pairs of solemn eyes,' as Miss Traill had termed them, fixed upon me, a deadly calmness superseded the excitement which had throbbed in every nerve.

I knew that what I had to say might mean life or death for the woman I loved. So thinking, I scarcely heard the first question put to me by the Coroner after I had kissed the Sacred Book. With an effort, I pulled myself together.

'Have you seen the body found two days ago in the moat belonging to this estate?' the Coroner asked.

'I have,' I answered firmly.

'Did you recognize it as that of your cousin, Miss Paula Wynne?'

'I did not so recognize it.'

'Do you intend the jury to understand that you are not able to swear to the identity, or that you have reasons for believing it to be the body of someone else?'

'I mean that I am sure it is not that of my cousin.'

As I so spoke, in a clear, ringing voice, there was a slight sensation among the jurymen. I had feared some long pre-amble, a dragging forth of my experience in the ingle-room on the day of Paula's disappearance, and now I exulted that the questions as to identification had come first. And they were questions that I believed nobody else beside myself would be able to answer upon oath.

'Please give your reasons for making such a statement.'

'In the first place, it struck us all that it was a strange thing that the head should have been cut off. There seemed no motive for such mutilation, unless to render identification difficult, in which case the clothing and jewelry might also easily have been removed; or unless there were a plot to
make it appear that the body of a stranger was that of Miss Wynne.

"Pardon me," said the Coroner, "but the question is, not what you or others thought and suspected, but what facts you are able to cite. Will you proceed with your statement?"

I had expected this interruption, but had been determined, before it came, if possible, to insert this preface before the statement of details which must follow.

"After the finding of the body," I went on, "it occurred to me to try and put on the foot of the dead woman one of the shoes which had been stuffed inside the crown of the hat. Even allowing for the swelling of the flesh, the body having been for some time in the water, it was evident that the shoes—which I can state upon oath were those which Miss Wynne wore on the afternoon of her disappearance—would in any case have been several sizes too small. The woman whose body was found in the moat, though of much the same height and general build as Miss Wynne, had feet which were considerably larger. And this was also true of the hands, for, allowing for swelling, as with the feet, there were signs that the skin had been torn in forcing on the rings."

"I think it is impossible to rely upon any evidence of this sort," one juryman said audibly to another. "I, for one, am of the opinion that it would be absolutely impossible to ascertain what the size of the feet or hands had been in life, or even their true shape. Why, the corpse had been in the water at least a week!"

My heart sank a little, but still I went on:

"There was a difference of four or five years between Miss Wynne's age and mine.

"When our uncle, Sir Wilfrid Amory, took us under his care, we were both children, and played constantly together."

"It was in Sussex, one day, when Miss Wynne was almost eight, and I twelve or thirteen, that we were wading bare-footed in a brook, and my cousin, stepping on a sharp stone, hurt herself seriously. She was unable to walk for some
time, and when she did recover, a scar was left on the sole of her right foot, which in those days she very often displayed to me. It is not now more than six months ago that the old episode happened to come up in the course of conversation, and my cousin assured me that the scar was still as strongly marked as it had ever been. It was peculiar, and unmistakable, at least two inches in length—a dead white seam, jagged as the teeth of a saw.

'I very carefully examined the feet of the body now lying in this house, and on neither is there any scar whatever.'

Again there was a visible stir among the jurymen.

I paused for an instant, and was asked by the Coroner if this piece of evidence completed my statement.

'No,' I returned, 'I have still something else to say, of equal, if not more, importance.'

Deliberately I removed the gold links from my cuff, and pulled up the sleeve on my right arm. Between the wrist and elbow, an anchor and heart, neatly tattooed in blue ink, were distinctly to be seen.

'I learned the trick of doing this sort of thing from an old sailor when I was a boy,' I said. 'I did this tattooing myself, and my cousin insisted upon having a design of the same kind on the inner side of her right arm, above the bend of the elbow. She had thought she would not mind the pain (she was then about fourteen), but her courage failed in the midst, and only the outline of the heart was completed. So much was ineradicable, and I have seen it from time to time when my cousin was in evening dress. I do not know that Sir Wilfrid Amory ever had his attention called to the mark, but he was aware that it existed, as he would testify if you questioned him. And now, if you will have the doctor who examined the body recalled, you will hear from him the confirmation of my words—that there is no scar upon the foot, no stain of tattooing upon either arm.'

I had finished; I had said all that I meant to say, and I answered the remaining questions which were put to me with
a comparatively free heart. I did not know what the testimony of the doctor appointed by the Coroner had been, but I knew that Dr. Hasbrouck, when called as a witness, would certify that, to the best of his belief, the woman found drowned must have been some years older than Paula Wynne. I felt that the aspect of the case was changed; but still, the time which intervened before the finding of the verdict passed more heavily than any moments my life had ever known.

At last it came. 'Murder, by a person or persons unknown, upon the body of a woman unknown.'

I could have cried out aloud, and laughed, and flung up my hands when I heard it. For the plot against the Woman in Grey had failed. And it was I who had helped to bring it to the light.

'Thank God!' said Uncle Wilfrid, beneath his breath. But Haynes-Haviland did not speak. He went up to my uncle and shook hands, but there was that in his face which contradicted the cordiality of his action.

'Terry,' Uncle Wilfrid said, 'I did mean to be the one to tell Consuelo. But, on second thoughts, I would prefer it to be you. Go to her, and put an end to her suspense.'

I felt that it ought to have been he, and yet the temptation to obey was too strong to be resisted.

I knocked at her boudoir, and Consuelo herself opened the door.

'I have good news,' I said, and told her what the verdict had been.

She took it calmly; but she held out both her hands.

'And for it all I have to thank you,' she said. 'Once you saved my life. Now you have saved what is worth more to me and to those who care for me. What reward will you have?'

'I have done nothing,' I returned. 'I do not want, much less ask, a reward.'

'But if I offer it to you?'
My pulses leaped.

'Then, there is but one thing on earth I have begged of you, and—you refused it. Do you still refuse?'

'How can I tell, unless you ask it of me again?'

'You told me that was what I never must do.'

'But I am a woman. May I not change my mind?'

'Consuelo, give me your love.'

'What if I promised you my love, and could not promise that you and I should ever be more to each other than we are at this moment?'

Her hand was on my breast, holding me at arm's length, when I would have come nearer than I had ever dared to do before.

'I should consider myself the happiest man alive to have won that inestimable gift. Is there any hope that I may win it?'

'You never knew that—it was already won,' she said, in a low voice. 'But your cousin Paula knew. Women are wiser in such matters than men.'

'You love me!' I cried; 'then, I shall never cease to hope, I shall never rest, I shall move heaven and earth until I have gained all.'

'To gain all you must indeed move heaven and earth,' she echoed, 'for there are obstacles you do not dream of in the way.'

'I shall beat them down!' I exclaimed buoyantly. 'Now that you have told me you love me, what obstacle is mighty enough to stand between you and me?'

'Mr. Thomas Gordon!' announced a footman, appearing at the door.
CHAPTER XX.

THE MYSTERY AT THE SPIDER FARM.

He had been at Martenhead all day, it seemed, and had now come with congratulations. But I could see that his sudden appearance had depressed Consuelo.

I could hardly wait for him to be gone, that I might tell Uncle Wilfrid of what I chose to consider Consuelo's promise to me. She contended that there was nothing to be told, but at last consented that her adopted father should be taken into our confidence. There was a feeling in my heart that his sharing the secret would, in a way, bind her to me. And I knew, from what he had once hinted to me, that he would be glad.

Never, through all the many years of love and kindness Uncle Wilfrid had given me, had I heard so deep a ring of tenderness in his voice as at the moment when he took Consuelo's hands, and thanked her for bestowing upon me the blessing of her love.

'You will belong more than ever to me after this, my child,' he said. 'And there is a thing I should like you both to know, you and Terry, though, in the midst of your new happiness, it will seem a sordid enough trifle to you, I dare say. But, now that in all human probability you will one day be man and wife, I shall decide to do what I have for some time thought of doing, in any event. Apart from a small legacy to Paula, in case she survives, I shall alter my will, and leave all my worldly possessions between you two—the beings who are dearest to me on earth.'

One hand he put out to me, and I would have grasped it,
had not a slight creaking of the door surprised me, and
drawn my attention away. I was half inclined to fancy that
Gordon, tortured by jealousy, had come back, and, with a
flash of premature resentment, I strode to the door.

A figure was just leaving it, but a figure smaller in every
way than the leonine Gordon. I followed, and in a second
had overtaken Haynes-Haviland.

He started, and looked up at me apologetically with his
saintly eyes, an expression of complete innocence on his
youthful face.

'T ask your pardon, Mr. Darkmore,' he said. 'But I had
been told I might find you and Sir Wilfrid with Miss Hope.
I begged not to be formally announced, as once or twice I
have been granted the privilege of entering her boudoir. But
I fancied you were engaged, and so I came away again,
without disturbing you.'

How little did I dream of the complications that were
destined to arise from this one seemingly insignificant
incident!

By dusk, the poor remains of the 'woman unknown' had
been removed from the room where they had lain at Lorn
Abbey, to be given decent burial in the graveyard by the old
grey church in Martenhead. And with the body, fear and
suspicion and the atmosphere of death went too.

Both ladies retired especially early that night. I had
hoped for a few more moments of heaven with Consuelo, but
I was denied them. She was very tired, she said, and her
face confirmed her words.

Uncle Wilfrid, too, felt weary to the verge of illness, he
admitted, and, after an hour or so spent in talking over the
future with me in the smoking-room, he left me, saying he
would go to bed.

Uncle Wilfrid and I were always contented in each other's
society, but to-night I was scarcely sorry to be left alone.
There was much for me to think of, much of which I could
not speak even to him.
For long I sat brooding, and at half-past one I got up with a sudden inspiration for a stroll to the riverside before going to bed. It would give me a chance, too, for a look at her window, the sort of sentimentalism I had never understood in lovers until a few short weeks before.

I stepped out into the white purity of the night, the smell of wall-flowers blowing towards me with the river breeze. My footfalls made no sound on the soft velvet of the lawn. I had left my pipe behind me, and sauntered on, my hands behind my back, my eyes fixed on the glittering path of moonlight which stretched across the river.

Not far from the brink was a huge Lebanon cedar, famous throughout the country for its age, its height, and the phenomenal girth of its great gnarled trunk. Round it ran a low seat, and on this I stretched myself at full length.

Scarcely had I done so when two voices made themselves audible—Consuelo’s and Miss Traill’s. They were on the other side of the huge tree, out of my sight, as I was out of theirs.

‘Are you sure he is coming?’ said the Woman in Grey.

‘Well, one is never sure of anything that he is going to do; as I’ve told you before, I can’t control him. If I’d thought I could, I should have gone and tried to arrange matters with him. But there’s only one thing, I’m afraid, that will make him change his mind. You know what that thing is. It isn’t too late yet, my dear. To be sure, Mr. Darkmore has the parchment, but I’ll wager anything he has never yet given it a thought or a glance. And he would hand it back to you willingly if you asked him for it. Tell him you’ve changed your mind. It’s really the only fair thing to do, considering that, from the first, it was part of the bargain with me.’

That is not true, Naomi. You and everyone concerned have been more than repaid for all you ever did for me. You think that I will buy you off at any price, when all that I have hoped for is so nearly within my grasp.’
'You will be very foolish if you don't pay this price. But, see, here he comes. I'm sure it must be he.'

I lay still on the rustic seat under the black shadow of the cedar. I did not mean to stay and listen to any secret of Consuelo's which might now be brought up for discussion, but I did mean somehow to help her, if I could. If I could but think of the right way to do it, I told myself, she might be once and forever relieved of those whom I mentally classed as blackmailers. Therefore, for the present, I did not move.

'It is he,' I heard Miss Traill say. 'He would prefer doing business with you alone.'

In a moment more her dumpy figure was to be seen in the moonlight, ambling across the lawn in the direction of the house. The man I could not see, for he had chosen a different way of approach; but I knew that he had come, for the Woman in Grey spoke haughtily, breathing the one word 'Well?'

'Well,' repeated a heavy masculine voice, with an unpleasant provincial drawl. 'I've heard from Naomi, and I've come to see if I can't get you to consider matters. You'd better, you know, for you are under my thumb; and if you don't do what we want, you know what the consequence will be.'

A word or two more I caught, and then they walked away beyond hearing. I was glad of this. But never once did I remove my eyes from the short, squat form of the man.

Moments elapsed. Sometimes the two strangely assorted companions glided on side by side; sometimes they paused, in earnest conversation. But at last, with a gesture which seemed to tell of utter desperation, the Woman in Grey hurried swiftly away without one backward look.

She was evidently going to the house, and at first I feared the man would follow her. But he did not do so. He stood still, his chin sunk into the hollow of his hand, the moonlight shining full upon him. For several minutes he appeared to reflect, and then began walking toward the gate.
It would have been easy for me to follow and catch up with him, but this I did not wish to do. I wanted to follow him to his lair, wherever it might be, and, if possible, discover something so much to his disadvantage that he would be as completely in my power as he had persuaded Consuelo to believe she was in his.

My blood was up. Wherever the chase might lead me, however long and intricate it might prove, I meant to follow it.

My quarry slouched along the lawn until he struck into the avenue; then on again, until within fifty yards of the porter’s lodge, when he took to the grass once more, and suddenly disappeared through an aperture in the thick holly-hedge, for which he had apparently intentionally been making. I gave him a start, and then plunged through the thicket, regardless of scratches and dishevelment.

A long, straight road now stretched before us, extending on the one hand to Martenhead, on the other to a town of considerable size, called Witherton, about four miles off. For a few seconds he seemed undecided which way to go, then turned in the direction of the latter place—an incident which puzzled me slightly, until I reflected that there would doubtless be better choice of trains at Witherton.

I was in evening dress, which somewhat handicapped my freedom of movement, rendering me far more conspicuous than one would choose to be when engaged in such a chase. But I would not be stopped by that.

We journeyed on, always fifty yards or so apart; and at length the slouching figure turned toward the railway-station at Witherton, made visible by the few colored lights gleaming far away. Nothing was stirring, and evidently there would not be a train for some time yet.

The man had gone upstairs to the down-platform, but I preferred to wait below. For a time I paced up and down, and when I had twice heard the striking of a distant church clock, a sleepy-looking porter stumbled past me.
The down-train would stop at ten to five, he said, in answer to my question. There would only be about fifteen minutes to wait.

'How far do you live from here?' I inquired, gently slipping a half-crown into his astonished palm.

'Oh, just round the corner, in one of them cottages, where the roofs stand up among the trees, sir.'

'Do you happen to have such a thing as a top-coat which doesn't belong to your uniform? I started off in a great hurry. You are shorter than I am, but I think a coat of yours might do. I would give you what you like for it.'

'I have a coat, sir—a very good one, too,' he returned doubtfully. 'I hadn't any wish to dispose of it; but, to accommodate a gentleman, I wouldn't mind lettin' it go for a couple of pound.'

'I'll give you three,' I said, 'if you'll run back and get it for me before this train starts.'

'I can do it if I look sharp, and yet be on hand for duty in plenty of time, sir,' he returned, warming to the spirit of the thing.

He was off like a shot, and I stamped up and down impatiently until he returned, breathless, with a shabby travelling overcoat hanging on his arm. It was a tight fit; but, fortunately for me, the owner was a man beyond the average height, and I managed to wriggle into the garment, pulling the collar close around my throat.

In another moment or so I was on the platform, leisurely strolling up and down, and lighting a cigar from the silver case Uncle Wilfrid had given me.

I gave a sharp look round for my man, and soon saw him, walking back from an impatient journey to the far end of the platform. He had not bought his ticket; and when the window was opened, to show the sleepy face of the station-master, I stood in the background while the fellow purchased a third single to Ralston.

Ralston was a town some twenty miles away, well known
as an important railway junction. So far, at least, I had secured the pleasure of being the stranger’s travelling companion.

Getting into the train, I was glad to find that we had a carriage to ourselves, my unsuspecting quarry and I.

Slowly the morning dawned, cloudy and dull. I was weary and chilled, and, despite my keenness in the chase, had dropped into a doze once, when I roused myself with a start, to find a pair of bloodshot eyes fixed upon me, under the grim shadow of their overhanging brows.

‘Did you speak?’ I queried politely. I knew that he had not done so, but I was anxious for an excuse to open a conversation.

‘No, I didn’t,’ he growled. ‘I say, you got in at Witherston, didn’t you?’

I assented.

‘Well, do you know anything about that part of the country?’

‘A little,’ I said modestly.

‘Oh! I suppose, then, you’re acquainted with some of the folks round about?’

‘I know a few people.’

‘Look here: your clothes and your talk seem to me not to go together. You speak like a swell, and you ain’t dressed as smart as me. No offense; but is it the country folks you know, or the ones lower down?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t aspire to many acquaintances among the county people,’ I cautiously answered.

‘Ever heard of Sir Wilfrid Amory, who has lately bought a big place near Martenhead?’

‘Oh yes—Lorn Abbey. I’ve heard his name.’

‘Ever seen a tall, fine-looking young woman he’s taken to live in his house?—adopted her for a daughter.’

‘She is already famous throughout the country for her beauty.’
‘She is good-looking. Better-looking than she used to be when I knowed her first.’

‘Ah, you’re old friends, are you?’

‘Friends! Not much. You wouldn’t think, to look at me, if you have ever seen her, that we could have much in com-
mon; but I tell you there aren’t many people on earth who
know her as well as me and mine do. She’s cheated me out
of my just dues. Thinks she’s too high for me to hurt her.
If I should so much as open my mouth about that pearl
mitten she wears on her hand by day and night, she’d be
famous, I can tell you, for something besides her beauty.

I could hear no more; patience and caution were gone like
a flame blown out by a puff of wind. I was about to answer
in a way which would have surprised him, when, with a
mighty shock, and a wail which seemed to rise from the lips
of every one among the hundreds of passengers, I was
thrown headlong upon him, under a shower of splintering
timbers and crashing glass, a thunder of sound breaking
over me like the waves of ocean.

After the shock came cessation of all motion. I lay still
for a moment, taking surprisingly little interest in the
course of events; but having made sure that I was still in the
land of the living, and only slightly, if at all, injured, I
turned my thoughts toward ascertaining what had occurred.

I looked out of what remained of the window and saw
that such passengers as could were swarming out from the
wrecked carriages in front and behind me. The air was
vocal with shouts and cries, and above all was the sound of
escaping steam.

Having satisfied myself that the accident was apparently
a serious one, I remembered my companion, and proceeded
to unearth him from beneath a broken seat. His right leg
was bent under him, and hung so limply, as I extricated him
from his predicament, that I was certain it must be broken.
I had no friendly feeling for him, but I could not see him
suffer, when it was in my power in any way to give him help.
A brandy-flask was in his pocket, and by administering a little of its contents I soon brought him back to consciousness again.

It was more difficult to get him out of the smashed and shattered door, but I did it at last, and laid him, groaning and cursing, on the ground below the embankment.

Not far away rose the spire of a church, and the red roofs of the village clustered on a slight eminence. A crowd was coming down the road. Above was a broken bridge, with one coach half sunken in the shallow river.

Having disposed of my strange companion (for whose welfare, by a queer fatality, I seemed appointed to work), I ran back to assist the rescue-party.

A dozen or so among the passengers were injured, but luckily none killed; and when I had done what I could, I got a doctor from the village to look after my charge. When his leg was set, he was able to tell us—a bit of information I received without surprise—that he was Jonas Heckleberry, of the Spider Farm, near Market Peyton.

The place was not more than fifteen miles away, the surgeon said, and the best thing for the sufferer would be to have him conveyed home at once. This task, with an impulse which did not spring from charity, I took upon myself.

To Ralston we went by carriage, Jonas Heckleberry comfortably disposed on an impromptu bed laid across both seats. By this time it was nearly ten o'clock in the morning, the breakfast hour at Lorn Abbey. Would Consuelo have thought of me, I asked myself, and wonder at the unexplained absence of her lover?

The telegrams which I sent both to her and to Uncle Wilfrid from Ralston seemed cold and meaningless, and Consuelo's I wrote and tore in pieces several times before I could satisfy myself.

'Called suddenly away on urgent business. Back almost immediately,' sounded so bald and tame. Yet I could give her no clue to the reality. I did not mention the railway
accident. It would only make them both uselessly anxious if they knew what an ordeal I had passed through. But I hoped that, for the sake of her own peace of mind, Consuelo might read the account in the papers (that account from which my name would be missing), and learn that Jonas Heckleberry, seriously injured, would be no active enemy for some time to come.

Fortunately, I had in my pocket-book a goodly supply of five-pound notes, or I should have been obliged to wire for the sum needful to convey Heckleberry comfortably to his home. But as it was, I secured a first-class carriage to ourselves, had all arrangements made which could possibly promote the man's ease of body, and engaged a roomy landau at Market Peyton to carry us both on to the farm with the strange and forbidding name.

Mention of the Spider Farm caused the eyebrows of the man in charge of the stables to lift in an ominous and mysterious expression. Mr. Heckleberry had come to live there about two or three years ago, it seemed, having arrived mysteriously in the night. Before his advent the place had been known as Hillside, but it had been untenanted for years.

'Do you know why it was rechristened the Spider Farm?' I asked.

'No, not exactly, sir. A good many letters come addressed that way to the post-office, I'm told, and Mr. Heckleberry calls for 'em himself. But 'e's never had a friendly word fur anyone in the village, sir. What shoppin' 'e does is in the county town, seven or eight miles away, so as to keep anyone 'ere from 'aving a chance or an excuse to go out to the farm; that's what's been thought in the neighborhood. There's queer stories told about Mr. Heckleberry's business, but I don't concern myself much with such things.'

By this time the landau was in readiness to receive the injured man, who was placed inside, groaning, but with closed eyes.
It was a four-mile drive from Market Peyton to the Spider Farm, my loquacious informant had told me, and as I began to think we must be nearing the place, I looked out with curiosity. Whatever there was that was 'queer' about Jonas Heckleberry's business I meant to know. Whatever might be learned against his character and pursuits I intended to have within my knowledge, that, if he lived and attempted again to trouble the Woman in Grey, I might be prepared to turn the tables upon him.

The road from Market Peyton had been pretty in a commonplace way, but when we had gone three miles or more there came a sudden turn to the left, where two roads forked, and the character of the country began to be changed. Instead of the pastureland, we were approaching rough heath and pinewoods. On one side stretched the open moor, on the other a grove of tall dark trees clustered gloomily together, with never a glimpse of sunlight underneath.

Again we turned, and the shut gate of a farm was before us. A wild, straggling growth of trees half hid the house from view, but I caught a glimpse of a low building of red brick, mellow and mossy with age, set back nearly a quarter of a mile from the road. Behind it rose a hill thickly wooded with pines; and so desolate was the appearance of the place that I fancied the clouds brooded lower and darker over it than above any other spot.

'I will get down here and walk up to the house,' I called to the driver, who stopped obediently, after showing for an instant an excited, curious face.

The farm gate, to my surprise, was locked with a padlock, fastened to a chain. I easily vaulted over the five or six bars, however, and fancied I should have no difficulty, when the nature of my errand became known, in obtaining the key, that the carriage might be driven up to the house.

The road inside the gate was thickly grass-grown, as though a wagon but seldom passed over it, and the house itself, I soon saw, was a large and rambling one. At one end
was a buried ruin, so covered now by moss and vines as to show that the fire which had destroyed it had been kindled many a year ago. And I thought, as I looked up at the arched windows, that this was doubtless but a remaining wing of some old ruined manor-house.

A pine-tree darkened one half of the second and third stories, and trails of ivy fell down to the black oak panels of the front-door. Heavy wooden shutters were drawn over all the windows on the ground-floor, and nowhere was there a sign of life, save in the faint blue mist of smoke which floated over a chimney somewhere at the back.

Notwithstanding the discouraging outlook, however, I seized the rusty knocker, and beat out a summons which echoed dismally from room to room within.

In response came the baying of a dog, but there was no other sign that my loud knocking had been heard. Again I repeated it, and at last, discouraged, began pushing my way through the wilderness of weeds to the back of the house.

I went to the left (as the vine-shrouded ruin stretched to the right, blocking the nearest way), and I had skirted the side of the building and arrived at the back, when a movement at a half-shuttered window attracted my attention.

I stepped close up to it, and peered inside. A face retreated, and another remained—a face unlike any that I had ever seen before. It was long, and covered with a series of flabby wrinkles bagging under deep-set, bloodshot eyes, and though the cheeks were dark as an Indian's, the huge, prominent nose was a pale flesh-pink.

At first, as I peeped between the shutters, under a curtain of vines, into the darkness within, I believed this face to be human. But in an instant I saw that it was that of an enormous dog of a breed I had never met with; but, judging from descriptions I had read of the creature's curiously human features, I fancied that it must be one of the famous Dogues de Bordeaux.

Though the room into which I gazed was dark as looked
into from outside, a cross-light from a half-open door revealed the figure of a little old woman. On her head was a great flapping cap; across her sunken breast a black-and-white check shawl was folded. A stray length of grey hair fell over a yellow, receding forehead, and I was struck with an eerie sensation as I observed how wonderfully alike were the two faces—that of the big dog and the tiny woman. Both were old, flabby, long-lipped, sunken-eyed, animal in expression, though, indeed, it seemed to me that the Dogue's was the more intelligent and benevolent of the two.

'Don't be alarmed!' I shouted. 'I have brought you news of Mr. Jonas Heckleberry. Pray come to the door, and let me have a few words with you.'

My only answer was a rush for the door behind her, through which the uncanny creature retreated, loudly slamming it after her retreating form.

Angry at last, I waited no longer, but striding through the tangled grass to the front of the house again, I ran down the road to the gate where the landau awaited me.

'Can't you get in, sir?' inquired the driver, with eager eyes.

'No; but I mean to do it, and let you in, too,' I returned.

In a cooler moment, phenomenally strong as I knew myself to be, I do not think I could have accomplished the feat, which was easy for me in the heat of my temper. So did I twist the chain, at the same time wrenching the gate against it, that the links snapped in two, and I pushed the gate triumphantly open.

'Drive in,' I said curtly. And again I took my place in the landau, steadying the injured man against any possible joltings of the carriage.

In a few more moments we had stopped at the back of the house, whither I had bidden the driver proceed, as I felt that I should not be able to break in that solid-looking door of oak, nor unfasten the closely-barred shutters.

I tried the door at the back, and, finding it fastened, pro-
ceeded forcibly to wrench up the lower sash of the window through which I had looked.

Hardly had I done so when the huge Dogue de Bordeaux, which had been anxiously awaiting its opportunity, leaped out. I stood ready with my blood up for the encounter; but, with a snarl in my direction, he sprang past me toward the landau, upon which he began to fawn, with whinings and contortions of his great body.

Having made an opening for myself, I climbed through the window, and dropped down into a vast and gloomy kitchen, dark, cavernous, with high rafters like the refectory of some ancient monastery.

Although the room was empty of human occupancy save my own, to my bewilderment, as I stared about me, my eyes seemed everywhere to alight upon something that moved with an indistinct, creeping motion in the dusk.

The walls moved; the rafter, so high above, moved. It was as though the dark boarding wriggled like the back of a snake. I could imagine, for the moment, the sensations of some miserable wretch overtaken by an attack of delirium tremens.

I stood still, staring, forgetting for the instant the errand upon which I had come, and then suddenly something scuttled across my feet.

It was a hairy-legged spider, with a fat, bloated body as large as a shilling-piece.

I sprang aside, for I had always had a loathing of spiders. But the spell of my bewilderment was broken. I moved closer to the wall, and saw that its dark surface was covered by wire screens, behind which rough planking had been carelessly nailed on. There were black, mysterious-looking crevices between the boards, the surface of which was dented here and there by knotholes and splintered cracks with broken edges.

Myriads of spiders limped or darted along the boards, and their crowding bodies and wriggling legs had given, from a
greater distance, an effect as though the walls themselves had moved.

Involuntarily I had laid my hand upon a table, which ran nearly the length of the room, but I quickly withdrew it as I observed that within the wooden boxes and glass jars which furnished it scrambled spiders of various sizes and sorts.

Until now I had not fancied that the name Spider Farm signified any industry. I had supposed it had been merely bestowed upon the place because of some unpleasant whim of the tenant. And even now that I had discovered my mistake, I did not in the least know what to make of the reality.

With all speed I got myself out of the repulsive room, opening the door through which the old woman had disappeared. This, I found, led into a bare, wide passage, with a stairway at one end, and the outer door at the other. I hastened to draw the bolt at top and bottom and turn the key, and then, pushing against the door a carpet-covered brick which stood close by, I left it wide open, to admit the invalid when a place of rest should have been prepared for him.

The air of the house was musty. After a long breath or two I betook myself upstairs, hoping to find a bed which I might drag to some habitable and more accessible room on the first-floor. Half way up was a small landing, with a door and a window, past which I would have gone had not something sprung out at me with the vicious unexpectedness of a jack-in-the-box.

I had just time to ward off a blow aimed with no less formidable a weapon than a broken-headed axe; and then, quietly removing it from the withered little hand that grasped it, I held at arm's length the old woman who had lately fled from me below-stairs.

There was a madness of fear and desperation in the eyes which looked up at me, and anger was changed to a species of pitying amusement in my heart.

'I am sorry,' I said, 'to restrain your freedom for a
moment, madam; but you must allow me to remind you that it is scarcely civil to welcome a harmless visitor by broad daylight with an axe. Only be patient one moment until I have informed you that Mr. Jonas Heckleberry—whom I can hardly be mistaken in supposing to be your son—is outside in the carriage you can see from this window, seriously injured in a railway accident. I should be delighted if you would allow me the privilege of escorting you down to him at once.'

The creature stared at me as though I had been a being from some hitherto unknown sphere. And as I answered the look, never taking my eyes from hers, I noticed an odd difference in the size of the two pupils, which nervously contracted and expanded in a curious, cat-like way.

This difference, I had been told by a famous brain specialist, was an infallible sign of insanity, and, as I remembered this fact, my sense of amusement at her antics lessened, and my pity grew.

I released her thin little arm, which I had been tightly holding, and had the satisfaction of seeing her trot with youthful alacrity down the stairs. I followed, and having seen her crooning over the half-conscious man, I ran up the steps again, and presently found myself in a sparsely furnished bedroom.

A man's suit of country clothing hung on the wall, and, concluding that this apartment was sacred to the master of the house, I took up the mattress and bedding in one large roll in my arms, and once more descended with it. It would be more convenient, I had already decided, that Heckleberry should have accommodation on the ground-floor.

Opposite the horrible room of darkness in which rioted the army of spiders was a second door, which I unceremoniously flung open, and found myself in a combination of kitchen and dining-room.

Here I dumped the bedding I had brought upon the ragged carpet, and, having spread as comfortable a couch as
my limited knowledge of such matters enabled me to do, I hastened out to the landau.

The old woman had climbed in beside her son, and was listening, with a quieter and saner expression than she had worn, to the mutterings which fell from his lips.

"This man and I," I said, alluding to the driver, 'can carry him indoors for you, and you shall set about making him some broth. You have no idea how much good that would do him.'

I spoke purposely with the voice of one in authority, hoping to awe her into obedience, and to a certain extent I appeared to be successful.

She and the dog stood eagerly taking in our every motion, but the gentleness of our movements evidently inspired both with confidence. There was no desire shown by either the woman or the animal to prevent our entrance and the carrying out of the plan I had made for the sufferer's accommodation.

When Heckleberry had been laid down on his improvised bed, and the few instructions which the surgeon from Ralston had given me for this crisis in the affair carried out, I sent the cabman away with a generous fare, and a leaf torn from my notebook which was to be given to a doctor in Market Peyton, and which, I hoped, would bring him over to the farm in the course of the afternoon.

When all was finished, and the old woman, the dog, and I left alone with Heckleberry, who was now delirious and raving of the accident, I suddenly felt a warm touch upon my hand as I stood looking down at my strange patient, and, turning quickly, I saw that the great Dogue de Bordeaux was smelling me and caressing me with his tongue. I patted the huge head, almost out of proportion with the body, and saw that the woman was gazing with some apparent astonishment at the picture.

'That dog is Jonas's,' she said, the first words with any weight of sanity in them which I had yet heard her speak.
'He bites strangers—if strangers come here. Only they don't come very often.'

'I should imagine not,' I returned fervently. 'You see, the dog understands that I mean well by his master, and is grateful for that.'

'Yes,' she vaguely responded. 'But you oughtn't to have come here, you know. Jonas won't like it when he wakes up. He never lets anyone in—except them that comes to stay.'

There was a slow, mysterious emphasis about her last words which I was at a loss to understand.

'Those who come to stay?' I echoed, imprudently perhaps. She pointed to the ceiling and nodded.

'Them that's up there,' she whispered.

'You don't mean the spiders?' I questioned curiously. She shook her head.

'No; not the spiders, of course. Them that come shut up in carriages at night. At the other place my daughter used to look after 'em, and I too. But that was before I hurt my head. Ah, how I used to make them jump and cry out when I went in with the whip! Them was the good old days. But we had to come away from there. It got too hot for us—that was what Jonas said. And Naomi had a good place. And then,' she lowered her voice, 'then she came.'

'She?'

'Yes. The beautiful lady. Oh, the night she was brought here, so white, half dead! I thought at first she was one of them. But no; it was something worse than that. My daughter Naomi's clever. Why, since Naomi went, you're the first that's been, barrin' one o' them. And he's out there now. Do you want to see?'

She drew me by the coat-sleeve to the window, and pointed outward, towards the dark and rigid pines.

'Under one of those trees,' she volunteered, 'Jonas made me help to dig. And I swore never to tell. But he was always afraid I would, I know. That's why he keeps me
away from everyone, and everyone away from me. Only you
—I know now that you're one of his friends.'

A chill crept over me with her words.

'Did—Jonas dig out there many times?' I questioned.

'I'm not sure how many. He doesn't tell me things any
more, as he used. Once I waked in the night, and I could
see him out there in the woods with a lantern, and I heard
the sound of his spade in the sand. Next day, when I went
to peep into that room upstairs, he was gone. And I've never
seen him again.'

'By-and-by,' I said to myself, 'I shall have this black-
mailer's secret laid bare before me—a horrible secret it bids
fair to be. Then let him look for no mercy from me. Her
poor little white girl's secret shall be protected forever by
the black shield of his.'

Then I remembered the chance allusion of the old woman's
to the 'beautiful lady' who had come to them—whose coming
seemed to have been an epoch even in these strange and
dreadful lives.

'God help her—it was the Woman in Grey!' I thought. But,
though I might have drawn from those babbling lips
what I would, now that the creature's confidence was won, I
determined to guard Consuelo's secret from myself as I
would from the veriest stranger.

When I heard it—as some day I hoped I might—I would
hear it from herself.

'Are you and your son living alone in the house at
present?' I asked cautiously, 'or——' And I came to a
significant pause.

'All but—the last,' the beldame whispered. 'Listen!' And
again she pointed above.

I obeyed. Save for the mutterings of Jonas, there was
silence for a moment, and then I heard, or thought I heard,
a faint, irregular footfall, that went dragging back and
forth over our heads.
CHAPTER XXI.

MR. NOBODY OF NOWHERE.

'What makes that sound?' I questioned.
She started with a sort of nervous jerk, like a toy which is pulled by a spring.
'What! Don't you know?' she inquired.
'I'm not sure,' I responded cautiously.
A look of incalculable slyness crept over the thin face, and in that instant I recognized a likeness to Miss Traill, who must be, I was convinced, the old woman's 'clever daughter, Naomi.'

'Ah, then, if you don't know that you'd better go away from this—quick. You don't know nothing about this house—nothing as everybody mightn't know. So don't you go sayin' as you do, or you might git yourself in trouble. Spiders? Yes, my son makes an honest livin' out o' them. Many a time, in the old place, when folks used to come or ask questions, I've had to take 'em round and tell 'em all about the spiders.'

She put on suddenly a curious mincing manner. She was bowing and smirking as though acting in memory her ciceronage of some important personage in the past.

'We rears 'em to sell to the wine-merchants, you know, and gentlemen just startin' of wine-cellar, who is in a hurry for the bottles in their bins to look like old. You has no idea what a call there is for 'em, sir, and not but two or three more spider farms in the country. As many as ten or twelve thousand spiders, young and old, we has in our place, sir,
more than half of 'em in the cellars, for it's the dark and the
damp that they likes best. Then we've a room for the com-
mon sort that doesn't build no webs, which we keep for the
good little spinners to make their meals of. No finer lace
than you can find on our walls—he, he! And the flies—
they're welcome here. They gets treacle given 'em to tempt
'em in, smeared on the frames, and then our pretty pets make
short work of 'em. Bless you, sir! they are pets, some of
them. Why, my son's got two or three fine fat fellows that
perches on his shoulder and eats out of his hand, and he
says as they'd follow him round the house like dogs, if they
was let to. Though I don't know about that. You might see
one or two that he makes most of runnin' about the floors.'

The mother of the spider farmer seemed now to have com-
pletely forgotten her former revelations, and her subsequent
anxiety to rid herself of me. But I had had a lesson to
restrain my curiosity. What there was to be known of the
hidden business at the farm, cloaked so to speak by the
spider webs, I would find out for myself. Sometimes, I told
myself, old Mrs. Heickleberry must sleep. Then, during the
period of Jonas's illness, I should only have the Dogue de
Bordeaux to reckon with.

At Ralston I had sent to a chemist's and purchased such
things as the young surgeon had told me would be wanted
immediately. I had beef extract and brandy, and also a
cooling draught, in case of fever, for which he had scribbled
a prescription on the leaf of a note-book.

I wandered helplessly about for a few moments in the big
kitchen dining-room, where I had made Heickleberry's bed,
interviewing the scantily-furnished larder and cupboards.
Then, warming to the work, I found cooking utensils, and,
stirring the fire, proceeded to prepare for the invalid some
beef-tea. I had not done any cooking before since I was a
boy at Eton, and I was inclined to be proud of the result, in
spite of the large variety of spoons and various utensils
which I somehow found it necessary to use. I even went so
far as to feed the spider farmer myself, and to get some of his fever-medicine between his teeth, while the old woman watched me stonily with drooping jaw.

A couple of hours must have passed (only varied by the sounds above), and intermittent gusts of rain swept against the cracked and dingy panes of glass.

As time went by, I began to be afraid that, after all, the doctor from Market Peyton had refused to come, though, in common humanity, I could hardly see how that could be so.

There was no clock in the room, and I was obliged to consult my own watch, which I did oftener, perhaps, than there was any need, for when the hour had approached five I grew very restless and impatient. Always, as I put away the timepiece—a very handsome one which my extravagantly-generous uncle had given me on a birthday a year or so ago—I looked up to find the old woman's eyes fixed upon me with a deep-set gleam of wolfish greediness. There seemed to be some 'method in her madness' after all.

I had calculated that the doctor would arrive by a little after three, at latest. And, as I did not wish to run the risk of being barred out of the house at the Spider Farm before I should learn what were the secrets it contained, I had decided to give the doctor letters to post for Consuelo and my uncle rather than venture forth myself.

I did not mean to tell where I was, for I believed that the mention of my presence in the home of the Heckleberrys would terrify and distress Consuelo—the very thing which I most wished to avoid doing. But I had planned what I would say, how satisfy her surprised, perhaps hurt, curiosity at my sudden absence at such a time—a time when I should most have wished to remain at her side. And mentally I had got the letter written.

But five, six, and then seven o'clock came, and no doctor had appeared. I had taken the responsibility of bringing Jonas Heckleberry home, promising that he should be well
cared for, and I knew that he must by this time need a doctor's ministrations. To be sure, I had kept myself busy in attending upon him, with what little help I could obtain from his mother. But more than I could do was necessary now, and I began mentally debating as to whether I should walk into Market Peyton, send off my letters, and procure a medical man myself.

I argued the pros and cons for some time, and at length decided that I would run the risk. It would not do to tend the fevered and delirious man alone and unassisted through the night.

'I am going for a doctor, someone who will do your son good, and make him well again,' I said slowly, eyeing the old woman with authority, and speaking in a manner one might use with a slow-witted child. 'I shall be gone two hours at most, and you must look after him as well as you can meanwhile, and then, when I return with the doctor, you must come and let us in.'

'I'll see about it,' she slyly answered.

I did not know what mad thought might be growing in her mind. But it was the only thing to do. I must go to Market Peyton.

It was raining furiously still, and was as dark as it might have been at that hour in March instead of the beginning of May. But I went on toward the farm gate which I had broken open at noon, with my head down and the collar of the porter's coat pulled up to my ears.

I had got through the gate and a quarter of a mile farther on, perhaps, when suddenly I came into violent collision with someone walking rapidly in the opposite direction.

'Hallo! Why can't you look what you're about? Surely there's room enough in this road for two!' exclaimed an angry voice.

I apologized, and found myself talking to a man not much more than my own age, perhaps, but almost featureless, veiled in a heavy black beard. A soft black hat, streaming
with rain, was pulled well over his eyes, and a mackintosh was tightly buttoned round his throat. In one hand was a rather professional-looking bag, and, in spite of my surprise that he should be walking, I began eagerly to wonder if this short-tempered gentleman could be the Market Peyton doctor on his belated way toward the Spider Farm.

‘I beg your pardon,’ I cried civilly, ‘but are you on your way to see Mr. Jonas Heckleberry, of Spider Farm?’

He had gone past me a step or two in his hurry, but wheeled round hurriedly at my words.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he echoed somewhat mockishly, with a look of being startled, ‘but I should like to ask what may that be to you?’

‘It is this to me,’ I answered; ‘that I wish to know whether you are the doctor who was sent for early this afternoon from Market Peyton.’

‘I’m Mr. Nobody of Nowhere,’ he returned, with a peculiar laugh. ‘But though I haven’t got an M.D. after my name, I’m a pretty good doctor for all that, and I’m the best Mr. Jonas Heckleberry is likely to get to-night. But, again, I’d be glad to inquire what affair it is of yours? You don’t come from the Spider Farm—that I know.’

‘There you’re mistaken,’ I said coolly, ‘for I do come from there, and I’m going back again with you if you are a doctor, as you seem inclined to hint.’

‘The devil you are!’ he exclaimed shortly, and I caught a gleam of dark eyes under the slouch hat.

I could not help laughing. ‘Let us drop this badinage,’ I said, ‘and come to some sort of understanding.’ I then went on to explain what I thought necessary, and at last repeated my question. Had I met the doctor?

‘You have, and you haven’t,’ he returned. ‘I don’t live in Market Peyton. But I had business there to-day. I heard about the accident. And the fact is, I know the Heckleberrys; I lived once in the part of the country from which they came, and I’m one of the few people it wouldn’t fret
Jonas unnecessarily to see about him. Though, as I said, I'm only "Mr. Nobody of Nowhere," and so it's my whim to remain, I took a fancy when I heard the news to run out and doctor Jonas myself. I was able to satisfy the medical chap who was coming of my capabilities and the advantages of my presence on the scene, and as he was busy over a case which he didn't care to leave, why—I was welcome to have my way. Rather good of me to take the trouble, I think—it isn't a nice night for a long walk—and good of you to put yourself out so much for a stranger. Are you sure he was a stranger?

'I never saw him till last night in my life,' I answered truthfully.

'Well, you'll be glad to get to your home. Rest assured your patient will be in skilful hands. And now good-night to you; I must be hurrying on.'

He was off as he spoke like a shot; but I was considerably taller and longer of limb than he, and I had caught up with him again in a moment.

'Not so fast, Mr. Nobody, if you please,' I said; 'I'm going back with you to the hospitable shelter of the Spider Farm. I think I mentioned my intention once before.'

'I don't recollect it,' he returned surlily, 'nor is there the slightest need on earth for you to do so.'

'I haven't asked either your permission or your opinion,' I retorted, losing my temper a little. 'I shall go back, if only to see that you are a doctor, as you pretend to be.'

'Fool!' I heard him mutter below his breath; then hastily opening the bag he carried, and shielding the contents from the downpour of rain with the cape of his mackintosh, he ejaculated impatiently: 'There, if you doubt my word, look at that! Here lie the credentials.'

The bag was stored with neat rows of bottles and some surgical instruments, several large ones wrapped in chamois skin.

'I see,' I commented. 'Still, I prefer to go back.'
‘Then, allow me to inform you, sir, that you’ll be simply intruding where you’re not wanted. If you’ve left any luggage out there, all you’ve got to do is to give me your address, and it shall be sent to you. There is no good accommodation for strangers at the farm, and Mrs. Hebbleberry isn’t exactly an ideal hostess. She got a fall downstairs once, and hit her head on the stone floor of a cellar, and she’s been mad as a hatter ever since, poor woman! Sometimes, Jonas has told me, she babbles the most hideous nonsense, enough to frighten folks out of their wits. I hope, for her own sake, she kept her mouth shut before you to-day, for there’s never, by any chance, a word of truth or a gleam of sense in anything she says.’

I wondered for an instant if, after all, I had been misled into suspecting dark and hidden horrors at the Spider Farm—horrors which had all been born of the mad fancies in a lunatic’s brain. But I remembered those slow, halting footsteps, and the weight that had dragged and paused overhead, and I told myself that I had not been mistaken.

At first, sheer ill-nature at his impertinence inclined me to frighten him, but a second’s more reflection showed me how unwise such a course would be. I even decided, weak as it would seem, to appear ready to humor him in the matter of my return.

‘I have left no luggage at the farm,’ I said, ‘and since you assure me that you can do all that is wanted out there, perhaps I shall reconsider my decision. I confess the idea of dry clothing and a good dinner appeals to me almost irresistibly, by Jove!’

‘I wouldn’t try to resist, if I were you,’ advised Mr. Nobody of Nowhere.

‘All right, then, I must trust you,’ I said heartily. ‘Let me know how he gets on, will you?’ And I fabricated a name and a London address on the spot, with a quickness and plausibility of which I would not previously have believed myself capable.
You're a man of sense!' my companion exclaimed. 'For the second time, I wish you good-night.'

'Good-night,' I echoed, and, turning at once, I commenced walking briskly away through the rain in the direction of Market Peyton.

I did not even stop to see whether or no he was looking back after me; instinct told me that he would do so; but having proceeded at a good rate of speed for five-and-twenty yards, I suddenly turned off the road and darted in among the pines which, on one side, densely lined the way. I knew that he was not upon my heels, or I should have kept on farther. But I suspected that, if he had any really important reasons for wishing to keep me away from the Spider Farm, as I believed he had, he would presently make a sally in the direction I had taken, to ascertain whether I had indeed carried out my expressed intention, or whether I were dogging his footsteps towards the farm.

I had not very long to wait for my deductions to be confirmed. I began to hear the sound of footsteps growing gradually louder, and presently the figure of a man loomed against the heath and the wild night sky. He went on for two or three yards farther than the spot where I stood hidden, and then paused, as though listening. After he had stood thus for a full moment or more, he turned again, and commenced going back toward the farm at a run. Mr. Nobody of Nowhere, having ascertained to his satisfaction that the coast was clear, and that he was not being followed, was evidently extremely anxious to make up for lost time. I forced myself to wait until he had had full twenty minutes' start. He must have been in the house for some time now, I told myself, and would have entirely abandoned all idea of my return.

In the excitement of the moment it was very probable the doors would not have been locked, for in so isolated a place—and a place of so evil a repute—there would not be much
danger of more visitors for the Spider Farm that night. At all events, I must take my chance.

Had I persisted in my resolve to return with the supposed doctor, he might easily have prevented the exploring expedition which I wished to make, and further discoveries might have been rendered impracticable. But I did not intend to be thwarted at last, after all that I had gone through to gain my end.

Very carefully I picked my way, in dread of the dog, which might be abroad for the night, and which would certainly raise its deep-toned voice at any unaccustomed sound. But the noise of the wind and rain was in my favor. A gale blew among the pines on the hill behind the house, wailing like lost spirits overcrowding Hades, and the rain rattled against the bricks as loudly as though each drop had been a hailstone. I stole nearer, and all was silent, save for the storm and the beating of my heart. The front of the house was barred and shuttered as before. Not so much as a gleam of light came from chink or crevice.

If my foot rattled a single moss-grown pebble in the gravel now, I should find so much the more difficulty in carrying out my scheme. I thought of this, and stooping down, with a supporting hand on the angle of brick at the corner of the house, I pulled off my spoiled patent-leather pumps. The sharp stones cut my feet through my silk socks, but I did not care, and I carried the shoes until I might deposit them in some place of safe keeping, knowing that I should want them again for future emergencies of travel.

Softly padding over wet gravel and through mud on stockinged feet to the back of the house, round the path along which I had boldly walked in the morning, I was successful in reaching the window of the kitchen without arousing the suspicions of the great Dogue de Bordeaux. The shutters were only half closed, as they had been in the daytime; and though every other window was pitchy black,
through this one filtered the dull yellow light of a single lamp.

At first I could see no one, only the bare walls and a few sticks of old furniture already familiar to me. I knew that Jonas Heckleberry's pallet on the floor was below my line of vision, unless I climbed up, and this I dared not do, for fear of the noise I might make. On a table was the doctor's bag.

Evidently Mr. Nobody had received the expected welcome, I thought, and as the words formed themselves in my brain, the door from the passage into the kitchen opened, and the doctor himself came in. He was accompanied by the old woman, and I could see the shadow of the Dogue moving along the opposite wall. Luckily for me, I said to myself, that its attention had been engrossed during my approach.

The doctor set down a candle on the table; he then walked over to that part of the room where I knew the sick man lay, and looked down, as though regarding him, his hands behind him. Presently he flung himself into a chair, with a stretch and a great yawn, which sounded plainly in my ears through the cracked panes of the window.

'That's over!' he exclaimed. 'It's a nasty sight. If Jonas and you aren't careful, there'll be some more digging to be done under the pines. But we'll get Jonas round again before long.'

'That's a lovey,' crooned the hag, warming her lean fingers at the kitchen range.

'Yes; I always was a lovey, wasn't I? You couldn't get on very well without me, anyhow. And now, to show your affection, fetch me some whisky, and I'll have a good steaming go of hot punch to warm the blood in my veins; then we'll stir ourselves again, and lock up the house for the night.'

'Aah!' I said to myself, 'if that is the programme, it behooves me also to "stir myself."'”

I had found out what I wanted particularly to know, and
so far I was in luck. I stole to the door at the back of the house, and noiselessly turned the knob; then, gently pushing when I had got it all the way round, to my joy, the door yielded, and I edged myself through a cranny into the passage, shutting myself carefully in. A ray of light came from under the warped door of the kitchen; otherwise the passage was in darkness. I could hear the clink of glasses and the setting down of a bottle upon the table. Then somebody was stirring the fire, and I knew that, until the water for the punch was hot, I might consider myself comparatively safe from detection. For a moment I paused outside the door. The two oddly-assorted companions were talking cheerfully together.

‘A clear case of luck I had the appointment with Jonas to-day,’ went on Mr. Nobody of Nowhere. ‘I should like to know how he fared last night, and what he got out of her. Confound him for getting into this mess, and keeping me waiting!’

‘Who’s “her”?’ curiously queried Granny.

I thought that I could have answered the question, and my blood grew hot with wrath against the doctor.

‘Never mind “her.” See if the water’s getting hot. I say, old girl, listen to that rain outside. What does this night remind you of?’

‘I don’t know. The rain makes my head feel queerer nor ever. I can’t call up nothing at all.’

‘See if I can’t help you. Think back—not many years ago. You’d just moved into this house, and things weren’t settled yet. None of “them” (as you always call ’em) had come here. A dark night, and the sound of the gale in the pines. A carriage drives up to the door. Not from Market Peyton—oh no! and what wouldn’t the gossip-mongers there have given to know what was in it? You ran out to the door to meet it. (Your head was sound enough in those days, Granny!) The wheels and windows are splashed thick with mud. The driver gets down off his seat——’
'Yes, yes, I remember!' shriiled the old woman, frantic with the joy of recollection. 'The driver—that was you.'

'Right you are. Nobody else could be trusted. And what does the driver fetch out of the carriage? Can you tell me that?'

'A woman.'

Granny took him up this time. (I could not tear myself away from the door now, even though by this time the water on the fire must be nearly at the boiling-point.)

'I thought she was dead at first. Her face was white as the snow that lies out there among the pines in winter. I took hold of her hand to see whether it was cold, and, ugh! I jumped as though I'd been beat with my own whip I used to think so much of in them days, when I see what was on that hand.'

Involuntarily (at the words which told me of a surety that the conversation was veering towards Consuelo and her secret—that which Paula had called the 'secret of the pearls') I drew back a step from the door. There was a faint creaking of a board under my foot, and the Dogue de Bordeaux responded to it with a bell-toned note.

'What's that?' demanded Mr. Nobody of Nowhere sharply, and his chair scraped as he rose hastily to his feet. 'I don't hear anything, but Grim did.'

'Law, it's nothing!' whined the old woman. 'Grim's always doing that, and givin' me a start, if Jonas is away.'

'I'll take a look out into the passage, nevertheless,' said the doctor. And I heard his footsteps moving across the uncarpeted floor.

'Don't trouble,' Granny returned. 'If 'twas anything, 'twas upstairs.'

'Ah, if that's all!' ejaculated the man, with a sigh of comfortable satisfaction. 'I dare say you're right. I won't bother, then, for I see the water's steaming out of the kettle over there. Now for a bit of bread and cheese, and the punch.'
I had a reprieve, and my 'cue' as well; so, without another instant's hesitation, I set out upon my way upstairs. I felt my way along the landing, and at the top of the short flight which wound above I took out my matchbox.

I struck a wax vesta, and began a deliberate survey of my surroundings. Jonas's room, from which I had taken the bedding, was the first to the right, and a long, narrow passage, with four or five doors on either side, running from the back to the front of the house, lay straight before me.

On the left the passage was divided midway by another, the entrance to which gaped darkly, and I could see that there was a descent of a shallow, worn step or two. On the opposite side, according to my calculations, there should have been a similar intersection; but instead there was an additional door—a low, broad door, such as might be expected to give access to an attic or store-room, painted a dull blue, and secured with rusty bolts and bars as though to stand a siege.

'Beyond that barrier,' I said to myself thoughtfully, 'lies the heart of the mystery of the Spider Farm.'
CHAPTER XXII.

BEHIND THE BLUE DOOR.

My match had burned down, and I struck another to examine the fastenings of the door, at which I intended that my explorations should begin. There was a bolt at top and bottom, a long iron bar which ran across the middle, lying bedded in a great rusty hasp, and a lock in which, to my infinite satisfaction, the huge key was standing. Afterwards I had fatal reasons for remembering the precautions which had been taken to render this door secure.

Slowly I slipped the bolts, which were difficult to move without noise. Then came the bar, which nearly fell from my hand as I lifted it, and clanged against the door. But I just avoided the catastrophe, and turned my energies to the key. This proved not so easy a task, and I lighted half a dozen matches before I had got it to turn in the lock.

When at last I turned the big brass knob and felt the door opening under my hand, my store of wax vestas had been diminished to six, and I anathematized myself that I had not replenished the box last night at Lorn Abbey—last night, which I now looked back upon as through a vista of years. Instead of opening into a room, the blue door led me into a passage narrower than that which I had left. I held up a match, and saw that at the farther end were two doors facing each other. I then took the precaution to close that through which I had passed (that the presence of an intruder might not so readily be suspected, in case someone came up from below), and proceeded along the passage. As I went, I was
mentally locating the rooms downstairs, and I concluded that the door on the left would lead me into the habitation of the mystery, whatever it might be.

Before the two oaken doors I paused and listened for a moment. Not a sound at either, and then, suddenly, I started at hearing a low moan. It began in a low key, and rose at last to a wail, which again died away in a series of choking coughs or sobs. Whether it were the voice of a human being or an animal I could not be sure.

The key was in the lock, and, striking another match, I flung open the door. A close, stagnant air, like that of some stifling tenement, rushed into my nostrils, and something lurched at me out of the darkness. Before I could focus my eyes upon it, the match was jerked out of my hand, and—a far worse loss—the little silver box which I had also been holding, fell, and went spinning away across the floor. Never, so long as I live, shall I forget that vile moment, or cease to dream of it on restless, feverish nights!

The room was black with the thick blackness of an underground vault. Something alive was breathing close beside me, then dragging itself to a distance, with the dull sound of a heavy weight that followed.

It had fallen against me, and struck away my match, whether by intention or accident I could not guess. But I got down on my knees and began groping about desperately for the silver box.

My sole anxiety was to find the matches, and look upon the inhabitant of this foul room.

My hands, as they groped along the floor, caught on splinters which roughened the bare boards, and pushed aside thick, stringy rolls of dust.

At last my fingers were upon the box. I clutched it, and felt for the catch which held the lid. To my dismay, it was open, and every match had fallen out. The search, therefore, had to begin all over again.

As I blundered about, still on my knees, the unseen thing
which was my companion panted nearer me, and suddenly my arm struck against a body which crouched in a corner.

It emitted a grunt which seemed to express sheer physical terror, and somehow the thought that my presence had inspired it with fear brought with it a distinct sense of relief. Unable to find the matches, I deliberately put out my hand and passed it slowly over the cowering form, which shrank away from me, crawling.

It seemed to be clothed in some loose hanging garment, and from this, though neither shape nor voice had told me, I judged that it was human. It was on all-fours, and as I reached upward for the head I came upon what seemed to be a hump.

'Don't be frightened,' I said, hoping that the sound of a friendly voice might reassure it, 'I have come to help you.'

But it flung me away from it with long, skinny fingers that brushed against my face and throat, giving utterance as it did so to the most unearthly cry that ever smote my ears.

The push given me had caused me to lose my balance for an instant, and I kept myself from pitching over by pressing the palm of my hand on the floor.

Under it, as I did so, I felt something which I took to be a match, and I snatched at it eagerly. I was right. It was one of my lost vestas.

I sprang to my feet and struck it on the wall. Up rose a flare of yellow light, and I could see a pair of eyes gleaming at me out of the darkness, half covered by a shock of reddish hair.

Only a dim impression I got of a misshapen form, with a small head set under a hump, a huge open mouth, eyes that blinked timorously as a rabbit's, and a falling tangle of unkempt locks; and then my gaze was diverted from the sight by the sound of the door at the end of the passage opening and slamming back against the wall.

What I might have expected, had not my thoughts been
completely absorbed in that which was close at hand, had happened. But now that I had seen a part of the secret of the Spider Farm, and fancied I could guess the rest, it would not so much matter.

At the first sound I had put out the match which I had held burning; but in an instant more the doctor, with a candle in one hand and a knife—with which he had probably been cutting bread—in the other, appeared in the doorway.

He came to a standstill upon the threshold, and stood glowering at me, while the dull face of the old woman peered over his shoulder.

'So it's you, is it?' he said in a low voice, which had, however, a suggestion of controlled ferocity in it.

'Yes,' I answered quietly. 'You see, you didn't get so much the start of me, after all.'

'That remains to be seen,' he grimly retorted. 'The question is, what made you come here at all?'

'I had private reasons,' I returned, 'which I don't think it necessary to explain to you. And, having satisfied myself, I am now ready to go.'

'Not so fast!' he ejaculated, stopping me with the knife he held when I would have pushed unceremoniously past him. 'So you mean to go and make up some garbled, exaggerated story of what you've seen here, do you?'

'I think it will be quite unnecessary to exaggerate it,' I returned. 'A rather circumstantial and damaging narrative can be made without garbling, by putting together what I have seen and what I have overheard in this house. And I don't fancy that, with the description I can give, those whom it may concern will have much trouble in putting a name to Mr. Nobody of Nowhere. Allow me to tell you that I consider you and your fellow-conspirator a pair of inhuman fiends, who ought to hang, and who shall hang, if my tongue can help you to the ropes. Now stand back, you villain, and let me pass with this poor wretch whom you have starved and tortured, or it will be the worse for you.'
'Thank you for the pretty compliments you pay us,' sneered the doctor; 'but you will find two can play at your game.'

Again he raised his long bread-knife, which glistened in the candle-light. And I heard the old woman calling to the Dogue de Bordeaux:

'Grim, Grim, Grim!'

With the coming of the doctor upon the scene the inmate of the room had shrunk toward me, rather than from me as before, as though for protection from a cruel taskmaster whom it knew.

I was hardly yet sure whether it were man, woman, or child, so small, yet so indescribably old and horrible did it appear in the occasional flare of light which passed over it.

With my elbow I struck up the knife, which was aimed at random, and would in a moment more have wrenched it from the doctor's hand, but something caught me with a sudden jerk around the legs, and a quick, involuntary glance downward showed me the flapping cap of the wizened face of the old woman.

I lost my balance for a second and staggered back, catching at the frame of the door. Little did I know what that one second was to cost me.

Had not the upset taken me so unawares, Mrs. Heckleberry's strategic manoeuvre could not have ended so successfully. As it was, I was up and ready for the doctor again in the fraction of a moment; but he had not waited to meet the assault. He and his companion were already at the blue door at the end of the passage, and in a flash I knew intuitively what they meant to do.

'Good-night,' taunted the doctor, as I rushed towards them. 'Since you like your present company so much, you may keep it.'

And door and bolts seemed to slam simultaneously in my face, as I reached the former and flung myself upon it.

Down came the heavy bar on the other side as I brought all
the weight of my body to bear upon the door. And then the big key turned slowly and gratingly in the lock.

‘You’re more than my match in a fight,’ called the voice of the doctor through the keyhole. ‘I soon saw that, but I reckon I’ve got the best of you now. “He laughs best who laughs last.”’

Comments on my part would have been as undignified as useless. I simply ceased to waste my strength upon the door, which ten men of my strength and size could scarcely have dislodged, and faced my situation.

Pitted together, as he had admitted, the doctor would have stood no chance against me. Even unarmmed as I was, while he flourished a formidable knife, I should not have had much fear of him as an adversary, though he was not a small man or a weakling.

But the woman had intervened, and my carelessness had been to blame in not preparing for such an emergency. By the slight accident of a stumble, and a slip of the foot, I had been placed at the mercy of a scoundrel.

There was strong reason why, now that I had been rendered powerless to injure them, I should be kept in that position. The very lives of Jonas Heckleberry and his confederate might be at stake. My liberty regained, the doctor had every right to suppose that his would of a certainty be forfeited. That a compromise might be effected, through my desire to shield Consuelo Hope from the torture of the blackmailer, he did not know. And it was not to be thought of that I should turn coward, and plead for release on any such terms as those.

I stood leaning against the shut door, thinking over my position.

‘I shall be lucky,’ I said to myself, ‘if I get out of this alive.’ And then I began to reflect in a curiously cold, impersonal sort of way how easy it would be for those at the Spider Farm to do away with me.

In the first place, neither Uncle Wilfrid nor Consuelo
knew where I had gone. I had telegraphed from Ralston, an important railway junction, from which trains went out in many directions. I had said nothing which would lead them to connect me in any way with the accident, as I had not known when I should be able to return to Lorn Abbey, and, meanwhile, I did not wish them to be made anxious.

For the same reason I had not given my name to anyone on the scene of the disaster.

In the end, clever detectives might ferret out the fact that I had come to Market Peyton and the Spider Farm, the evil reputation of which place would hold suspicion fast upon it, were it learned that I had never been seen to go away.

But that would be, at best, the work of weeks. Meanwhile, what would be thought at home?

Of all the torturing ideas which would present themselves, I believe that this was the worst. For it was the bitterest agony for me to feel that, while I lay here a helpless prisoner, or my dead body went out to join the others of which the old woman had hinted, 'under the pines,' Consuelo might be thinking that I had intentionally deserted her on the very night when I had gained the blessed promise of her love.

In all probability, I told myself, there would be no attempt at murder to-night. Mr. Nobody of Nowhere would prefer waiting until starvation had weakened me, and left me a less dangerous adversary to confront.

The hours would be long in passing, but dawn must come, and with the light it would go hard with me if I could devise no means of escape.

Suddenly, as I reflected, I remembered the door I had seen opposite that which caged the deformed idiot or maniac.

I was intensely sorry for the sufferings of the unfortunate creature, and I had meant to help it. But I could do nothing for it to-night. My mere presence could give neither comfort nor aid.

As for me, the prospect of a night spent in darkness with
that eerie, moaning, dragging thing close beside me, yet unseen, was well-nigh intolerable. And the recollection of the second door brought relief. If I could feel my way back to it, and it should prove to be unlocked, I might find sanctuary on the other side.

I moved away with comparative briskness, my hand feeling along the wall.

Thus I reached the other door at last, and had the satisfaction to find that on turning the knob it yielded to my touch. I stepped over the threshold, and shut myself in, pushing a small bolt which my fingers soon discovered.

Here at least I should be alone. No human presence was hidden here, or some precautions would have been taken to secure the door.

If there were windows I was sure that they must be heavily shuttered, for, though I strained my eyes through the darkness, not the faintest break in its dead black monotony could I espy.

It seemed to my fancy that there was a subtle fragrance pervading the place. It was this which caused the quickening of my pulses, the same tumultuous beating of the heart that I invariably experienced when the Woman in Grey came into a room, or when I suddenly found myself in her presence. There was always the same delicate, elusive suggestion of a perfume about her, floating from the gold ripples of her hair or her dainty draperies. Like the soul of a perfume, rather than a perfume itself, was it, so faintly yet subtly did it express itself to the consciousness, scarcely to the sense of smell. It resembled a spiritualized mingling of fresh garden roses and lavender more than anything else, and yet it was not quite that. Everything that Consuelo Hope touched seemed afterwards always to retain this fairy-like essence of her personality, so to speak. Now, the moment that the door of this closed and shuttered room was bolted behind me, the faint, ineffable and well-known fragrance seemed about me, pervading the air.
There was as well a smell of mustiness and a lack of freshness, as though I might have entered some long-sealed attic; but this could not banish the delicate sweetness of roses and lavender which triumphed over the other, filtering through the heavy atmosphere, as water filters through a bed of sand. So strong was the sudden impression of her nearness, that the sting of tears rose hotly behind my eyes.

It was almost as though her spirit had come to me, sent by the compelling force of love, to cheer and comfort me. For an instant the thick walls and impassable barriers which separated me (perhaps forever) from life and love and freedom ceased to exist for me, only to close round me the more coldly a moment afterwards. I was in utter darkness. I stood with strained eyes wide open, hoping that when they should grow accustomed to the curtain of blackness stretched before them they might begin to penetrate its depths.

But I found presently that it would be useless to hope for such lifting of gloom so opaque, so dense. If I meant to learn anything of my surroundings before the coming of dawn, I must, like a blind man, trust solely to my sense of touch. With both hands extended, palms outward, I began moving cautiously about, sliding my feet over a smooth surface which felt like a much-worn carpet. Presently I stumbled against some huge obstruction, and discovered that I was touching a bed with old-fashioned posts and a canopy, which, as my hand brushed it, sent out a musty-smelling puff of dust.

Skirting along the bed, I easily reached the wall, and so went shuffling on, until my fingers came in contact with a window-frame. This room was, I conjectured, at the front of the house, on the extreme right, filling in a corner. I remembered that all these windows had been shuttered, and that, unlike the majority of houses, the shutters of solid wood were on the outside.

It would be, I thought, almost too good to be true that the fastenings should prove to be such as I could tamper with
from within. If it were so, it would scarcely have been worth the doctor's while to bolt the blue door upon me, knowing well enough that I was not the sort of man to mind risking a jump for dear life from a first or second story window.

I was not surprised, therefore, when my hands told me that iron bars had been placed closely together inside the window, which must have been shuttered before their insertion, and would thus be now impossible to open.

Bars, for some reason, had been required. Had they been made visible from outside, questions might have been raised in the minds of chance visitors. Consequently, the heavy shutters had been drawn together to hide the prison-like effect of the cage within. At least, it was so that I mentally explained the contrivance.

Knocking against an occasional chair, a dressing-table with a tilted mirror, and a large frame set high upon the wall (which, apparently, surrounded a painting on canvas), I ascertained during my peregrinations that there were two more windows, both shuttered and barred, and a low door which led into a cupboard. The door I opened, and the perfume of cedar rushed out.

I felt gropingly about the interior, half expecting to find that a door led through into some other room, and thus, despite the bolt that I had hopefully shot, I should be open to invasion from the enemy. But so far as I could tell in the dark, there was nothing of the sort. Across the back there were hooks, and on two of these hung some garments, long, and soft to the touch.

I now knew my environment as well as I could before morning should send a few penetrating shafts of light through the chinks of the wooden shutters, and a certain hopelessness settled down upon me as I thought of the long, weary interval.

After a time, however, nothing seemed of importance, so far as my welfare was concerned. A heavy stupor was upon
me. I must sleep, I felt, or my strength would be broken. Once more ascertaining that the bolt was fully shot, and as firm as its frail nature permitted, I found my way to the bed, and flung myself down. When I opened my eyes again, a grey dusk had replaced the darkness. A few cracks in the shutters of the three large windows admitted enough light to show me my surroundings.

From where I lay I faced the picture of whose existence my sense of touch had already told me, and could scarcely distinguish the features of a woman in a ruff. Only the eyes shone out, vivid and black. In the dull, faded old picture with the crude, pallid face, the contrast of their lifelike brightness was almost startling. They appeared to be staring straight before them, and, as I lay directly opposite, this caused their gaze to seem fixed upon me.

It was long before I could draw my look away, but at last I forced myself to turn my attention elsewhere. I rose from the bed, and began examining it. The huge ark evidently belonged to some period of furniture manufacture with which I was unfamiliar, despite the interest I had shared with Uncle Wilfrid in antiquities of all descriptions.

There was no valance shrouding legs and space underneath, but the bed itself was made in the form of a huge box. Head and footboard were extensions of a solid, carved block of black oak. Four tall posts supported a carved canopy of oak, and cheap, faded curtains of some dark green woollen stuff depended from them. The door of the cedar cupboard was ajar, as I had left it in the night, and a roll of something white, fallen from a hook to the floor, had been dragged partly out into the room. Half mechanically I started to walk across and examine it; but as I did so, my eyes happened to travel once again to the woman in the picture.

I stared at her incredulously. All the lustre, the wild fascination of the eyes was gone. No longer did they give me gaze for gaze, with a gleam of malice shining out from
vivid black and white. They were as dull, as lifeless, as badly painted, as the rest of the picture. The frame was set high on the wall, its top reaching the dusty cornice which ran round the ceiling; and even though I mounted a chair to peer more closely into the smirking face, the eyes were still full three feet above my line of vision.

I could, however, see them quite distinctly. And there was certainly nothing in the slightest degree remarkable about them. How I could ever have fancied them to appear so, I did not now understand. I stepped down off the chair impatiently, dragging it across the floor with a scraping noise. When I had set it again in its former place, I turned to glance over my shoulder at the picture once more. Like a white flash of lightning was the gleam which the strange orbs shot out at me, then seemed to turn away.

Resolving, angrily, that I would no longer be deluded, I went on to my inspection of the cupboard. The white object which had fallen to the ground was a species of dressing-gown of cheap lawn, which looked as though it might have been purchased ready-made from some country shop. But it could never have been intended for Mrs. Heckleberry or her 'clever daughter Naomi.' There seemed to be a certain grace and distinction about the simply fashioned garment as it hung over my arm.

My very fingers tingled as I asked myself if these folds had ever draped the form of Consuelo Hope. I knew that the Heckleberrys held some secret of hers. I suspected that the beautiful woman who had been brought under some strange circumstances, still a mystery to me, into this hateful household, was Consuelo herself. And if so, I might easily believe that in this room she had spent the period of her residence. I could but pray that it had been brief.

Reverently now I replaced the white robe on the hook at the back of the cupboard. Beside it was suspended a dark travelling-cloak, with a deep, shirred hood. Gently I lifted one of its folds, with the impulse (on the bare chance that it
had once been hers) to press it to my lips. To my surprise, it was crusted with patches of long-dried mud of a rather peculiar color—deep yellow, with a vein of red. So heavily was the back of the cloak coated with it that one might have fancied that the wearer, wrapped in it, had lain on ground which was sodden with standing pools of rain.

The shelves which lined the upper half of one side of the cupboard were empty, save for a bundle and a bottle or two, one of which held a few dregs of bright, rose-colored liquid. Mechanically, I took it up and looked at the label: 'A teaspoonful to be taken on every return of the fainting symptoms.' Another, much smaller and half full, was ominously marked 'Laudanum, Poison,' and behind it lay a roll of some rough material. Long, stout pins held it in place. Strongly impelled, yet not knowing why I troubled myself with such a trivial thing at such a time, slowly I took them out. Then I unrolled the thing itself. It fell down before my eyes as I held it up, in awkward, creased folds, which for long had not been freed from their restrictions.

'Great Heaven!' I ejaculated. And my voice echoed dismally through the big, desolate room behind me. I was looking at a dress such as is worn by women in English prisons. I began moving restlessly up and down the room, forgetful of my own strait. Why should I dream for a moment that any of those things in there had ever belonged to her?

Yet, hurried by a sudden impulse, I went back to the cedar cupboard and opened the door. Though I did not know it, on that one action hung the whole future course of my life. I would prove to myself, I thought rebelliously, that she could never have worn that dress. It must have been made for a woman much larger, much stouter than she—very probably the redoubtable Miss Traill herself.

I dragged out the gown, which I had flung back in a tumbled heap, and let the folds drop once more. So doing, I had unconsciously pulled down something else—a bent card of pasteboard, which fluttered to the floor at my feet.
'No!' I said aloud, holding the ugly garment out at arm's length. 'Consuelo could never have worn this thing.'

Then, as I would have passed again out of the cedar cupboard, I saw the bit of bent cardboard lying on the floor, and carelessly picked it up.

It was a small visiting-card, such as it is the custom for men to use. 'Mr. S. D. Varren' was the name engraved upon it, and somebody had evidently made an attempt to obliterate the characters by heavy scoring with a pencil. The same pencil had written, just above, the words, 'The address of the only man alive who can or will help you to what you want is Mons. Paul Lepel, 29 Rue de Lacheneur, Paris. Try him. He has already been communicated with in your behalf.'

Had this bit of information been intended for Consuelo, I wondered? And instead of returning the card, I put it into my pocket. Again it must have been the unseen hand of Fate which guided mine.
CHAPTER XXIII.

A LIGHT OUTSIDE THE WINDOW.

Fortunately I had been thoughtful enough of the future to wind my watch during that dreary vigil in the darkness. As for the second time that morning I closed the door of the fateful cedar cupboard, my thoughts questioned the hour, and I took my watch from the pocket in which I had just bestowed the card.

It was but seven o'clock, and I could not repress a sigh of combined weariness, impatience, and suffering that was physical as well as mental. I had gone through a good deal during the past four-and-twenty hours, to say nothing of the severe strain endured before. And I had scarcely yet recovered my full strength since the wound which had disabled me on the day of Paula's disappearance.

My nerves were still braced for immediate action. I felt equal to considerable exertion, had there been the remotest chance of such exertion setting me free. But the prospect of standing an unlimited siege of imprisonment and starvation seemed beyond me.

Action was necessary to my mood—action which would cause me to forget lassitude and the keen gnawings of the vulture, hunger.

With all the force that was in me I seized one by one the bars of the window nearest me, and attempted to shake them. There was no sign of yielding. Each one might have been deeply imbedded in a rock. Undismayed, I tried the next, and then the next, until I had proved all three invulnerable.
'Never mind,' I said to myself, with the tendency of the solitary prisoner to soliloquize aloud already developing in me, 'this is not the only room.'

As I thus audibly encouraged myself, I distinctly heard a sarcastic laugh, apparently very close at hand. With a stride I was at the door, and had slid back the bolt, almost hurling myself into the passage outside. But nobody was there. I ran to the door at the end, and tried it, but it was locked as fast as ever, and I wondered if the miserable occupant of the opposite room had indulged in the peal of mirth to which I had just listened.

Softly I opened the door and looked in. The room was devoid of furniture, save for a mattress with a huddle of quilts upon it, which was drawn into a corner. A few crusts and well-gnawed bones lay scattered near, and upon one of the latter the unfortunate prisoner was eagerly engaged.

For the first time I had a comprehensive look at the face and twisted, half-clad figure. The gnome-like creature was a boy of from fifteen to twenty, perhaps, but the pinched features were old beyond his years.

He was sitting curled on the floor beside the pallet, his long, tangled hair divided over his humped back and falling down on either side, his feet stretched out in front—and I cursed the cruel wretches whose delight seemed to be in needless torture, as I saw the heavy iron weight attached by a ring and a chain to the left foot.

I grew sick with the pity that flooded my heart.

'Thank Heaven,' I thought, 'he has enough here to keep the spark of life in him yet for a day or two. If they mean to starve me, it still need not necessitate his death in the same way. And should I be lucky enough to devise and carry out a plan of escape, I will take him with me, or I will not go at all.'

On the floor I spied my lost match-box, and three of the four matches which had remained to me at last out of my depleted store. Joyfully I secured them, and felt as thank-
ful as a man who has chanced unexpectedly upon some
hidden treasure.

My next thought was to try the bars upon the two win-
dows, as I had those in the opposite room. They were
equally firm, and running from top to bottom of the window-
frame, ranged at regular intervals of not more than two
inches apart.

This was the situation, then. I had tried all possible
avenues of escape, and found them impracticable. If my
jailers so willed it, I and my wretched companion in misery
must die like a couple of trapped rats.

I should be simply one of the many who disappear—going
down under the surface, leaving scarcely the proverbial
bubble to mark the place where they have sunk.

If only someone would come to me, actively to do me to
death, I felt in my desperation that I should have strength
left to meet any attack. But that would not be the policy of
Mr. Nobody of Nowhere, I was sure.

The terror of the poor idiot as I shook his window-bars
was pitiable to see. He crawled from before me as I moved,
bleating like a frightened sheep, and in mercy to him I made
my exploration as brief as I could. Closing the door upon
him again, I went drearily to the silence, the gruesome
twilight, and the deadly waiting in the opposite room.

Hours passed. I had nothing to do, when my restlessness
became unbearable, save pace up and down like a caged
animal, and peer at the friendly face of my watch.

At last the light faded. It was maddening to feel that
thick, impenetrable darkness of night remorselessly folding
round me once again, like the black wings of some evil bird
of prey swooping down over the body in which the tide of
life begins to ebb.

It must have been, I calculated (judging by the time when
I knew the sun had set), close on midnight, when suddenly
I was roused from a half-doze by an outbreak of strange
noises in the opposite room.
I had thrown myself on the bed, but I rose, dizzy and confused, and groped my way across the passage, and to that other door.

There, having flung it open, I stood for a moment, listening to the frenzied gurglings and rattling of the chain which held the iron weight. And, though all was dark, I saw a ray of yellow light, which gleamed and died and flitted fitfully past the chinks in the shutters of the windows.

I found my way across the room, and pressed my face close against the bars which protected one of the windows. I could see nothing at first, though I was conscious that a light quivered along the trunks of the trees. But presently, as I continued to gaze, a figure, holding up a lantern, moved into my line of vision. It was that of the old woman, Mrs. Heckleberry, and she went stooping and peering along, swinging the light of the lantern over the ground before her, cutting the intense blackness under the closely growing pines.

At last she stopped, and set down the lantern on the ground, and then I saw that she was not alone. A man was with her—a man who carried something slung over his shoulder. Suddenly he turned, sliding down from his shoulder the thing that he had carried; and as he moved a few steps further away (behind the lantern instead of before it), the light shone up in his face, and I saw that, as I had suspected, it was Mr. Nobody of Nowhere.

The implement he had held was now set against the earth, tightly grasped with both hands, while one foot pressed it home. It was a large spade, and he had begun to dig!

In a moment I was overwhelmed with a realization of what he was doing. He was digging my grave!

I began to calculate how long it would take. The soil was so light and so loose that he had a comparatively easy task. In an hour or two I thought that he might finish it.

This was taking time by the forelock with a vengeance.
With a certain sense of shock, I realized that my jailers must, after all, intend my death to be a speedy one.

There was some reason that I could not guess which now rendered a course of slow starvation an unsafe one. I must be hurriedly put out of the way.

They had doubtless fancied me asleep in the next room, on the bed where I had spent most of the previous night.

It seemed to me that this must have been arranged in their minds, or they would have chosen a spot for their digging operations which would not have been visible even from the windows of the idiot's room. In some way (it struck me for the first time) that man and woman down there must have acquainted themselves with my movements during the twenty-four hours and more that I had been their prisoner. How, then, could they have done it?

I started up quickly from my stooping posture at the window. In an instant the key to this mystery had suggested itself to my brain.

The eyes in the portrait! What a blind fool I had been not to think of their possibilities before!

If there were a slide or flap on which the dull, expressionless eyes were painted—a slide which could be pushed up or down for a pair of keen human eyes to look through—my bewilderment over the unaccountable change which came and went need be bewilderment no longer. It would be but a simple device for ascertaining all that took place in the room, without betraying the means of communication.

If eyes could peep through holes in the portrait, the portion of the wall behind the picture-frame could not be solid. Where human beings could look in, a human being might be able to get out.

I waited for no more. If anything was to be done, it must be done quickly.

It was the flitting light under the trees which, flashing into his prison, had so terrified the unfortunate boy, and drawn from him the dismal screams that had brought me to his
room. These screams must have been heard by those two at their gruesome work outside, and yet they had not allowed themselves to be disturbed. The miserable creature was as little to be feared by them in some ways as a dead man—he could tell no tales.

This was the moment for making use of one of my treasured waxen vestas. So feeble would be its flame, that I was sure the light would not penetrate to those outside. And whatever difficulties I might have to encounter, I could not leave the idiot behind.

I struck the match and laid it on the floor, that it might burn as long as it would, first brushing aside the thick layer of dust, which might have ignited and finally set the whole room in a blaze.

My companion in misery was crouching in a corner, as usual. As I advanced towards him he crawled away, but I overtook him, and, with one hand firmly grasping him by the humped shoulder, I attempted to allay his fears with a few murmured words—which he might or might not understand—and began examining the weight attached to his ankle by the ring and chain.

It was padlocked on, and the chain appeared to be strong, but I still hoped that one of the links might be weaker than its fellows.

The poor wretch was fairly paralyzed with terror. He lay still, and made no effort to escape. Down the length of the chain I passed my fingers—and still the vesta burned. All seemed intact, yet there was one link in which I fancied I detected a slight bend or imperfection.

With all my strength I grasped the chain on either side, and twisted it violently round. It did not give way, but I wrenched it again, and to my intense satisfaction the link opened. I tore it apart and the weight fell off, leaving a dragging length of chain attached to the ring, which was still locked upon the excoriated ankle.

But the vesta had flickered for the last time, and died out.
One more hurried glance at the window, to see that the doctor was still engaged in digging, and I lighted another match.

How I should ascertain whether any hope of egress lay behind the portrait, with but one wax vesta, I did not know; but as I sacrificed the match, an idea suddenly came to me. I would collect some of the rubbish scattered over the floor of this room, and kindle a fire on the empty hearth in the other. Thus I should obtain a light which would last throughout my operations, yet would not threaten us in case the attempt at escape should fail.

There was a broken basket half full of polished beef bones, which would do excellently well. I heaped it up with fragments of brown paper, balls of dust, and such heterogeneous matter as littered the prison chamber in generous profusion. To this I meant to add the wash-hand-stand in the room opposite, which I knew that I could easily break in pieces.

Slipping the handle of the basket over one arm, I placed the other round the bent back of the idiot, and half dragged, half led him through the door and into the room across the passage. Then I shut the bolt, conscious all the while of the slight protection this one poor precaution gave.

Dark as it was, I found my way to the fireplace, flung in my bits of paper, crushed up the basket on top, covered it with the dry bones, and, with a heart throbbing hard and fast with excitement, applied my last match.

A faint crackling noise gladdened my ears as the thin wood braided in the basket was ignited. With proper care there was no fear now for the survival of the fire. I ran across the room, set down the earthenware jug and basin off the wash-hand-stand, and, bending its legs outward, began breaking it up for firewood.

The idiot watched my movements furtively for a few minutes, but as the fire grew he approached, held out his hands with a cackling laugh to the warmth, and then—his
roving eyes discovering the tall, canopied bed—he went, leaping and limping alternately, and threw himself upon it with a crows of delight.

The chair on which I had mounted in the morning to examine the eyes of the portrait was not high enough for my present purpose. I determined to drag the dressing-table under the frame, and set the chair upon that.

The table stood in a part of the room which the changeful glimmer of the firelight had not yet reached. I crossed over to it, and then, whether or no I was arrested by some faint sound, of which I was scarcely conscious, I have never been quite sure.

At all events, instead of picking up the heavy piece of furniture, as I had meant to do, I paused, and for a moment stood perfectly still, veiled in darkness, scarcely touched with the red glow.

'Now for the portrait!' I thought, laying a hand on each side of the dressing-table. I glanced up involuntarily at the picture as I did so, and a sudden leap of the fire brought out the eerie gleam in the eyes which had so astonished and bewildered me in the daytime.

Firmly convinced of the truth of my new theory now, I felt sure that someone was looking into the room.

A vision of the black hole under the pines came up before me, and, with the quick instinct of self-preservation, I held myself rigid and still.

The eyes had not turned towards the dark corner where I stood. It appeared to me that their glistening gaze was fixed upon the occupant of the bed, and it occurred to me that in all probability I would be supposed to be lying there. When the eyes were gone, as silently as I could, I lifted the dressing-table, carried it across the room, and set it down under the portrait. Then I placed a chair on top, and pushed both against the wall.

I climbed up, and my eyes now being on a level with those of the picture, I could see, by looking closely, that
they were set back behind a pair of nicely-cut holes in the canvas.

I had with me a small penknife, which I almost invariably carried, and, insignificant as it would have been as a weapon, it was sufficient for this purpose. I inserted it in the small openings cut out to fit the painted eyes arranged on the flap behind, and slit the canvas down from top to bottom.

It was as I had supposed. The rent which I had made displayed a backing of board, with a door about twelve inches square exactly behind the pictured face. Instead of opening outward, this door—on which a pair of eyes were crudely painted—evidently slid up and down. The inner surface was smooth, and I saw no means of raising it; but I inserted the largest blade of my knife into the thin crack which indicated the joining at the bottom, and slowly pushed it up.

A square window was thus revealed, large enough to admit the passage of my head, and I found myself peering into a space which was faintly lighted from some larger one beyond.

For a moment I could not entirely comprehend my surroundings. But presently the nature of the whole contrivance was patent to me. The backing of the picture and the wall of a cupboard in the adjoining room (possessing no apparent communication with the room I occupied) were one and the same.

As I pushed my face through the small window or slide, I could look down and see a shelf underneath, fixed at such a height that a man standing on it could have placed his eyes against the apertures in the canvas, now torn away. I could see other shelves at the sides of the cupboard, piled with various articles, and I could see a half-open door which led into the room beyond. There all was still. But the light made me fancy that it was, or had lately been, occupied.

I listened strainingly, my heart beating loudly in my own ears. Suddenly a strange and inexplicable sound arose—a sound which was like the rolling of thunder far away,
with a reverberation which shook the floor under the table on which I stood.

Something cracked loudly in the room behind me, and I drew in my head to turn and stare expectantly at the door. It was fast shut, but, my sight confused by the leaping fire-light, I stared in unbelieving horror at the bed.

The great box-frame was empty. The tall, carved posts rose up under the canopy like skeleton arms, but the body of the bed was gone.

I cried out appalled and absolutely terror-stricken, for the first time, I think, in my life.

Leaping from the dressing-table to the floor, which I almost expected to feel giving way from under me, my knees trembled like those of some old and palsied man.

I staggered over to the bed, and stared, horrified and incredulous, into the dark and empty space lately occupied by the bank of feathers, the tumbled pillows, and patchwork quilt, upon which had rested the body of the idiot.

From some distant region below came up the sound of gurgling water.

Summoning such poor fragments of strength and courage as I had left, I bent over and peered down into the yawning pit. It was like looking into the shaft of a mine. The bed, with the feather mattress strapped on, was visible, hanging upon hinges like the lid of a box that had been pushed inside and broken. The sides of the shaft were of rough stone, wet, and glistening with slime.

As I gazed, the thunderous rumbling came again, and slowly, with many a creak, the bed rose into its former position. Pillows, sheets, and coverlet were gone. Only the feathers, with the old and dingy bag of ticking that held them together, remained.

And the idiot? I knew too well that his had been the fate intended for me.

Stories of such hideous contrivances as these I had read. Cranks that turned, precipitating the unconscious sleeper
from his bed into a hidden well, or a river that carried his body swiftly to the sea. But I had not dreamed that any such remained in England in these days of enlightenment and peace.

This, then, was what they had been waiting for—waiting until they were sure that exhaustion would drive me to the bed.

Intensest horror mastered me. I remembered only the wretched boy I had meant to save, and who had perished in my stead.

Then suddenly came the thought of escape, and the recollection of the discovery I had made behind the picture. If I could but get out of this vile den alive, and bring down vengeance upon the murderers who inhabited it!

I think I must have spoken the desire aloud, for I heard my own voice, and, closely following, the noise of a heavy weight falling. I knew, from the sound, that it was the great bar which secured the blue door at the end of the passage.

With a start I threw off the deadly oppression which had weighed down my limbs like manacles of iron. I looked to the bolt on the door, and calculated that it might hold for five or ten minutes if a strong man attempted to force his way in. Then in an instant I was up on the table under the portrait, tearing the cut strips of canvas away.

The blue door had opened. I had heard the big key grating in the lock. And footsteps were coming along the passage. I seized with both hands the wood at the lower edge of the slide, and shook it violently. It cracked in my grasp, and as I wrenched and tore at it it seemed to me that there were signs of yielding.

In the midst came an exclamation in the passage outside. Mrs. Heckleberry, I told myself, had looked into the idiot's room and discovered his absence. Even yet, unless they had explored those depths of gurgling water at the bottom of the pit, they would not be aware of the mistake that they had made—the old woman and the doctor.
Voices whispered at my door, and the knob was turned, then shaken.

For a second I had involuntarily paused; but now, with renewed vigor, I applied myself to my task again. If this were a secret door, I hoped to break the fastenings. If it were but the solid back of the cupboard, I meant to tear it down.

I got a good hold upon it through the open slide, and the wood was not more than half an inch in thickness. A moment ago I had been a weak and trembling wreck; now the blood flowed like liquid fire through my veins. Each muscle was tense as steel.

Crash! came a great blow on the door. At this rate the hasp which held the bolt in place would not last many minutes longer.

I held my breath for a final effort, and, as the wood groaned under my hands, I was startled by a voice speaking in the room beyond the cupboard and the portrait.

'What's that? Who's making that noise there?' The tones were gruff, and sounded to me like those of Jonas Heckleberry.

Naturally, I made no reply, but redoubled my efforts to break down the woodwork.

'Here, Varren!' yelled the voice. 'Come round this way. He's getting into this room!'

Even at that crucial moment my mind caught up the name of Varren, and I remembered that it had been printed upon the card I had found in the cedar cupboard in the morning.

One mighty effort, and the whole back of the picture gave way so suddenly and unexpectedly that I was precipitated into the cupboard on the other side, falling forward with the splintered woodwork.

I had pitched over the shelf which formed a support for those who looked through the eyes of the portrait, and, striking the door between the room and the cupboard with my head, had forced it wide open.
I was on my feet again in the fraction of a second, and I had enough sense to close the cupboard door behind me. I stood, panting, with my back to it, and found myself facing Jonas Heckleberry, raised upon his elbow in a bed, and covering me with a revolver.

'No, you don't!' he said. 'You take one step to pass me, and you're a dead man. I never was caught napping yet without this thing under my pillow, and I don't mean to be.'

I wheeled round deliberately, bolted the door of the cupboard through which I had just come, and turned the key in the lock. At least Mr. Nobody of Nowhere should not have it all his own way in following me. One enemy at a time was enough.
"No you don't!" he said. "I never was caught napping yet without this thing under my pillow." Page 266.

—A Woman in Grey.
CHAPTER XXIV.

WHILE LIFE HUNG ON A WORD.

With my eyes on his face, I advanced a step or two nearer to Heckleberry.

'The devil!' he ejaculated shortly. 'You're the chap that saved me in the accident!'

'I am,' I said. 'And you assured me of your gratitude. This is the way you take to show it.'

He still covered me with the revolver; but his hand began to shake, and his lower lip fell.

'Varren lied to me,' he muttered. 'I wasn't told it was you. I don't want to shoot you, but we can't let you go out of this house.'

The storm of my excitement was dying down. The very fact that I had a man to speak to, a danger which I could see to confront, had a calming effect upon me.

'I should very much like a short conversation with you, Mr. Heckleberry,' I said quietly, 'if I could be assured of privacy.'

He glared at me, not knowing how to take my sang-froid.

'Look here,' he growled: 'you needn't think you can get away from me. My aim's pretty steady.'

'Hark!' I exclaimed. 'They've got into the room I've just left—your friend Mr. Nobody, alias Varren, and your extremely enterprising mother. I think this cupboard door, however, is fastened rather more stoutly—for obvious reasons, perhaps—and, to save themselves trouble, they will doubtless run back through the passage, and endeavor to

267
come in here by that other door over there. Now, if you will allow me to close and lock it before that can happen, and if you will mention that you wish a few moments' undisturbed talk with me, it will certainly be much to the advantage of us both.'

'Bless me if ever I've seen your like!' he ejaculated. 'You are a cool one! How's the door to be shut and locked? I can't get up and do it. And I'm not such a softy as to trust you with the job.'

'The door is in such a position,' I said, 'that if I attempt to slip out you can easily shoot me. But I give you my word that I will not make such an attempt.'

'Your word?' he repeated mockingly. 'How do I know who or what you are?'

'I'll tell you,' I returned. 'My name is Terence Darkmore. Sir Wilfrid Amory is my uncle, and my home is Lorn Abbey.'

A strange light had shot up into Jonas Heckleberry's eyes. 'Go and lock the door,' he said sulkily, yet with a concealed eagerness.

The door was a heavy one. And the room being accessible from the main part of the house, and not intended to be utilized for the detention of prisoners—who must be locked in from the outside, without much means of protecting themselves within—there was a key as well as a bolt, and the latter was considerably more trustworthy than my sole security in my late forced lodging-place. I made both lock and bolt fast, and then returned to Jonas.

Beside his candle, on a chair, were a glass of liquor of some kind and a plate of bread and meat. My eyes fell upon them hungrily.

'If you will excuse me, Mr. Heckleberry,' I said, 'I will invite myself to share your meal before beginning a conversation of much moment to us both. It is difficult to arrive at logical conclusions, I have already found, on an empty stomach.'
'Take what you want,' he responded gruffly.

Heckleberry watched me with a curious, grudging interest. Suddenly we both started. Someone was trying the door.

'Is that you, Varren?' Jonas asked.

'Yes. I thought that devil had strangled you and got away.'

'Not he; I was too quick for him with my revolver,' Jonas made answer, with his eyes on mine.

'Have you shot him?'

'No; not yet. I find I know the chap. I want a little talk with him first.'

'Pshaw! what a fool you are! He's managed to cheat the rat-trap. But he don't get out of this house alive. How came the door locked? You couldn't have done it, eh?'

'I made him do it. With the little black muzzle of my iron dog pointed at him, just as it is at this minute.'

I went on eating, and finished the liquor, the worst brandy I had ever tasted. I felt like a new man.

'Oh! he's begun to give in, has he?' the doctor's voice continued outside. 'There's nothing like a little hunger to tame a man. And he wanted taming, if ever I saw a fellow who did. Since you've got him down so quiet, make him open the door again and let me in. I don't half like leaving you alone with him.'

'Do, Jonas dear, there's a lovey,' crooned the voice of Mrs. Heckleberry. 'There's such a pretty little hole out under the pines.'

'Hold your jaw, can't you, you old lunatic!' yelled Jonas, with a following volley of oaths.

But I broke in gently.

'Don't mind my feelings,' I said. 'I have already seen the hole under the pines to which the lady refers.'

He muttered something angrily, and then shouted to those outside the door that they should let him alone.

Putting the dishes in their former place beside the candle, I drew up another chair close to the bed, and sat down upon it, that my face might be near enough to Jonas's for a low-
voiced conversation. I thought, in all probability, there
would be a keen ear at the keyhole of the door.

'To begin with,' I said quietly, 'I am perfectly aware that
you are a criminal—that you have merited the worst penal-
ties of the law. You call yourself a spider farmer. But you
live by the torture of helpless fellow-beings, confided to your
keeping to get rid of as you choose. And you haven't chosen
to give yourself much trouble in prolonging their lives, to
put the accusation in its mildest form. To-night, your com-
rade in crime, and your mother, whose distracted brain
somewhat excuses her misdeeds, deliberately attempted to
murder me. By a strange fatality, your prisoner, whom I
would have rescued, suffered in my stead. In some way his
life of torture and his violent death must be avenged. But—
it is too late to save him. And, for a time, you may buy my
silence at a certain price.'

As I spoke, the face of the sick man had grown more
brutal, more relentless.

'What is the use of buying what one can get for nothing?'
he muttered, nervously fingerling the trigger of the revolver,
which was already cocked.

'Can you get it for nothing? that is the question. I am
bound to tell you that our meeting in the railway train was
not accidental. I was following you. I knew the business
which had taken you to Lorn Abbey, and I meant to block
your game. Now, I have it in my power to do so.'

'In your power!' he echoed savagely. 'You have not got
it in your power to draw one more breath on this earth unless
I choose to let you.'

'Wait,' I said. 'And not quite so loud, if you please. I
wouldn't judge hastily, if I were you. As you say, you have
but to press down the trigger, and I am a dead man. But I
don't think you will do it. Quite apart from the question of
gratitude, it will be wiser to let me live. My presence here
was planned. Do you think that a man like Sir Wilfrid
Amory would allow his kinsman to die unavenged?"
I was now trying the experiment known, to those who play the game of poker, as 'bluffing.' And I saw by Heckleberry's face that my words had told.

'Is this all you've got to say?' he queried.

'No. I have only been endeavoring to show you that there was reason in my demand. You cannot have my silence for nothing. The price of my blood is your own blood, and that of your accomplices. But I have more to exact from you than my life. I will have from you that which I followed you to obtain.'

For an instant I was silent, and we glared into each other's eyes, like two men who have drawn blood with their foils, and pause to read the enemy's next thrust in the shifting of his glance.

'I see what you want of me,' said Jonas. 'The secret of the woman who has been adopted by your uncle—the woman who ousted your sweetheart from her place in his house.'

'You are wrong,' I replied. 'You keep her secret, and I keep yours, until you have time to get out of the country, that is all. I demand that you make no more attempt at blackmailing and intimidating her, that you cease your vile trade of murder, and I will keep silence long enough for you to escape with your life. Now you may choose. I have been frank with you because I do not fear you. Kill me, and be sure as you do it, that two days will not pass before your crime has found you out. Let me go free, with your safety bought. Which is it to be?'

'Oh, you're on her side, eh?' he chuckled. 'Well, what would you be willing to do for me, if I let you go out of this house scot-free, and sent you to a man where you would learn something that would give her—er—give her new life?'

I sat silent for a moment, thinking. I could hardly reconcile it with my conscience to bribe this wretch and keep the secret of his crimes.

Jonas seemed to read the reason of my hesitation.
‘I swear,’ he asseverated, ‘that till to-night there’s never been a murder done here, and of this, as you know, I am not guilty. I’m not responsible for what’s happened. It’s true that I’ve kept foolish lads here, whose families had some reason for gettin’ rid of ’em—puny, sickly creatures, who died on my hands. I didn’t spend much in dainties or doctor’s bills to keep ’em alive, I admit; but I never killed ’em. They died of themselves, and we buried ’em as secret as we could; for to have it known that I was in such business would have brought out things that would have been inconvenient for me and my patrons, and trade would have been spoiled. This was just the house for it, too. I’d heard of the place when I was a boy. The biggest part of the old manor was in ruins long before my grandfather’s time. There was awful stories about it—that it had been a den of thieves and murderers in the old, old days. But everybody thought the queer traps and things that had been here were burnt in the great fire that did away with everything but the few rooms you’ve seen. When I found it best to move from my part of the country, I thought of this farm, and got it for a song. I soon found out that some of the old contrivances hadn’t been destroyed, and was in pretty good workin’ order, too. The only improvements I made was that big blue door you saw, and the bars on the window, which I needed in my business. But there’s been no trade in murder here, and I ain’t Varren’s master. He’s not a chap to trifle with, I can tell you. And after your pryin’ and peepin’ about, it ain’t much wonder he was tempted to get rid of you. You could make things look pretty black for us, and there’d be nothin’ for it but to shut your mouth, if you hadn’t let me see that you’re to be bought. Any time you changed your mind in the future, you know, I could do the same with you, or, rather, with the woman you seem to have taken some big chances for—Miss Hope.’

Jonas, in his eagerness to obtain the terms he wanted, having, as he fancied, turned the tables upon me, had for
the moment forgotten the revolver that he held, and the necessity to keep me well covered. His hand dropped ever so little, but I saw by his face rather than the display of carelessness, that his thoughts were elsewhere.

With a sudden quick spring I was upon him, and had wrenched the weapon from his hand. I had little strength left for a fight; but he was in worse condition than I, and, now that I was no longer at the mercy of his revolver at every move I made, our positions were entirely reversed.

Before he had had time to cry out, my grasp was on his throat. I bent over him, and whispered:

‘Tell me the name of the man who can help her, or I’ll kill you as though you were a dog!’

As I spoke I placed the muzzle of the revolver against his temple, and felt the shudder that went through him at its implacable touch.

‘I’ll give you just half a minute,’ I continued. ‘I’ll release your throat, and you may speak; but just as sure as you cry out for help I’ll put a bullet in your brain.’

He looked up at me, and there was a fire in his eyes which would have burned my life out if it could.

‘I’ll speak!’ he whispered. ‘This comes of gratitude—this comes of sparing you when I had you in my power. And you call yourself a gentleman!’

I could hardly help smiling.

‘Hurry up!’ I cautioned him.

‘Go to M. Lepel, 29, Rue de Lachencur,’ he mumbled.

It was the name and address scribbled in pencil on the card I had found in the cedar cupboard.

Having obtained, or thinking I had obtained, what I wanted, I put the revolver in my pocket, and deliberately gagged Jonas with my handkerchief. I then pinioned his arms behind him, by means of a woollen shawl which had been flung over his feet, and, having temporarily secured myself against his vengeance, I laid him back upon his pillows as gently as I could.
It was unnecessary to bind his legs, and all that I did I endeavored to do without giving him any increase of physical pain.

His eyes followed my movements revengefully, and yet there was a malicious satisfaction in them, too—something almost expressive of angry amusement, which at the time I could not fathom, though afterwards I had cause enough to understand it.

All was quiet outside. Mr. Nobody, or 'Varren,' as I now knew him to be, yielded to Heckleberry's fiercely expressed command, and desisted during the first part of the conversation from his attacks upon the door. In all probability he was listening; but I had taken care that he should not be able to catch what we had said.

Jonas grunted and struggled a little, but the impromptu gag did its work well, and, paying no heed to him, I walked to one of the windows. These were not barred, and though the shutters were tightly closed, as were all the others along the front of the house, I had no difficulty in opening them. Underneath the window I could see the fluttering of ivy leaves, and, putting down my hand, I felt a network of thick ropy stems.

In my boyhood I had been a good climber, and, worn out though I now was, I had little difficulty in making my descent. I could scarcely realize, after all that I had passed through, and the horrors I had seen, that I had at last escaped so easily.

I was still in my stocking feet, and I thought that, in the end, time would be saved if I were able to find my shoes. I went softly round to the side of the house, to the place where I had hidden them before making my stolen entrance on that eventful first night, and I was glad to ascertain that they remained where they had been left. Then, running in the direction of the gate which I had broken, I vaulted over it, without stopping to push my way through, and was away in the direction of the village.
CHAPTER XXV.

WHAT HAD HAPPENED AT HOME.

It seemed like a foretaste of heaven to be back at the Abbey again; but hardly had I been admitted within the door, when I knew, by Wemyss’ face, that I must confront some new trouble.

‘Oh, Master Terence!’—he had called me so since I was a little boy, and had never been able to change—‘I am glad you have come back!’ he cried. ‘Then you did get one of the telegrams?’

‘Not one,’ I said. ‘Why did they send? Were they anxious about me?’

‘No doubt,’ returned Wemyss confidentially, ‘as you went away so sudden, sir—that is, at first. But you have been sore wanted. Sir Wilfrid’s been took very ill, sir.’

‘Nothing really serious, I trust?’ I questioned quickly.

‘Well, sir, that’s what the doctors hardly seem to know. There’s been two in consultation already, though Sir Wilfrid only came down yesterday with the attack. So far as I can make out, neither of them appears to be quite sure what is the matter.’

‘Yesterday?’ I repeated. ‘Only yesterday! And they must have got my telegrams the day before.’

‘Yes, sir, they did; that I happen to know. I heard Sir Wilfrid and Miss Hope talking about it. They expected a letter afterwards, to say where you were, sir, and when you might be returning; but none came, I’m sure. And they didn’t know where to telegraph you about Sir Wilfrid.

275
We've got another invalid in the house, too, Master Terence.'

'Not Miss Hope? I questioned.

'Oh no, sir; not Miss Hope, nor yet Miss Traill, who seems quite well again. But the gentleman from The Nest—I believe he was former owner here—Mr. Haynes-Haviland. He called the very day after you left, sir, and had the misfortune to slip, coming downstairs from Miss Hope's boudoir. He fell and hurt himself, and asked that he might stay on for a few days, as he really felt too much shaken to be moved. He's here yet, though better; for when Sir Wilfrid was taken ill, and you away, he thought he might be able to do something to help.'

I scarcely heard more than half that Wemyss said to me, so eager was I to learn more of my uncle, though I had a vague sense of irritation at the thought that Haynes-Haviland was established in the house.

'I suppose I might go up to him—to Sir Wilfrid?' I said, half doubtfully.

Without waiting for an answer, I hurried upstairs—meaning to wait outside his door and waylay the doctor as he was leaving. But someone had been before me.

In a great high-backed armchair of carved oak, a slender figure half sat, half lay, a golden head prone upon two white arms. There was something piteous in the pose, when one thought of the proud, haughty courage of the woman, such utter abandonment of grief did it express.

'Consculo!' I said.

She looked up with a start of surprise.

'Thank God you have come back!' she said. 'For his sake! For mine? Ah, I don't know—I don't know!'

'Why don't you know?' I whispered, drawing her up from the chair, and taking her into my arms.

'Because—oh! I ought never to have let you see that I cared for you! You got my telegram, and the express letter I sent to town, addressed to your club?'
'I have had neither. I have not been to town,' I said hurriedly. 'All I know of Uncle Wilfrid is what Wemyss told me downstairs.'

'Wait, then. Take your arms away from me. There is some cruel fate which follows me like a Nemesis. I know—I am sure it is a plot. I could guess whose, though I cannot see the meshes of the net that is being spread for me; and I can prove nothing. Only a few days ago I was saved by the evidence you gave, and that alone, from the suspicion of having murdered Paula Wynne. I thought I saw my way to the end, towards which I had been panting and striving and yearning for years. But now another blow has fallen. It is the last. I am beaten. I own it. I have no more strength left.'

'You have my strength,' I said tenderly. I had not released her from my arms, though she had commanded it.

'After all,' I went on, 'much as you may regret having admitted your love for me, still you have done so, and you can't retract. Therefore you have given me the right to help you. Tell me what has happened to break your splendid courage—tell me while I hold you here against my heart.'

'How can I? And yet, rather I than another. And better that it should be before the doctor comes. They think—indeed, they say they know—that Sir Wilfrid has been poisoned. And though they have not put it into words, they believe that I have done it. If he dies, I shall be accused of causing his death. If, as Heaven grant, he recovers, they will say it was because I was kept scrupulously away from him.'

'My darling!' I interrupted. 'Everyone here—even you—must be mad, I think. To put it on the very lowest ground, what possible motive could you have had in putting your best friend out of the way?'

'Wait,' she cried, 'and I will tell you.'

It was a long story, and I had hardly the patience to hear it, believing in her so utterly, scorning so completely those who did not. But she forced me to listen.
My telegram had come the morning after I had gone away. Afterwards, Consuelo and Uncle Wilfrid sat talking of me in the ingle-room because it was my favorite. In the midst he had told her that his solicitor was coming, and that the will he had spoken of making was to be signed that very day. Consuelo had begged him not to leave her money, but he had insisted upon carrying out his intention. Then the solicitor had been announced, and Consuelo had retired.

While she had been at tea with Miss Traill, Haynes-Haviland had appeared, remaining until Sir Wilfrid came in, and asking for a few words in private with him downstairs.

Then had come Haynes-Haviland’s fall, of which he had made much, insisting that he was too severely shaken to venture on leaving the house.

The ‘few words in private’ had been spoken, nevertheless, and Consuelo had not seen Uncle Wilfrid till dinner-time. He had sent word that they were to dine alone, as he was not feeling well; but Consuelo had gone to the ingle-room, where he still was, to inquire into the trouble. A legal-looking document had lain beside him, and Consuelo had seen by his face that the headache he had pleaded had been only an excuse. He had been reading a letter, which, on being questioned, he admitted was the property of Mr. Haynes-Haviland, something that gentleman had wished his advice upon.

Consuelo, suspecting some plot, had begged to see it, and, on being persistently refused, had finally snatched the paper in desperation.

What she found that it contained she did not tell me; but I inferred that it had reference to her secret. It was put in a clever way, that Haynes-Haviland need not seem to have acted maliciously, but rather as though he would have benefited her.

As for Uncle Wilfrid, he had believed nothing; but, whatever the charges against her were, she had confessed to their
truth. So great was his horror and surprise on listening to such unexpected words, that he showed symptoms of the faintness from which he had suffered the first time that his eyes fell upon Consuelo's face.

In a glass on the table at which he had been sitting was some wine already poured out, and this she had hastily administered. No sooner had he drunk it, however, than he was seized with a strange illness, and, extremely alarmed, Consuelo had had him assisted to his room.

Once there, she had given him water from a carafe, and again the attack returned, more violently than before.

Dr. Hasbrouck, on being sent for, seemed puzzled and distressed, and later wired to London for a famous specialist on poisons. Miss Traill had seen both men examining a wineglass and carafe; a night and day nurse had been brought in, one of whom Consuelo suspected was a detective set to watch her.

She knew, at least, that all her private papers had been disturbed, and she, together with the other members of the household, had been forbidden to enter the sick-room.

'Now you see the motive that can be alleged,' she said when the miserable story was finished. 'He had made his will, leaving everything to you and me, and just afterwards he had seen a letter exposing circumstances in my past, the truth of which I had been obliged to admit. Won't people suppose I tried to kill him before he would have time to tear up the new will and make another of a different kind?'

As she spoke, the door of Uncle Wilfrid's room opened softly, and a man came out.

'That is he—the man who acts the part of night-nurse,' Consuelo whispered through half-shut lips.

But softly, almost inaudibly, as she had spoken, I saw that he had heard.

He raised his white lashes, and scanned both our faces, and as he did so I started in sudden surprise. There was no mistaking those clear, steel-blue eyes, though, had I not once
felt them piercing to my very soul, I should not now have recognized the man, or dreamed that he was disguised.

Consuelo, observant as she was, had not done so. But I knew that I could not be mistaken. It was Marland, the detective who had been employed a short time ago in ferreting out the mystery of Paula's disappearance.

Somehow, I felt relieved that the man appointed to watch was Marland, and no other. I did not understand how it could be, for Consuelo had told me that the doctors had communicated with the police. That meant the local force, and Marland was a London celebrity—considered one of the best detectives employed at Scotland Yard.

He disappeared, and I did not attempt to stay him, nor did I tell Consuelo of the conclusion at which I had so suddenly arrived.

I did not know in what room he was supposed to seek rest during the day, after his pretended vigils, but when Consuelo had left me I speedily found my way to the housekeeper, and inquired where he had been put.

Then I knocked imperatively at the door which she had indicated.

There was no spoken reply, but the man himself answered my rap.

'Is there anything I can do for you, sir?' he meekly inquired in a well-disguised voice.

'Yes'—rather sharply. 'You can let me in, and grant me a few words in private.'

He had been writing. A number of papers lay scattered on a table by the window, and the pen had been hastily stuck in the inkpot.

I sat down, while he continued to stand in the servile manner of an inferior.

'Be seated,' I said, 'won't you, Mr. Marland?'

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

'Well, the mischief is done. You should enter my profession, Mr. Darkmore. You might make your mark.'
'I'd rather do that by getting the best of a man in your profession, and I mean to try. Much obliged for the compliment, all the same. But let me preface what I want to say by remarking that, beside admiring your skill as a detective, of which I have heard, I feel drawn towards you as a man, and I want your help and sympathy, not your distrust. You are under this roof with the purpose of collecting evidence against someone living in the house. Is not that so?'

'Hardly that. I am here to watch—to discover, if possible, the perpetrator of a crime committed against your uncle, Sir Wilfrid Amory.'

'And I ask you, as man to man—first giving you my word of honor that I will not repeat anything you may say—whether you came suspecting Miss Hope?'

'I was led to believe that there was some evidence against her which I was to sift. Indeed, my presence here is, in a way, an accident. As you know, I have been putting my best efforts into the unravelling of that disappearance mystery. I happened to have business in this neighborhood again. I was in the local police-office when a certain request came from this house yesterday. Scenting a connection between the two affairs, I naturally asked permission to undertake the work required. There was good reason why it should be granted; hence the disguise. But you have been too clever for me.'

'You speak of a connection between the two cases,' I said eagerly. 'Has it occurred to you that, in one way or another, there has been considerable evidence against Miss Hope lately? A short time ago she was suspected of having caused in some mysterious way the disappearance of my cousin, Miss Wynne. A week after there was more incriminating evidence, which came horribly near convicting her of murder. Of the latter suspicion she was triumphantly cleared, thanks to two or three bits of evidence which I was able to bring forward, establishing without doubt the fact that the body found in the moat was not that of Miss Wynne. Was
not another fact established at the same moment with equal clearness—the fact that there had been a dastardly plot against Miss Hope? Someone had been so anxious to have her convicted as the murderess of Miss Wynne, that he, or she, had gone far enough to procure the body of a strange woman, and dress it as completely as possible in Miss Wynne’s clothing. All this struck you, of course?"

"Certainly it did, Mr. Darkmore. But because a woman has once been suspected wrongly, that is not to say that she is to be for all time considered above suspicion. Besides—I have your promise that what we say to each other shall be in sacred confidence—besides, I am not by any means sure yet that Miss Hope didn’t have something to do with Miss Wynne’s disappearance.

"What! you still think she murdered—"

"No, not so fast. I know she didn’t, and for the best of reasons. I am almost certain—almost certain, mind you—that I have seen Miss Wynne alive, and within the past three days."

"Thank God!" I ejaculated. ‘I never believed that she was dead.’

‘Nor I. But, at all events, there is some strange connecting chain of circumstances here. The poison on the dagger which wounded you was granil. The poison which has been given Sir Wilfrid is granil, and I have learned that it can be procured of an old herb woman whom Miss Hope knows very well.’ He got up, and took a bottle from his small travelling bag. ‘Here is some of the stuff,’ he said. ‘Where do you think I found it? In the young lady’s room wrapped up in a handkerchief.’

‘My God!’ I muttered. ‘Yet more than ever do I say it is a plot. I would swear that the man Haynes-Haviland is in it. He hates Miss Hope; he has tried before to injure her, I know.’

‘It would be hard to prove,’ said Marland incredulously. ‘To be sure, the man is in the house, but he is certainly ill.
He has some heart trouble, which has been increased, according to Dr. Hasbrouck, by his falling downstairs. He is not in a fit condition, I should say, to be planning murders and conspiracies. In my opinion, you can do nothing toward advancing that theory. You have faith in human nature, especially a beautiful woman's human nature, and I admire you for it. But for all that, I mean before many days have passed over my head to prove to you that she has been in prison—that she is a criminal.'

'I defy you to do it,' I said, giving him look for look. 'Put your soul into it, if you will; but I will beat you yet on your own ground. I swear to prove to you that you are wrong, if only you will give me time.'

'Time? What do you mean to ask of me?' he exclaimed.

'Tell me first what you are going to do.'

'I'm going to put the police authorities in possession of every fact I've acquainted myself with here at Lorn Abbey; and then justice must have its course.'

'What do you mean?' I cried. 'What will be done then?'

'Miss Hope will undoubtedly be arrested and taken to jail, there to await her trial for the poisoning of Sir Wilfrid Amory.'

'My God! How can I help her?' The words seemed to utter themselves without my volition.

'Only by leaving her to justice. If she be, after all, innocent, the truth must come out in the end.'

'I am not so sure of that,' I said bitterly. 'The right does not always prevail. But I believe you to be honest. I think some time you'll find out the mistake you are making, and then you'll be glad if you have granted me the boon that I'm about to ask. "Favor" is too weak a word for me to use.'

'Well, Mr. Darkmore, what is it? I've already told you I'd be glad to do anything for you that I conscientiously could.

'I ask you this, in the name of humanity—in the name of mercy. Don't communicate with the police—say nothing to
them of what you suspect or what you know—for three days from now. That is what I want of you.'

'Mr. Darkmore, it's impossible! My honor as a detective is at stake!'

'What is that to the danger of ruining an innocent woman's life? I don't ask you to keep back the information indefinitely—only for seventy-two short hours. Only give me a chance to collect evidence which, on my soul, I believe may at least clear her of that first charge you have made—that she was ever guilty of a crime, that she was ever in prison. If she attempted to clear herself, to say that she is not the woman for whom you and others seem to take her, she might not be believed; but let me bring witnesses—let me go to find a man of whom I have heard, who may be able to save her. Will you do that?'

'You seem to forget, Mr. Darkmore,' said Marland, with a rough kindliness of voice and manner, 'that your uncle is, in great probability, a dying man. If he dies there will be inquiries, an inquest; and, even if I wished to keep what I know secret, it would all come out, and I should only be very justly censured for my conduct. I should lose my position, and—'

'Curse your position!' I cried passionately. 'I am bargain-
ing for a woman's life. I promise you the sum of ten thou-
sand pounds—every penny of my own property—if you will grant my request!'

Hard lines gathered about Marland's face, and a spark was kindled in his steel-blue eyes.

'So that's the sort of chap you think I am, is it? No, sir, not all the money in Christendom would tempt me; but—I might do it out of regard for you. Only you should not speak of bribes.'

'What—' I began; but he cut me short.

'Wait! On two conditions I might be brought to do it. Promise me that you won't even try to communicate with Miss Hope before you go, that you won't engage in any plan
of helping her to get away, and I'll not only keep silent for three days, but see that Dr. Hasbrouck does the same, even if I have to lie to him by saying it will interfere with my plans as a detective if he lets out anything at all.'

'I promise everything!' I cried impetuously. 'And I ask your forgiveness most humbly for dreaming for an instant that you were to be bribed.'

'Then, I may tell you the one thing that looks somewhat favorable to your side. The will your uncle made yesterday is gone!'

'Well?' I queried, waiting to know more.

'Don't you see,' he asked, 'it would not be to Miss Hope's interest that the will should disappear?'

'Where was it?' I inquired mechanically.

'Sir Wilfrid and his solicitor were in the ingle-room, as I believe you call it. The will, when made, was allowed to lie for the time upon the writing-table, where I found it and took charge of it, together with one or two other papers. Last night I wrote to Sir Wilfrid's solicitor, hoping that he would find it convenient to call to-day, as I could not leave the house. He has just been, in response to my note. But when I opened the box in which I had placed the will, together with the letter found grasped in Sir Wilfrid's hand, both were gone. Someone in this house must have used a skeleton key.'

Even so small an admission from such a man was something to build upon. And I did build upon it, during the time which had to pass before I could leave Lorn Abbey on my self-appointed mission.

Even for Consuelo's sake, I could not go until I had seen Dr. Hasbrouck, and learned that there was hope for Uncle Wilfrid—before I had been allowed to bend over the bed of the man who had been to me as a father, vowing with his unconscious hand in mine to save the woman we both so dearly loved. Then I set off for London, meaning to start immediately for Paris.
I was too late for the night boat. But early next morning I left Charing Cross, and reached my destination in the afternoon. My one thought was to find M. Lepel, at 29, Rue de Lacheneur. He was the man who, according to Jonas Heckleberry, could give to the Woman in Grey 'a new life.' It did not matter that I was ignorant of what he would be able to do—how be able to save her. But I believed, because I wished to believe, that he could do so.

I got a fiacre, ordered the man to take me to the Rue de Lacheneur, and, somewhat to my surprise, found myself at length being driven through that portion of the city where, in days when the Revolution was undreamed of, stately carriages had set down fair freight before magnificent houses. Long ago, however, the tide of rank and fashion had ebbed away from the neighborhood, leaving it desolate, and every year more dilapidated.

It was before a huge, dark and shuttered mansion that my fiacre stopped. There was a high wall, and an imposing entrance. I knocked, and had so long to wait before my knock was answered, that I began to fear the house might be deserted. What if M. Lepel had moved away, and left no trace behind?

I rapped out another resounding summons, and at last I caught the sound of hurrying footsteps. There was the rattle of a chain and the slipping of a bolt, and the great door was thrown open by a respectable-looking man in livery—neat, but somewhat the worse for wear.

He stared a little at sight of me, as if visitors were not frequent at 29, Rue de Lacheneur, admitting that M. Lepel lived there, and was at present in the house, 'though most particularly engaged.'

I had come from England to see him, I said. And my business was urgent.

'Ah!' ejaculated the servant. 'Shall I tell my master that it is an intending patient?'

'If you like,' I assented, feeling that to do so would be politic in my present state of ignorance.
‘And the name?’

‘That I should prefer not to give. But you may tell M. Lepel that I come recommended by an old friend of his.’

‘Then, monsieur will wait? In the reception-room?’

I would wait, I said, but hoped that it need not be for long. Then I tipped the man with prudent magnificence, and was shown into a small, octagon-shaped room, off a wide hall.

There were mirrors let into the panels, and on every side I could see my own anxious, haggard face. The furniture was of ancient fashion, and had once been elegant.

I sat in one of the Louis Quatorze chairs, counting the moments, until at least three-quarters of an hour had gone. Then a door slammed in the distance, and presently footsteps passed along the hall.

The voice of the servant who had let me in spoke civilly in his native tongue. Another voice answered. Involuntarily I jumped to my feet. That voice I was sure I knew.

With a stride I was at the door, and had flung it open, just in time to obtain a three-quarters view of a man’s face, as the servant let him out. He held under one arm a small, neat parcel, wrapped in paper which apparently covered a box about a foot in length, and a few inches less in width.

Something he slipped into the Frenchman’s hand, and the glimpse I caught of the face showed me a satisfied half-smile. In an instant more the door had closed behind him, without his seeing me. But I had had time to ascertain that I had not been mistaken in believing I recognized the voice as that of Tom Gordon.

Struck with great wonder, I closed the door of the room softly, and sat down again in the chair which I had vacated.

Still a few moments passed, and I was left alone, but at the end of a quarter of an hour the man in livery appeared to say that his master awaited monsieur in his study.

My nerves twanged with excitement as I followed the servant to the end of the long hall.
CHAPTER XXVI.

WHAT I SAW IN THE CELLAR.

The room into which I was ushered was dusky with the 
tinted twilight of stained-glass windows.

At first, having come from the light, I could only see that 
a tall, dark figure rose and approached me. But in another 
moment the mingling red and amber gleams from one of the 
tall windows fell upon a head as white as snow. A crimson 
stain reflected from the colored glass lay in a slanting bar 
across the strange face, melting into the long white beard. 
It was as though a bloody finger had been drawn across the 
forehead to the chin on the opposite side—a gruesome effect, 
taken in conjunction with a pair of brilliant black eyes 
(glowing out from their deep hollows, under prominent 
white eyebrows), and a nose of which Mephistopheles need 
not have been ashamed.

He was an old man, nearer seventy than sixty I should 
have thought, and was unmistakably a Jew, though I should 
have set him down as being of Spanish extraction, rather 
than French, as the name Lepel suggested.

'Ah, monsieur is a stranger,' he said in French. 'I never 
forget a face. And yours I have not had the honor of seeing 
before. But my servant tells me you have been sent to me. 
By whom, may I be permitted to ask?'

'An Englishman, of the name of Jonas Heckleberry,' I 
replied.

M. Lepel's thin face expressed nothing but blankness, if
that could be. He shook his head, with its waving crown of snowy hair.

'The name is equally strange with your face, monsieur.'

I was surprised, and somewhat taken aback, at this. There was a growing lack of confidence in M. Lepel's air. I hardly knew what to say, but suddenly my mind presented me with a substitute.

'Mr. Heckleberry is an intimate friend of Mr. S. D. Warren's,' I hastily ejaculated, remembering the card I had found in the cedar cupboard, and which I had now with me in my pocket-book.

A light leaped up in the old man's eyes.

'Ah, Dr. Warren?'—spoken with a somewhat peculiar emphasis. 'He is, or was, a very good friend of mine. Of late I have heard nothing of him, but at one time he sent me numerous patients. You, no doubt, are one? Yes, it seems a pity to spoil that face, monsieur. I tell you frankly, I could not improve it.'

I stared at him blankly, then prudently dropped my eyes, that he might not see I did not understand his meaning.

'Mr. Warren mentioned to me, as a former acquaintance of yours, Miss Consuelo Hope,' I said dubiously. What—it suddenly struck me—should I do if he did not know the name?

But he did know it. His eyes told me that.

'I made a success in that case,' he said. 'You could scarcely wish a better proof of my skill before having it tried upon yourself.'

Somehow my flesh began to creep. There was a curious familiarity in his manner now. He eyed me over, dwelling on each feature with a sort of unctuous pleasure. A prescientiment that I had come here for evil, and not for good, was heavy upon me.

'I have invariably made it a rule to insist upon the complete confidence of my patients; M. Lepel went on, with a smile. 'Why not? If their fate is thus placed in my hands, is
not my fortune equally in theirs? And you, monsieur? What is the need which has brought you to me, mentioning a name I have already heard to-day—and for the first time in years?'

In an instant knowledge flashed upon me of what he meant. Tom Gordon had come to him on some errand connected with Consuelo Hope. Had he come as a friend and helper, or had jealousy of me, with her, converted him into a dangerous enemy?

'The man who left you a few minutes ago—I know him,' I stammered. 'He—spoke to you of Miss Hope?'

M. Lepel eyed me narrowly.

'If I allowed myself to converse with you on the affairs of others, would you not naturally conclude that I might do the same with yours, when your back was turned?'

'I asked,' I began to stammer, 'because I have come to you partly on the same errand. There is something you can do for Miss Hope.'

'Yet the question which seems to me more pertinent is, what can I do for you, monsieur? And, by the way, you have as yet forgotten to confide to me your name.'

'It is Terence Darkmore. I—'

'Ah! I regret my ignorance of the English aristocracy, to which I can plainly see that you belong. The name suggests nothing. Tell me frankly, have you had the misfortune to spill blood—do you stand in danger from the law? If so, you have not been deceived when you were told to come to M. Lepel. I, and I alone in the world, I may say without egotism, am able to give you—a new life.'

He had used the very words which had fallen from Heckleberry's lips. What was this mystery into which I was blundering unawares?

'It is for her, not for myself, that I beg your good office,' I exclaimed. 'For Miss Hope I want the new life of which you speak.'

'Ah! She would come to me again?'

'Her friends ask your aid for her. She is in great trouble.
I have been told that you can help her—save her, if you will. I have come to you to learn how.'

'In trouble once more?' he echoed. 'Ah, singular misfortune! Never yet have I undertaken a case of the kind twice. Yet, why not? why not? I have little doubt that it could be done, and done successfully. Though it would be more difficult than before. And the fee—always in advance, as my good friend the English doctor has, perhaps, been thoughtful enough to tell you—must be proportionately greater.'

'I confess I do not understand you,' I said desperately. 'I was informed that you knew that which could save Miss Hope from a trouble which has overshadowed her life, and which has become darker than ever during the past few days. If this is true I will pay you what you ask.'

'Two thousand pounds was my previous fee. My lips are now closed, my hands powerless unless I receive double that sum, and one thousand more. I have spoken. And I await your decision. Consult your friendship for the lady and—the sum you may have at your disposal.'

'You swear to me that your knowledge can help her—can clear her fair fame?'

'It can do everything for her. But, before we go a step farther, the money must be paid. Otherwise, how could I be sure that you were not some agent of the police, wishing to ruin mademoiselle—and me? A police spy would not pay me five thousand pounds. I shall consider the lady's interest—and my own—sufficiently safe when I have received that sum—not before.'

My own property, left me by my mother, was small—not above ten thousand pounds, as I had mentioned to Marland, the detective. I had been ready to make it all over to him in the shape of a bribe, which he had refused. I was equally ready to bestow half—or all, if need be—upon M. Lepel, for the information he evidently did not intend I should have for nothing. But how to obtain it, that it might be
paid down immediately, and I be put in possession of facts necessary to serve Consuelo, was the question. According to Uncle Wilfrid’s wish, none of the money had ever been spent, and since my early childhood the poor little sum had lain idle, waiting for a ‘rainy day.’ Now that rainy day had come, and I wanted the money without any delay.

I thought the matter over for a few moments, as M. Lепel seemed to expect me to do, and then, telling him that I had been unprepared for the demand, suggested I might be able to borrow the sum in question from a friend of my uncle’s, who was at the head of a well-known bank in Paris.

M. Lепel knew the name, and thought the plan feasible, announcing that in his opinion I should lose no time in seeing the gentleman, as these matters often took some little time to arrange. He seemed, however, decidedly uneasy at allowing me to leave his presence, and laughingly hinted that I might as well allow him to accompany me in his own carriage, of which he would be glad to offer me the use.

He distrusted me, it was plain to see, and was anxious to keep his eye upon me until the promised sum should be in his hands.

The carriage, which was soon ready, was a coupé, and my companion leaned back against the cushions in such a manner that he could not easily be seen by passers-by.

‘You will do me the favor not to mention my name to your friend the banker,’ he said. And I had my own reasons for assenting.

I had dined more than once at the house of M. Martin with Uncle Wilfrid, and he had returned our visits in Portman Square, so that he knew me very well, and readily consented to lend me the sum of five thousand pounds until the end of the week, when I suggested repaying it.

The transaction took some time, however, and it was late in the afternoon when I drove back with M. Lепel to the house in the Rue de Lacheneur.

‘At last,’ he said, with an air of bonhomie, I will throw off
caution. You shall go with me into my private laboratory—into that room where much of my great work has been done.'

He stood courteously aside at the door of the so-called study to let me pass in first. Then, when I had obediently done so, he followed, and, going straight to a handsome bookcase which covered one side of the wall, he removed two or three volumes, and pressed his hand upon some object at the back invisible to me.

The whole thing instantly swung forward, as though it had been a door, and a dark, square alcove was revealed.

With a smile of pleasure at my surprise, M. Lepel's old face wrinkled up, as he busied himself in lighting a white shaded lamp.

'Go on,' he said. 'Have no hesitation. We must take the precaution of shutting ourselves in, as one can never be too careful. One never knows at what moment one's enemies—and we all have enemies—may seek to pounce upon us.'

Without another word I walked into the alcove. The old man followed, holding the lamp, and the bookcase was carefully pulled into place after us. He glanced at me, smiling and waving me forward, and I saw that we stood at the top of a narrow stone stairway that wound downward, the last steps hidden in darkness, which the lamplight did not penetrate.

'You have courage!' exclaimed M. Lepel approvingly. 'You say to yourself, "I do not know this old fellow. He may be planning to lead me down to some secluded spot, where my cries cannot be heard, and murder me for the money which he knows I have with me, without giving himself the trouble of imparting to me the secret." But you say also to yourself, "I am young and strong; he is old and feeble. I need have no fear of anything that he may try to do." Have I not read your thoughts aright, M. Darkmore?'

'I must confess that some such fancy did flit through my brain, only to be dismissed immediately.'

'Ah! I am a wizard—that is indeed the name by which I
am known among those whom I have helped. Shall I go first down the stairs, that you may feel confident I have no intention of beating in the back of your head?"

He laughed eerily as he spoke, and I followed suit. But I did not avail myself of his offer. I went down the flight of steps until I reached a heavy iron door set deeply into a brick wall.

M. Lepel took from a chain which was looped across his waistcoat a small key, which scarcely looked adequate to unlocking so formidable a portal. But it turned easily in the lock, the old man gave a slight push, and noiselessly the door opened.

'This room,' said my companion, 'if the walls could speak, would tell more secrets, and darker ones, perhaps, than those of the Inquisition in the country of my ancestors.'

His words seemed to take for granted the fact that I understood matters which were in reality dark to me—matters upon which a display of ignorance on my part might seal his lips, despite the money which was about to change hands.

'This is my bank,' he went on, 'as well as my surgery, my laboratory, my sanctum sanctorum—a secure one, too, as no one knows the way to it but myself and one servant, while even he would not be able to open my safe.'

I took out the money which I had received from M. Martin, and laid it on the table, and the old man's yellow and withered hands curved round the pile like avaricious claws. He took up the notes, counted them over, and, busying himself for a moment in the farther end of the room, presently returned without them. I concluded that he had, in that short space, deposited them in the mysterious safe.

He came close to me, and peered up into my face.

'How much do you know of what I have already done for Mdlle. Hope?' he questioned.

'It is partly that which I wish to know,' I hesitated, 'that I may assure myself you are able to help her again.'
'I am growing old,' he said, with apparent irrelevance. 'My hand is less steady, my eyes less clear. Still, I shall be equal to this one ordeal. It shall be the last. Already I have made arrangements to retire on the fortune which I have earned with the most incredible industry. Your fee, my dear M. Darkmore, is in all probability the last I shall ever accept. Had you offered it to me to betray an old client, rather than to save, I must have refused it, welcome addition as it is to my hoard. But it is easy to guess that the secrets of Mdlle. Hope are safe with you. To understand what I am able to do for her in the future, you must know exactly what I have accomplished for her in the past. It seems to be her good fortune to make devoted friends. In the past she had one who unlocked my doors for her with a golden key. And now you step forward in another hour of need. If you will come with me, I will show you mademoiselle under two phases.'

He smiled with some strange meaning. Another key was taken from the chain he wore, and, pushing aside a curtain which I had fancied might conceal a cupboard, or set of shelves, he discovered a low door.

'Bring the lamp, if you please,' he said. 'We have no electric light here. This, you will say, is the strangest cellar which ever was dug under the earth. I call it my picture-gallery—my mausoleum—what you will.'

He opened the door, and I bent down to follow him into the dark space which yawned mysteriously beyond. The flame of the lamp flickered, and I drew into my lungs air as damp, as coldly suggestive of death, as that of a vault.

We were standing, having descended a step or two from our former level, in a species of hall, with rows of closed doors on either side. A bunch of large brass keys hung in an inconspicuous niche in the wall; and I noticed, as M. Lepel released them from the hook upon which they had been suspended, that to each key was attached a label, with writing upon it in red ink.
'Take them. See for yourself how well this place guards its secrets,' he said.

The writing was all in cipher.

'Look further,' he went on. And his lean hand pointed upward to the first door. Above it was a slab of white wood, on which were inscribed some cabalistic characters in red ink.

'Each key knows its own door, and could tell a history, if it would.'

He went on slowly, until he had nearly reached the end of the hall. I could then see that two others, apparently exactly like that in which we stood, branched out, one on each side, like the extended arms of a capital T.

Before a door opposite to the spot at which he had paused, he got on tiptoe, and carefully read the cipher at the top.

'Study that tablet,' he said, 'and see if it can pick out the key which unlocks the particular secret you have bought from me. And remember, as you do so, that it is but one out of a thousand.'

With a curious sensation of choking, I examined the labels, and finally selected one which matched the characters above the door.

'Right,' said M. Lepel approvingly. 'I beg that you will unlock it yourself.'

Had I dreamed what the irony of Fate had appointed me to do, I would have thrust my hand into the fire sooner than insert the key in the hole which fitted it. But I did not know.

The door opened, and the lamplight showed me three shelves. On each lay one box, resembling exactly in size and shape the parcel which Tom Gordon had carried out of the house a few hours before. On the front of each box was pasted a label, inscribed with red lettering and figures, like those which were attached to the doors and keys.

'Beyond the chrysalis!' exclaimed M. Lepel. 'Behind the door directly opposite lies the butterfly. Open it, open it!'
Can you not see, monsieur, by the likeness between the labels which is the key that fits?"

With a scarcely controlled impatience he took the bunch of keys from my hand, almost instantly throwing open the door.

Within were three shelves and three boxes, exactly resembling, so far as I could see, those in the niche on the opposite side.

So simple, so trivial, the arrangement looked, and yet I knew that I stood on the brink of some strange, perhaps terrible, discovery. I dreaded, yet longed for, the man’s next words.

He, too, was excited now, perhaps with the prospect of displaying his own boasted skill. With a hand that trembled he reached up and brought down from the top shelf of the first alcove we had opened the box which rested there.

‘Open it yourself, and see the ghost of a dead past,’ he commanded.

Was it the dank air of the vault or the chill of an unknown fear which had turned me cold as ice?

The box was of unpainted wood. I raised the lid, and pushing aside a linen napkin, I saw what appeared in the uncertain light to be the face of a dead woman.

I drew in my breath sharply. After all, it was but a plaster cast—a species of death mask.

The features were those of a young girl. In profile, they looked curiously familiar, but when the full face was seen the haunting likeness disappeared. The eyebrows, which were extremely heavy, and strongly marked, almost met above the bridge of the delicate Greek nose. The cheeks were rather too full for perfect symmetry, and so was the rounded chin.

‘Look inside,’ said M. Lepel eagerly.

I lifted the plaster cast from the box, and saw coiled underneath a lock of wavy auburn hair. The light from the lamp, which my companion now held, fell upon it, and brightened it to the hue of burnished copper.
'Is that what you meant?' I asked.

'No, no!'—impatiently. 'Inside the mask.'

I turned the thing over, and found in the hollow under the forehead a square piece of paper pasted firmly in.

'Forence Haynes,' I read aloud, 'tried and condemned for murder. Recommended to me by M. le Docteur Varren, medical attendant of the prison. Brought to me on July 25th, 1892, by M. Thomas Gordon. Discharged after treatment, September 1st, 1892.'

I stared at the old man, whose brilliant eyes flashed at me out of the dimness.

'Forence Haynes, the murderess!' I repeated. 'Impossible! You have been wilfully deceived. She could never have been here. She died in prison before the date you have written down as that of her coming to you. July 11th— I remember well seeing it upon the tombstone which marks her grave.'

M. Lepel laughed.

'Her grave! Since you know where it is to be found, I advise you to have it opened. This'—pointing at the box I held—'is the grave of Florence Haynes, the murderess. Behold her resurrection!'

With a step quick and springy as that of a young man, he snatched the box from the top shelf of the niche opposite the one already rifled, and flung up the lid.

'See! the result of my handiwork—M. Paul Lepel, whose benevolent skill has rescued so many unhappy mortals from the vengeance of society.'

Roughly he had torn away the linen, and, in doing so, had pulled from underneath a curl of hair, pale, yet glistening as moonlight. He held the box close to my eyes, and I saw a presentiment of the perfect features of Consuelo Hope.

It was but the ghostly image of her loveliness, and yet— it was the image of none other than herself. 'I stared at the two white faces, with the half-peaceful, half-mocking smile upon their lips, and sickened with horror and utter dark
bewilderment. Then a feeling of rage against the old man seemed to sweep like a wind across my naked soul.

‘You cursed villain!’ I uttered, between set teeth. ‘What monstrous lie are you trying to force upon me?’

He shrugged his bent shoulders, though I believe that in his heart he was afraid.

‘You and I must have been playing at cross-purposes all this time,’ he said, ‘if you did not know from the start that Mdlle. Florence Haynes and Mdlle. Consulo Hope were one.’

I staggered back a step or two against the wall, and stood there, facing him, with an ebbing defiance in my eyes. The calmness of one who speaks the truth, and is in a position to prove every assertion he means to make, was in M. Lepel’s voice and face. Yet I held out against it.

‘I know that you are lying,’ I said brutally. ‘I tell you Florence Haynes died in prison. There could have been no possible mistake.’

‘Ah, could there not have been?’ he echoed. ‘You do not know what money can do. I know the whole history, and can tell it you. I read the English papers, and my brain is of the kind that pieces together scraps of evidence as rapidly as lightning flashes across the sky. I suspected all, and they were obliged to satisfy me by placing fullest confidence in me before I would undertake the case. Will you hear the story from me, and believe, in spite of yourself?’

‘I will hear your story—yes,’ I answered sullenly, ‘but only that I may be the more fully prepared to refute it.’

‘Before I begin to speak,’ said M. Lepel, ‘let me bring to your notice certain points of resemblance between these two plaster masks, and explain the difference, for which I am responsible. Come, we will return to the laboratory. There is not the slightest danger that we shall be disturbed.’

I followed him mechanically, and watched him as he set down on the long table the two boxes which contained the masks, placing them under the full, white glare of the electric light.
‘Now!’ the old man exclaimed, beckoning me to one of the two chairs he had drawn up. ‘Observe these heavy brows, which fairly meet across the eyes of Mdlle. Haynes,’ he said, with the air of a professor demonstrating some knotty problem before a class. ‘With an electrical process I destroyed all that was superfluous, leaving only the beautiful and perfect arch you find upon the second face. The nose I left unchanged. As you see, it is the same in both masks. The hair of Mdlle. Haynes came to a bewitching point in the middle of the forehead. This I was obliged to alter by the same method in which I had remade the brows. Mdlle. Haynes, young as she was, was a woman of a fine build, magnificent rather than slender, her face full, her chin oversrounded in its proportions. I have, after a long course of experiments on the smaller animals, been enabled to prepare an elixir which, taken in connection with the food, permanently reduces the size without danger to the patient. This I administered to Mdlle. Haynes in the tedious process of transformation into Mdlle. Consuelo Hope. Tall as she is, she is a sylph, rather than a Juno, and the outline of her face is oval, not round. The formation of the mouth had now to be changed. Beautiful as it originally was, it would not have been prudent to let it remain unaltered. I therefore shortened the upper lip by a tightening of the muscle—a painful operation, but how extraordinarily successful you may judge. It was then essential to give another color to the hair of mademoiselle. I do not deal in vulgar dyes and bleaches. Such expedients are beneath my art. By a certain application to the roots of the hair, persevered in for some weeks, the coloring matter is not destroyed, but altered, and, without any future applications, the tint of the hair is forever changed. It is easier to darken than to lighten, by this process, but I preferred the latter, as locks of palest gold would be a more perfect frame for a face so exquisite as was Mdlle. Hope’s. This done, I added a pair of incomparable dimples, one in the chin, the other in the cheek, and, presto!
my work was complete. Sometimes I have been desolated by the necessity for exchanging beauty for ugliness. But in this instance, great as were the difficulties, I could not bring myself to such desecration. Mdllle. Florence Haynes was a goddess of loveliness. When she came to me she was a Juno; when she left my hands she was a Venus. Have you followed my words, M. Darkmore, by examining each curve, each line of the two masks? Do you admit the indubitable nature of my proofs?'

I was silent. The two white, smiling faces spoke for themselves. Now that they lay before me, side by side, and I could compare one with another, line for line, it was impossible to doubt. The features were those of the same woman. Altered as they were—so skilfully altered that the 'butterfly,' as M. Lepel had called the second, might have passed unrecognized by those who had known her intimately when in the 'chrysalis' form—there was no room to doubt the identity of the two.

There was but one hope left to which I might cling.

'You have proved to me that these two masks represent the same woman. I cannot deny that you have done that. But the question still remains, what woman is she? How do I know that the former is the likeness of Florence Haynes?'

Even as I so questioned, however, I remembered the description given me by the waiter at the Martenhead inn of the girl as she had appeared seven years ago. He had spoken of the auburn hair which fell over her shoulders, of the heavy brows which met across her eyes, of her height, and the mature fulness of her rounded figure. The two descriptions agreed with fatal accuracy.

I remembered, also, Haynes-Haviland's strange manner on his first meeting with the Woman in Grey. Paula's words of introduction had shown me that the man expected to meet someone whom he had seen before, and yet it had been evident that he had failed to recognize her.

Now, if this man's story were true, the mystery was clear.
There, too, was the secret of the pearls which covered one of her fair hands—the secret that Haynes-Haviland had tried to wrest from her—and Paula, also, to her own bitter cost.

*The hand of Florence Haynes had been bitten by her victim to the bone!*

As these recollections and suspicions rushed over me, mingling in one turgid stream, I remembered as well—though I would fain have put it from my mind—the strange knowledge of the clock's mechanism, and the plan of the house at Lorn Abbey which the Woman in Grey had shown, but had never explained; the key to the cupboard in the tower room, which she had laid there, lightly hidden under a flower, as though meant for me to find; her veiled, smiling hints regarding the Amory Catechism and the family secret which it might unlock; the parchment chart; Miss Traill's anxiety on the night of the ball, when it became necessary for the Woman in Grey to face Haynes-Haviland as though meeting a stranger; the prison dress hanging in the cedar cupboard at the Spider Farm; Consuelo’s mysterious visit there and her indebtedness to the Heckleberrys; their power to terrify and blackmail her, despite her wonderful presence of mind and indomitable courage. How vividly I could now recall the evil light in Jonas Heckleberry’s eyes as he lay at the mercy of his own revolver in my hands, and directed me to M. Lepel as the one man who could save the Woman in Grey!

What a revenge he had given himself! How he must have exulted in the thought that—though I had closed his own mouth, and rendered him powerless to do her further injury, for fear of consequences to himself—he had sent me to learn those very secrets of her past which she would gladly have died to conceal!

M. Lepel was answering the question I had asked, but there seemed to be a swirling of loud waters in my ears, and I had to ask him to repeat what he had said.

‘I say that if you will listen to the story of which I spoke,
you will know that that face is Florence Haynes's. And the preface to the story—which you must hear if you would understand all—is that for the past thirty years I have spent my life in saving criminals from the consequences of their crimes. Men and women have heard of me, and have come to me from the far ends of the earth. They have entered these doors, and they have not gone forth again until I have given them another set of features with which to face the world. It is a profession full of danger. But my secrets have been well guarded, and shall I tell you why? Because of such masks as these, which I never destroy, not even at the death of the person whose past and present they represent, lest he may have whispered his story to some surviving relative. Thus, though my secret is held by many, their secrets are mine as well, and proof of all that I have ever done for them is in my hands. Should a man be tempted to sell me, he dare not yield, knowing the contents of these vaults of mine—knowing that I keep his record here. The moment a refugee from justice comes to me—be he Russian, English, German, or French: for I have had those of every nation under the sun—a model is made of his face as it then appears. Before he leaves me his new features are moulded, and the record placed with both. I may say to you, without boasting, that scarcely a criminal has escaped punishment, within the past quarter-century, that I have not helped to disappear.

‘One night, more than two years ago, an Englishman came to me—M. Thomas Gordon. I told you I read the English papers, and there is no criminal case of note which I have not cut out and pasted in my book. I remembered M. Gordon’s name in connection with the trial of an English girl for the murder of an old woman who had adopted her. I remembered all—the name of the girl, the description of her face and form, the circumstances of the crime, and the commutation of the sentence to imprisonment for life. M. Gordon introduced himself. He had been recommended to me by a
Dr. Varren. "Ah!" said I to myself, "Dr. Varren is physician at the prison where the beautiful girl you defended is confined. You were active in obtaining a revision of the evidence. You are interested in her still." And Dr. Varren had sent more than one patient to me. I will not say that I have not had him under my hands in years gone by. He has now been discharged from the prison, and has fallen in the world, because of some small peccadilloes, and he has sent me no more patients of late. But that is neither here nor there in my narrative. M. Gordon solicited my good offices for a woman. What could I do for her, if it could be contrived that she should be safely smuggled over from England, and placed in my establishment? I could do everything, I said. Accordingly it was arranged. She was to be brought to me within a fortnight. M. Gordon went away, and three days later I read of the death, in prison, of the murderess he had so stoutly defended. I read all, and thought much. She had died in exceptionally warm weather. For that reason, and because of the nature of the illness from which Dr. Varren alleged she had been suffering, a speedy burial was recommended. Great pressure was brought to bear upon the authorities for permission to have the body removed from prison and buried elsewhere. In some way this permission was obtained—through M. Thomas Gordon, mark you that! A week or ten days after, my new patient came to me—a tall, splendidly handsome girl, with heavy eyebrows and auburn hair. It was the face I had seen photographed in an English paper as that of the murderess. She was ill, scarcely able to travel. She had been resting somewhere, in hiding, for a week. The copper-colored hair was cut short, but while she was with me it grew out to the length you see coiled under the mask of Florence Haynes.

'Before I undertook the case I told what I suspected, and demanded to know the truth. As I said, I have always insisted upon the fullest confidence from my patients. And Florence Haynes made confession. She told me how, when
all hope of release was over, it was planned by M. Gordon that she should escape. Years went by, but the right time never arrived, until at last there appeared a nurse in the prison hospital, recommended by Dr. Varren, who came from the same part of the country that she did. Bribed by M. Gordon, these two consented to work together. Mdlle. Haynes feigned illness, and was brought into the hospital. It was then that M. Gordon travelled to Paris to consult with me. Meanwhile a potent drug was administered to the feigning sufferer. I know it well, and am one of the few men who have used it in various emergencies. It is an extract from an Indian herb called granil. If exactly the right proportion is taken, a death-like sleep of forty-eight or fifty hours is induced. But the slightest error in judgment, or a delicacy of constitution, hitherto unsuspected, perhaps, and the dose becomes fatal. Yet this brave woman took the risk. And the plot, thanks to the connivance of doctor and nurse—who were well paid—was successful. Twice during her stay with me Mdlle. Haynes was visited by M. Gordon, who came to plan for her future welfare. On both occasions they saw each other only in my presence. I learned that mademoiselle would proceed to America, where she was to have the best of introductions. The prison nurse, under a changed name, perhaps disguised, was to accompany her as companion. And it was M. Gordon himself who chose the name which was to belong to his protégée’s new personality. She was born again as Consuelo Hope—words of fortunate significance, it was believed—and went out from this house beautiful as an angel, to make a world yet untried fall worshipping at her feet. When you came to me—when I demanded of you the sum of five thousand pounds—I under-stood that the lady had again been so unhappy as to offend against the law; that you wished her to fly to me, and be re-created under my hands. Have I made a mistake, M. Darkmore, in supposing this?'

I did not answer at first. I seemed bound hand and foot,
even tongue-tied, by some devil's spell. I had lost my ideal. At last I believed in her guilt. Consuelo Hope, an angel of light and injured innocence, no longer existed for me.

I had fought against conviction. I had clung to my belief in her when all had seemed dark—when proof upon proof had protested her guilt. It was at last easy to understand why she had sought, at all hazards, to obtain the footing of adopted daughter in my uncle's house.

It was to revenge herself upon him for her long imprisonment. This had been the 'mission' of which she had hinted more than once with veiled allusions. I might have suspected it from the first, ever since the moment when she knelt at Florence Haynes's grave.

And she had called upon me to help her fulfil it—to help her with my uncle's undoing! She had made me tell her the story of the murderess, professing not to know it, questioning me as to Uncle Wilfrid's share in the matter, as though to fan the flame of her secret desire for revenge.

And revenge she had had. She had won Sir Wilfrid Amory's deepest, most sacred affections. And she had tried to kill him at the last.

Yes, I believed even that of her now. And with the entering in of that terrible conviction I felt as though mine were a lost soul. I think that, had there been a weapon close at hand, I was mad enough, despairing enough, to have plunged it into my own heart.

I do not know what I actually did. But I was roused by M. Lepel's hand upon my shoulder. I drew away from the touch of it, and the action brought me to myself.

'Come, come, M. Darkmore!' he was exclaiming. 'If you did not come here to ask me to do as I have done before for Mdlle. Hope, what was it that you wanted of me?'

'Fool that I was!' I cried. 'I hoped you knew that about her which could prove her innocence in the past. I believed that I had been sent to you for that. But, instead, it was meant that I should learn the secret you have told me.'
The old man shrugged his shoulders, and threw out his thin, yellow hands in a gesture of negation.

'Ah, if that was what you wanted!' he sighed. 'I am truly desolated, monsieur; but I am the last man in the world to whom you should have come, if you wished to whiten the past of Mdlle. Hope. Of course, they all say to me that they are innocent. According to what I hear from their own mouths, I have never yet had a justly accused criminal under my roof. Ah, you have paid dear for your information with five thousand pounds! Yet I cannot offer the money back again. I have placed myself unwittingly in your power, and I have faithfully performed my part.'

With arms folded, I walked up and down like a caged animal in the horrible room, whose every article of furniture told the story of the man's hateful associations.

I paused at length before the table, and looked down again at the two white faces that sleepily smiled up at me.

'Those masks,' I said slowly, 'with the labels you have pasted upon them, form the only proof you hold against the —lady known to the world as Consuelo Hope?'

'My only proofs,' he returned, moving a step nearer, as though to protect his property. 'But, in case I ever needed to use them, are they not a host in themselves?'

'Changed as she is,' I went on chokingly, 'it would be difficult, even were she suspected, to identify her beyond doubt as Florence Haynes.'

I had spoken more to myself than to him, but he replied:

'It would indeed be difficult—impossible, perhaps.'

With a sudden rush, I pushed past him, and, snatching up the masks, tore off the slips of writing pasted underneath, and dashed the plaster images upon the tiled floor. They broke into a hundred pieces, and the noise of the crash mingled with the old man's scream of rage.

'Dastard! Traitor!' he cried. 'You wish to ruin me. You would tell my secret to the world, and you would leave me no remedy against the evil. Weak as I am, I will make you
suffer for this, if we have to die here in this cellar together, you and I.'

He darted to the other side of the room, and sprang toward me with a surgical knife in his hand. But I caught his wrist and pinioned it in a grip which held him helpless as a child.

'I give you my word that I do not mean to betray you,' I said. 'But I have this day paid to you the sum of five thousand pounds, and I consider that I have fairly bought for my own those two masks that lie shattered there.'

I took the knife from him, and, scorning any attempt at self-defence against such an antagonist, tossed it on to the table, as I freed his arm from my grasp.

His eyes flashed with anger at the insult he considered that he had received, but for a moment he did not trust himself to speak.

Presently, however, he flung up his head, and, with a short, angry laugh, stepped feebly to the door which led upstairs, and flung it open in my face.

'You are free to go, monsieur,' he said. 'After all, even though you have come to me as a spy, I have no need to fear you. I have your five thousand pounds. But if you consider these broken things a purchase, I fear you will still think you have paid dearly for the privilege of smashing them. As it happens, I made, at the order of M. Gordon, a pair of duplicates, which he carried away with him to-day.'
CHAPTER XXVII.

AT TOM GORDON'S CHAMBERS.

It struck upon me with a sense of incongruity, on leaving the house of M. Lepel, to find that it was not yet night.

It was like a blow in the face to go out into the street and find that the yellow sunset lingered in the west. I could not think, I could plan nothing for the future.

I walked on aimlessly for a time, with the gay rattle of Paris all about me, and then, suddenly remembering that I must catch the night boat, I hailed a fiacre.

It was not until after midnight, when the bright flashing lights of Calais glittered far behind me across a dark gulf of swelling waters, that I began to formulate my thoughts.

But as the fresh night winds cooled the fever in my veins, the realization came to me that some way of saving Consuelo must be found. Guilty as I believed her, I was as anxious to shield her as of old.

Yet how to do so was the question.

Something, at least, of her past career had been made known to my uncle in a letter. He had read there, and Marland had read later, that she had suffered a term of imprisonment for crime.

Therefore, it was certain that her secret had not been as safely buried in that lonely grave by the moatside as she had trusted.

If she could only escape at once, and be sent far away!

It might be managed, even though I had to break my
promise to the detective. But the thought of Tom Gordon's late mysterious visit to M. Lepel, and his order for replicas of the two masks, disturbed me greatly.

He was mad with jealousy of me, I knew. He was a man of brilliant talent, audacious, and as unscrupulous in gaining his own ends as he was bold.

It was impossible to guess what he might intend to do with the two masks, whose silent lips revealed Consuelo's secret; but I was strongly impressed with the idea that he meant to threaten her.

It would be cruel, unmanly to do this; but I thought that Tom Gordon, in a rage of baffled love, might be capable of being both.

There seemed little hope that I should be able to influence him; and yet, knowing the rugged nobility which lay latent in his nature, I did think that by frankly confiding in him I might be able to accomplish something.

It was too early when I arrived in London to go to his chambers in the Temple, and the hour of nine was booming out from the tongue of the clock when my cab turned in under the arch.

Gordon lived in Pump Court, and his chambers were up two pairs of stairs. His private rooms were there, as well as his offices, which were on the floor below.

As I went into the hall, a bent old man, who had been studying the names of the occupants of the building, stood aside to let me pass. I had scarcely a glimpse of the face under the wide-rimmed, old-fashioned hat; but I saw that a furtive glance was cast at me from behind a pair of convex glasses which had the effect of distorting the pupils to an enormous size.

I passed the door on which Gordon's name was painted, and went up to that on which a visiting-card was fastened.

I rapped, and waited.

There was a sound within; but my knock was not answered. Footsteps moved across the floor, and I heard a
whisper. Then silence fell, and, after a decorous interval, I applied my knuckles to the panel once again.

A door shut somewhere within, and steps approached, walking on an uncarpeted floor. A key turned in the lock, and in an instant more Tom Gordon himself stood before me.

He gave no start of surprise; but, though he controlled his face well, I saw by the quick frown in which his heavy eyebrows met that he was both astonished and displeased at seeing me.

Gordon was noted for the eccentricity of his ways and dress, and I fancy he did not dislike the notoriety brought upon him by his oddities.

He was clad now in a rough shooting-jacket, thrown on over a flannel shirt, above the low collar of which his great, muscular throat rose like a column of bronze.

He bade me good-morning shortly, but did not follow his greeting with an invitation to come in, and I was obliged to inform him that I had journeyed to town purposely to discuss with him a matter of importance before he bade me enter.

The room in which I found myself was wonderfully characteristic of the man.

The floor, thick with dust, was spread here and there with magnificent Turkish rugs. The morning sun streamed through the deep-set curtainless windows, unmercifully vulgarizing the sordid breakfast untidily set forth in exquisite china upon a soiled and threadbare tablecloth.

'Will you breakfast with me, Darkmore?' gruffly asked the occupant of the queer apartment. 'I'm my own cook. I can't bear a smug servant about me, smashing my royal Worcester. There's a rash of bacon and an egg to spare.'

I assured him that I had already breakfasted, and it was true that I had drunk a cup of coffee.

'Then, you'll excuse me if I sit down and begin to eat,' he said.
I knew that this was but an excuse to appear indifferent to my errand.

'You can talk, you know,' he went on. 'I shall listen all the better for a chance to stay my hunger.'

It was difficult to know how best to broach the subject which lay upon my mind, and I did not speak until he had exclaimed impatiently:

'Well? Out with it, Darkmore.'

How I told it all I scarcely know. But in a moment more I had plunged headlong into an account of my dealings with the Heckleberries, and my quest of M. Lepel.

I had hardly begun before he had forgotten his breakfast, and was up, facing me with a dogged look, and eyes that blazed under the bent and shaggy brows.

'So you know everything at last!' he ejaculated. 'Perhaps it is as well. Now we can talk fearlessly together, you and I.'

There was something ominous in his tone, and in his set face.

'That is what I want,' I said. 'Yes, I know everything. I even know that you were in the Rue de Lacheneur yesterday. I know what you came for, and what you took away.'

'Ah!' His eyes emitted a sudden flash. 'You are well informed. Do you also know what I have done with the articles I obtained?'

I was startled from my forced calm.

'What!' I cried. 'Is the thing already done?'

'Yes. And it is you she has to thank for such pain as I have given her.'

'I? What do you mean?'

'You stole her from me. She was mine by right. She would have added love to gratitude in time, if it had not been for you. I must have been mad to let her carry out her whim of getting into Sir Wilfrid Amory's house. I could have stopped it all in the beginning, if I had not been such a blind fool. I never thought of you, with your damned handsome face and your giant's body, that women love. You
did not know, perhaps, that the news of her engagement to you had already reached me, and I swore an oath that, come what might, you should not have her. I sent her those masks—sent them without a word. I knew, if I did that, what would happen then.'

'What did happen?' I stammered.

He started, and gave an odd look round the room.

'It was sufficient to tell you that what I expected came to pass. And now the time has arrived for a test. We shall see which can love a woman better, you or I.'

He stopped and stood glaring at me, with his splendid, grizzled head lowered like that of an angry bull.

'I swore an oath, I told you, that you should not have this woman,' he went on. 'But now I break it to give you a free choice. Are you willing to make her your wife, knowing what she is?'

'No,' I said. 'I love her still. I would give my life to save her. But my hope of happiness with her has been a dream.'

'What! Because she has stained her hands with blood you throw her off from you?'

'Throw her off!' I echoed passionately. 'I would go to prison for her, I would hang for her! But the Consuelo Hope I knew is dead to me.'

As my voice fell into silence brokenly, there was a sound in the next room, and I would have started toward the shut door, had not Gordon put out his arm to hold me back.

'Don't be afraid of eavesdroppers,' he said. 'It's only my dog in there—the one friend I've got on earth. I expected you to speak as you have done,' he went on. 'But listen to me. You and I are different. I would take her if she were ten times a murderess. I would take her with the red juice of human life wet on her hands, and I would wipe it off with kisses. Say, which of us two loves her the more truly now?'

'I have, and do!' I passionately protested. 'The love of which you speak is that which a savage or a brute would feel for his mate.'
Scarcely had the words left my lips, when the door of the
inner room opened, and Consuelo stood on the threshold.

A billowy mass of pale yellow hair, uncoiling as she fell,
rippled over the dark-stained wood of the floor. The sun-
light from the window touched it, and brightened its waves
till they glittered like spun gold.

The dove-colored travelling hat, with its curled, softly
drooping feathers, had half fallen off; but, though the heavy
veil still clung about the face, I needed not to see the
features. I knew that this early-morning visitor of Tom
Gordon's was none other than the Woman in Grey.

Involuntarily I released him from the grip with which I
had pinioned his arms, and, springing to the fallen figure,
would have raised it, had not Gordon intervened.

'Stand back!' he cried, in such a voice that in spite of
myself I paused. 'By your own words you have given her
to me, and I alone have the right to touch her now.'

I stood rigid, watching him as he lifted her, his very
tenderness tearing at my heart-strings.

Was it true, after all, as he had said, that his love was
greater than mine?

I could almost think so, while I looked, through a ruddy
mist, at the pale, perfect face turned up to the light of the
window, as Gordon softly placed her on the sofa underneath.

The sunshine beat down upon it, but found no fault. It
was not the perfection of the girl's great beauty that held
my eyes, and struck a pang of despair into my soul. It was
the exquisite purity of the face, its extreme nobility of
expression, that stabbed me with the dagger of remorse.

She had fallen on her temple, and blood slowly oozed from
a small cut, half concealed by a little moonlight-yellow
tendril of her hair.

Would it not be better for her, better for us all, that she
should never wake again from the swoon in which she lay?
In my heart I thought that it would be so; and yet the sight
of her sweet beauty, the closed eyes, the deadly pallor, the
helplessness of her attitude, pierced the very citadel of my life.

I could not give her up; I could not let her go. Yes, Tom Gordon had loved her with a love passing mine, for he had not repudiated her, stained with sin as he knew her to be.

I forgot that his eyes were on me. I forgot everything save the danger of the woman we both loved.

'God forgive me!' I cried—'forgive me for my disloyalty! Whatever she has been, whatever she is, whatever is to come, her future and mine are one.'

'Too late!' pronounced Gordon. 'You have voluntarily given her to me. See!' He caught up the hand, hidden with pearls, which hung over the sofa nearly to the floor, and, with a swift motion that I could scarcely follow with my eyes, he unclasped the bracelet which, at the wrist, held the pearl mitten in place. 'See!' he said again.

I could not choose but look; yet, with a sharp exclamation, I turned from what I saw. It was what Paula had seen that terrible day in the ingle-room—what the Woman in Grey for years had jealously hidden from the world—the marks of teeth that had torn and lacerated the delicate flesh in a strange, star-shaped scar.

'That is the sign of the barrier which parts you,' uttered Gordon solemnly—'the barrier which you yourself have set between you, in renouncing her. For me it but brings us nearer together, for without it she might never have been mine.'

He bent and kissed the scar, and a strong shuddering seized me, less of horror than passionate, hopeless resentment that it should have been his lips which touched her hand.

'Now you know, and have seen for yourself,' he went on, 'what happened when I sent her the masks. She did not know from whom they had come. She opened the box, and those terrible ghosts of a dead past confronted her. Can you picture what her feelings must have been? How she must
have trembled and agonized, asking herself what hidden hand could be menacing her in the dark?

'What would she naturally do? There were but two people in the world to whom she could talk of her secret—
the woman you know as Miss Traill and myself. The former she has learned to distrust. I alone was left. She came to me
to tell me of what had happened, and ask my advice as to
what was to be done. I knew that she would do that. I had
calculated upon it. It was for that reason alone I went to
Paris, and ordered the masks. I wished to see her alone,
here, and to remind her of my power over her, as I could
do in no other way, except by threatening her in so many
words with ruin.

'Well, I succeeded. She had not been half an hour here
when you came—an interruption none too welcome. I meant
that she should give you up, of her own free will—free, save
for my influence. I do not know if she would have done so,
for she has a will of iron, harder than iron to break; but,
after all, I have had cause to bless your coming. You have
repudiated her, and she stood in that room, and heard every
word you said. Even if you would take her back, she would
not go to you. I can answer for her, knowing her as I do,
that her pride alone would keep her from you now.'

I heard him as a fallen spirit hears its doom. I had no
answer to make him. My brain dinned with half-formed
excuses for her crime. And I realized that I had not known
myself until the sight of her white, unconscious face had
melted all my resolve, all my horror of her sin. She had
been driven to it, I told myself now. It had been done in a
moment of blind anger—the anger of a girl, pathetically
young, pathetically undisciplined. She had spent a lifetime
of repentance during the past seven years. She had paid for
her crime with the torture and humiliation of imprisonment.
She had actually gone down to the grave, and risen purified.
Must the remainder of her life be one long punishment,
de spite all the atonement of the past?
My being was shaken to its foundation, as I asked myself these questions, by a species of strange moral earthquake—an upheaval of the principles, the traditions, the purest beliefs, and the coldest conventions of my youth.

With eyes that yearned for the light of hers, as those of the dying yearn for the sunshine they may never see again, I gazed at her still face, the shadowing lashes, the sweet, downward curve of the mouth.

Perhaps it may be that my look pierced the mists of her unconsciousness, for she stirred faintly, her white lips quivered, and, slowly lifting her hand, she brushed it dazedly across her forehead, not yet waked to the realization of where she was.

Then her eyes opened, finding first the window just above her, and, later, falling upon her own hand stained now with a smear of blood from the slight wound over her brow.

It was the hand from which Gordon had just taken the glove of pearls.

He kneeling, I standing, we watched her in silence, without a movement, without an audible breath.

She had not seen us. All her mind was concentrated in wonder and a growing horror on that fatal mark. As she had passed the back of the hand over her forehead, the blood had streaked it, and I knew the association which must be in her thoughts, the horrid, accusing vision which must be rising out of the past.

As she came back to consciousness she drew her breath in sobs, and my heart ached to comfort her for a sorrow which must be beyond all human aid. She dropped her hand out of her own sight, with a shiver, and then her eyes turned to Gordon, and from him to me. At last she realized her position, and remembered what had passed.

A strange, white change quivered across her lovely face—a visible, sudden aging of it, which meant that the hopelessness and misery of the future closing in around her had swept over her like a great tidal wave.
Something in her look and manner seemed to remove us both to an immeasurable distance from her, though, physically, we could have touched her by putting out our hands.

Painfully and very slowly she lifted herself from the pillows of the sofa, and rose into a sitting posture, supporting herself with one rounded arm, her whole body piteously drooping like a lily in the rain.

The weakness of her womanhood shook me, and I trembled. There were hot tears in my eyes.

‘You—I heard a blow—I was afraid you might do one another some injury, and so I—came. I—it was weak of me to faint. But I have gone through a good deal.’

She spoke in the gentle, faltering voice of a child.

All her splendid courage, her marvellous strength of spirit, seemed broken. She had come to the end of it, and there was nothing in reserve. So I thought, at least; but I had yet to learn my mistake.

I took a step nearer to her, and held out my hands.

‘Consuelo,’ I said, brushing Gordon aside. But with a spring she was on her feet, and had repelled me with a gesture which might have been a wall between us, so impossible did I feel it would be to disregard it.

She swayed slightly, and her bosom rose and fell; but a vivid color had dyed her cheeks and lips.

‘Stop,’ she said. ‘I’ve heard—everything that has passed between you. Do not try to touch me—ever again.’

Her eyes flashed into mine. In their depths, where last I had seen love and trust, burned a fire of resentment and reproach.

Tom Gordon saw it, and stood aside, coldly smiling.

‘You blame me,’ I said passionately. ‘Well, you have the right, perhaps. I should have been loyal through all. Yet I needed but the sight of your face, Consuelo, to make me so again. From this moment let the past be blotted out. I am yours body and soul.’

‘You insult me, Mr. Darkmore,’ she said. ‘I am not the
woman to accept such an offer. As you say, let the past be blotted out—I mean the past which you and I have shared. I will go my way, and you will go yours, and the two ways must lie forever apart.

Forever apart! How little she appeared to dream of the deadly danger menacing her! It was strange that she had even been able so far to elude the vigilance of the detective Marland as to leave Lorn Abbey this morning. But I feared that he had only allowed her to escape for a little, as a cat will in playing with a mouse. This had been an old simile of Consuelo's and I now sadly remembered it.

How young she looked, as she stood facing me in her pride and anger! How I longed, in spite of all, to protect her, even though hope of personal happiness was gone!

'I refuse to be absolved, Consuelo,' I said. 'Give me back something of my old faith in you, for my love will never die.'

She gave me one look of mingled reproach, scorn, and a love that would not be quenched by either.

'I refuse to defend myself,' she answered.

Deliberately she passed by us both.

'Good-bye,' she murmured. 'And to you, Mr. Gordon, au revoir. We have not had our talk out; still, it can wait. I will write to you—soon.'

But I strode after her, laying a hand upon the door, when she would have opened it to go out.

'Consuelo!' I cried. 'Before you leave this room, some plan must be made for your escape.'

'Escape from what?' she echoed simply, while astonishment was also written on Tom Gordon's face.

I had to tell her then—tell her of the promise I had made to Marland, which I now meant to break for her sake.

'The hardest thing I ever did was to let you go out of the ingle-room the day before yesterday, without an explanation, after you had come down to me,' I said. 'But I had promised him. Then I was full of hope. I thought that, in two days at latest, I should be able to bring home from
Paris news which would save you, and atone for all. But—you say you heard everything that passed between Gordon and me—therefore you already know that I was disappointed. Marland is only waiting for my return, and then—the blow will fall. Now, when I know there is no other hope, I’m going to perjure myself for the first time. I shall not go back to Lorn Abbey at all, until you have been put safely out of his reach.’

‘You need not take the trouble, Mr. Darkmore. I have come to you.’

I started as though a knife had been thrust into my back, and glanced sharply round. The others did the same.

The outer door, which it had occurred to no one to guard or fasten, had been noiselessly opened. It was the voice of the detective himself which had so unexpectedly replied to me; but it was the figure of the bent old man in spectacles I had met on the stairs below that confronted us now upon the threshold.

Removing the disguising glasses, which had hid the eyes that once had betrayed him to me, he came into the room.

‘My little ruse has been even more successful than I fancied it would be,’ he said quietly; ‘though I expected to be rewarded for my pains in allowing this lady to make an early journey, and following her in her travels. I have learned a good deal outside at the keyhole, though eavesdropping is not always a remunerative occupation. Mr. Darkmore, I don’t blame you for your breach of faith. Doubtless I should have been ready to do the same in your place; nevertheless, I am extremely glad I am able to thwart your quixotic plans. Miss Florence Haynes, alias Consuelo Hope, it is my painful duty to arrest you for the attempted murder of Sir Wilfrid Amory. You must consider yourself my prisoner.’

My eyes and Gordon’s met. For once we were brothers in thought. I read what was in his mind, and felt that he knew mine. Without a word being spoken, a question being asked
or answered, he sprang to the door and locked it, while I rushed at Marland, and, with the impulse to silence him, covered his mouth with one hand, while I held him fast with the other.

Big as Gordon was, he was not as strong a man as I, and each had recognized that it must be my part to secure the detective, Gordon’s to guard the door.

But it was I who first addressed Marland.

‘Heaven forbid that we should harm you in any way,’ I said, ‘but we are going to keep you here until Miss Hope is gone beyond the reach even of your skill.’

Consuelo, startled and bewildered, watched us as though in a waking dream.

Marland scarcely struggled in my grip, knowing, doubtless, how useless it would be; but my words to him seemed to rouse Consuelo.

She came toward us, raising her veil, and showing wide, brilliant eyes, black with excitement.

‘Is this the man who was at Lorn Abbey spying upon me?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I answered.

‘Release him,’ she said. ‘It is terrible that this should be done for my sake.’

‘It may be,’ I admitted doggedly. ‘But I will not let him go. Gordon, what is your plan?’

‘We’ve got to gag the chap, I suppose,’ he returned, an ugly look growing on his face. ‘And we must tie him up somehow, so that he can’t thrash about and make a row. These walls are thick, but not so thick that nothing can be heard beyond. And there are the windows to think of. We’ll make all taut, and then we’ll put him in the next room, where Miss Hope went just before you appeared on the scene. It’s between two other rooms of mine, which is one advantage, and has no outside door. Then, one of us stays here, the other takes her away. Does that idea seem feasible to you?’
‘It’s the only one,’ I made abrupt answer. ‘Have you got anything ready which we can use for binding him?’

Gordon reflected for an instant.

‘Yes; some rope tied about an old packing-case in the next room. I’ll get it.’

The detective’s jaw worked under the heavy pressure of my hand, and I knew that he was making a violent effort to speak. He could not, however, utter a sound, for my thumb caught him under the chin, and held his teeth together. His eyes accused me, and I seemed to know what he would say if he could. I felt myself a brute, and yet I did not for an instant relax my hold upon him. If I had, he would have been at the door, shouting for help, in the fraction of a second. And one such shout might have been fatal to our scheme.

In a couple of moments Gordon returned, carrying sufficient cord to have bound two men of Marland’s size.

‘Keep on as you are, will you?’ he said to me. ‘I’ll tie him up. I know a good dodge or two in the way of a knot and a twist. Then we’ll gag him, though I’m not so sure of myself there.’

‘I can do it,’ I replied, recalling my late success in that line with Jonas Heckleberry.

‘Good. Then we’ll get to work.’

Gordon threw a loop of the rope round Marland’s arms, which I held behind his back—mercy in my heart, but none in my hands.

‘Once more I beg you not to do this thing,’ cried the Woman in Grey. ‘Mr. Gordon, you, at least, will listen to me. You know that you could save me if you would, without this outrage. You yourself had told me that, in so many words, the moment when Ter—when Mr. Darkmore’s knock sounded at the door. Be as noble as it is in your nature to be, and do for me what you can, but not in this way.’

‘I must make my own terms first,’ said Gordon stolidly, never pausing for an instant in the business of binding the
detective's arms and legs. 'This fellow's jack-in-the-box entrance was inopportune. I haven't had time to conclude the bargain yet. Hence this necessity. But for the present, the latest plan holds good. There, Darkmore, I think I've made a workman-like job of this. He's trussed up like a fowl. Now for that gag.'

I instructed him, according to my late experience, how to make the thing, and it was thrust between poor Marland's teeth before he had been given time to emit a sound.

'We'll carry him into the back-room, and lay him down,' proposed Gordon. 'There's a big lounge in there. If he's wise, he won't try to roll off, but will resign himself to being as comfortable as he can, till we release him.'

Between us we took up the bound form, now absolutely helpless, and as we marched slowly to the door of the adjoining room, I backing toward it, holding Marland's head and shoulders, my eyes turned anxiously to the Woman in Grey.

She stood like a statue, her back against the outer door, by which she appeared to be unconsciously supporting herself. She was evidently suffering extremest mental anguish, and, as I pitied and loved her, I felt that in this moment, if never before, she atoned for the sin which I believed lay dark upon her soul.

We reached the door, and, pushing against it with my shoulders, I opened it, as, after Consuelo's entrance, it had not been latched again.

In a second more I had passed into the other room. No arrangement had yet been made as to which one of us two was to be Consuelo's escort and protector, but while I felt miserably that for some reasons it might be considered Gordon's right, I longed that it might be my privilege. If we were to go out of each other's lives, she and I, it would be something to remember that it had been I who guided her to safety.

'Now,' said Gordon, 'he is disposed of for the present, and
shall be kept here until it is absolutely certain that all danger for her is past. Before we go back to her, let us settle this one question—which of us is to go, which to stay?'

'It seems to me wise that you should remain in your own chambers. You could plead illness for a day or two,' I had begun. But he cut me short with rather a bitter smile.

'Very plausible, Mr. Darkmore!' he exclaimed. It was easy to see that our brief alliance was to be considered at an end. 'That is a little difficulty that can easily be got over, if I set my wits to work.'

'Let her choose,' I suggested.

He hesitated a moment, and then flung back his shaggy head with a characteristic gesture of his.

'Very well,' he returned; 'it shall be so.'

He stood aside to let me pass over the threshold. I did so, he following, and then I stopped with such abruptness as to cause him to stumble against the frame of the door.

For the outer room was empty—the Woman in Grey was gone!

I dashed out, and looked down over the stairway. But she had passed from sight. Determined to follow, and leave the responsibility of Marland to Gordon for the time being, I rushed back and snatched up my hat. But Gordon's hand was on my shoulder, and, thus admonished, I waited to hear what he had to say.

'Look here, Darkmore,' he ejaculated: 'I believe she has gone back again to Lorn Abbey.'

'Why should she run away from us to go there?' I questioned.

'Did you see her face when we left her standing there by the door? I knew there was a storm of some sort in her mind, though it didn't occur to me then that she meant running away. She doesn't care what becomes of her now. That's the explanation of her going back to Lorn Abbey. She wants to say good-bye to Sir Wilfrid Amory, of whom she's curiously fond.'
I opened my mouth to interrupt him, but checked myself. I wondered how much he knew regarding Uncle Wilfrid's illness.

'Besides that, there may be papers to burn, all sorts of things which a woman wouldn't neglect in an emergency. Then, when she has finished at Lorn Abbey, she'll go away—somewhere—and hide herself as best she can—from you and me, as well as the rest of the world.'

'Right or wrong, let us follow her!' I cried.

'One of us, you mean. And it shall be you, provided, if you discover at the station that she's gone to Martenhead, you do not follow her until you have seen me. Telegraph her. Let her know that she's safe from Marland, and can remain at the Abbey for days, if she will.'

'You do not know,' I broke in. 'There is something else. She cannot stay at the Abbey now, even with Marland out of the way.' And then I had to tell him, in as few words as possible, of Uncle Wilfrid's mysterious attack, and the attempt upon his life, of which Consuelo had been suspected by others than the detective.

He looked grave, but did not ask me whether I, too, harbored such a suspicion.

'At all events, nothing will be done without Marland, for a day or two,' he said. 'She can remain until to-morrow, without danger. Wire her that, when you find out if she has gone down to Martenhead. If she has not gone there, I have one or two ideas in my head. But that's for later. I won't delay you longer. But, remember, I've something to say to you, which must be said before either of us sees her again, and upon that conversation hangs the issue of our three lives.'

I waited for no more, but ran down the stairs; and the last sight I had of Gordon was as he shut himself in with the detective.

I got a cab outside the Temple, in Fleet Street, and gave orders to be driven as quickly as possible to Paddington,
where fortunately I arrived just in time to see the train moving out for Martenhead. I even ran desperately after it, but was too late.

At the very most Consuelo could not have had more than fifteen minutes' start, and if Gordon was right as to her intended destination, in great probability I should be able to join her in the station, before she had caught a train.

Never, I should think, was that journey to Paddington made in less time, long as it seemed to me. Into every cab within sight I stared eagerly, hoping to come up with Consuelo, but was invariably disappointed.

One piece of luck was yet in store for me, however. As the train swept by me, from the window of a first-class carriage a white, beautiful face looked out. Gordon had been right.

A new time-table had been lately made, and I was obliged to inquire the hour at which the next train would start.

Two o'clock, I was told. And after that, there would be another in forty minutes. I would have time to wire Consuelo as Gordon had advised, go back to him, hear what he might have to say, and still catch the latter of the two trains mentioned.

I had a miserable, foreboding curiosity as to what should await me on my second visit to Gordon's chambers. That some important crisis would unfold, I could not doubt, for vividly did I remember the look on his face, and the strange, suppressed passion in his voice.

My telegram, veiled as its meaning had to be, I hoped would make Consuelo understand that it would be madness to leave before either Gordon or I should arrive, and yet I was more than anxious for her welfare and her decision.

I flung a sovereign to the cabman as he drew up his tired horse at the entrance to Pump Court, and went up the stairs which led to Gordon's chambers three steps at a time.

There was now no delay in answering my loud rap.

'Well?' Tom Gordon asked, flinging open the door.
I told him of the face which had flashed past me in the train, and of my telegram.

'Good!' he said shortly. 'Now we've got a little respite.' And then he paused.

'Not an hour for our talk,' I said excitedly. 'One of us has got to take that two-forty train to Martenhead. God knows what may happen if we don't.'

'One of us will,' he returned solemnly. 'And which one it will be depends upon what passes in the next fifty minutes.'

'Is Marland all right?' I asked rather anxiously, as Gordon motioned me to sit down.

He brought a silver-bound oaken box from a cupboard in the wall, and offered me a cigar, which I refused.

'Yes, trust me for that. And now for our talk,' he said gravely. 'Smoke, or I can't;' he said sullenly. 'And if I don't smoke I can't talk or think.'

I wondered whether his face had all along been so ghastly white—almost grey—without my noticing it, or whether it had only become so now.

'I said to you before you went out,' he began, 'that she had grown indifferent to fate. I didn't say why, but I know. It is because she loves you, and you have learned who she is, and believe in her guilt. She loves you all the more because she thinks she is losing you. But you are not worthy of her, and I am. You were ready to give her up, because you thought her a guilty woman; while I not only would not have done so, but I never believed in her guilt at all. And, as a matter of fact, she is innocent.'

'What!'

I was on my feet, the world rocking about me.

'You know this—you—'

'Yes; I know. I can prove it—to you, and to the world. It rests with you whether I do so or not.'

'My God!' I cried. 'Are you a man, and you have let her suffer like this!'
'Wait! Don't go so fast. I have only known what I know a short time. I had suspicions long ago; but step by step I have gone on—working with her since I brought her out of prison—until, at last, the chain of evidence is complete. Five days ago I said to myself, "She must come here, and listen to what I have to say. I have done much for her. I can now do everything." I wrote, and she would not come. You may do me the justice of believing that I did not know that there was any special need of haste in bringing forward the proofs I had accumulated. There was no reason why the old troubles should come up, save in private. Florence Haynes was dead and buried. But I determined she should hear what I had been able to do for her. And when she refused to come at my request, I—got the masks, and sent them to her, as I told you. She came—and the rest you know. I had barely had time to inform her that I could prove her innocence of the murder of old Hannah Haynes, when you knocked at the door. Much has been changed since then. That wretched detective chap has heard all, and he can't be silenced forever.'

'Why did you not speak out, and tell him what you knew?' I questioned bitterly. 'Come, it's not too late yet. He can hear what you have to say. He will not go further in the matter, out of chivalry toward Miss Hope, in spite of the maltreatment he has suffered at our hands. Thank God! she is innocent—innocent!'

'You believe it now, because I've told you so,' he sneered. 'Though yesterday, because another man asserted it, you were just as ready to be sure of her guilt.'

I felt the hot flush which mounted in my face, but I made no effort to defend myself. Why should I tell Tom Gordon against what fearful odds I had clung to my faith—until the very last?

'You wish to know the reason why I did not speak out?' he continued. 'It was because I was not ready. I will not make the way smooth for you. I have given the last seven
years of my life for her. I have impoverished myself, stripped myself of all my savings, to pay that scoundrel Lepel. Why should I have sacrificed myself in vain? Take her, if you will: she loves you—curse you for it! But take her branded, marred with the awful suspicion which must rest upon her forever, if you do. Take her so, and fly to the uttermost ends of the earth, if you will—to see her growing old before her time—to see her start at every sound—to hear her cry out in anguish of fear in her sleep. To know that she is innocent, and yet to feel yourself helpless to save her. You are welcome to what moments of joy you can snatch from such a hell!"

He relapsed into silence, blowing a volume of smoke from his mouth; then sprang to his feet, flinging his pipe far from him, and beginning to stride like a madman up and down the room. His fierce words burned my brain like falling lava.

'The—alternative!' I stammered.

He stopped in his wild pacing, and turned upon me.

'That she shall be mine! And there is more. Even to save herself from prison, I do not believe she would give herself to me, loving you as she does. If you would save her, make her a free and happy woman, you must finish the work you have this day begun. She resents your loss of faith in her. But her heart is still yours. To save her, you must make her hate and despise you—believe that you are not the brave and chivalrous man she thought you were. You must show yourself paltry, despicable, until she sickens at the thought of having loved you, and turns yearningly to me. Do you love her enough, Terence Darkmore, to do this?'

As his question rang out, the Temple clock struck the quarter after one. In another five minutes one of us two must go to Martenhead.

We faced each other in silence; then I spoke.

'You have asked me the one thing hardest to do—deliberately to make her hate me. I can't do it! I'll go away,
if you wish, and never see her again. She will forget, and——’

‘She is not a woman to forget.’ He glanced at the clock. ‘You have my ultimatum. And you have still four minutes to decide.’

‘I would rather you took my life than ask this of me.’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘I’m no murderer. I wish you no harm, and I ask nothing of you. I merely present the alternatives as they stand. Gather for yourself what ashes of happiness you can from the ruin of her life, or elect to give her freedom and an unstained name.’

With a groan, I turned from him, and moved to the window that looked down upon the court. Men were sauntering out of the Temple, intent upon their luncheons. There seemed no hurry or confusion there. Groups of two or three met and talked together. A burst of laughter over some good story came up to me. Away in the distance a street band was playing that plaintive air from ‘The Bohemian Girl,’ ‘Then You’ll Remember Me.’

Never, I knew, would I hear the music again without enduring the pangs of this crucial moment.

I was hardly conscious of making a decision, but at the end of a few seconds I turned once more to Gordon.

‘I give her up to you,’ I heard myself saying. ‘I will fulfil all your conditions; only save her, that’s all I ask.’

‘I congratulate you on your decision,’ said Gordon. ‘Your strength isn’t all in your muscles. And you’ve proved your love for her is true. Go. Find her, and leave the rest to me. Warn her of my coming. You know what the remaining part of your task is to be. Let her believe that the stain upon her character has killed your love, and holds you aloof from her. Her pride will soon heal the wound your unfaith has made.’

‘Unfortunately, that is more than I can say for yours,’ I returned shortly. ‘Now let us come to an understanding.
We have just two minutes to do it in. I have put myself in your hands. Am I to go after her or stay?'

I ground my teeth together.

'Your first step will be to clear her,' I said. 'If the man or woman who is guilty of Hannah Haynes’s murder be still alive, justice must be done.'

'The man lives,' Gordon answered; 'and you may trust me for that, even as I now trust you to deal according to your word by me. If you mean to take the two o'clock train, you haven't another moment to spare. But see, as you leave me, I go to Marland.'

He strode to the door of communication between the rooms, and opened it; then he started back with an exclamation.

The detective had contrived, bound as he was, to roll himself from the sofa to the soft rug beneath, and so to the door, where he had lain with his ear at the space left by the warping of the sill.
CHAPTER XXVIII.

ON THE TRACK OF A MYSTERY.

I dared not wait to know what the consequences of this unexpected move on Fate's chessboard might be, for a persistent voice in my heart called me, with wild urgings to save her from some unknown danger, to Consuelo. Gordon and Marland must fight it out between themselves; and, as I ran hastily down the stairs, it dawned upon me that his eavesdropping would convince Marland more speedily than anything else of the truth of Gordon's later statements, whatever they might be.

I was only just in time for the train, and, to this day, I cannot remember one single incident of that journey down to Martenhead. I do not even know if I had fellow-passengers in the carriage with me. Whether joy and thanksgiving that Consuelo was innocent of murder, or remorse for my brief lapse of loyalty, or anguish that, for her own sake, I must destroy her love for me, and lose her out of my life, were uppermost in my mind, I cannot tell.

For one moment I would be ready to fall on my knees and cry out: 'Thank God! thank God for the knowledge of her innocence!' Again, utter darkness would shroud my soul.

I believe I was almost entirely unconscious of all that was external, until I seemed to hear myself mechanically engaging a fly at the station. I should have been glad of the walk to Lorn Abbey; but I would not recklessly squander even a moment which might afterwards prove precious.
'Has Miss Hope returned?' were my first words to the footman who opened the door at my summons.

'No, sir, she has not,' he answered, looking as surprised as a footman ever ventures to look.

'What?' I had feared something indefinite; but now that my fears appeared to be confirmed, the news came to me with as great a shock as though I had anticipated nothing.

'Are you absolutely certain?'

'Well, sir, she hasn't come to my knowledge. But I only heard indirectly that she was away, sir. There was a telegram arrived for her about a couple of hours ago. I took it in myself, sir. But she wasn't in her rooms, and Miss Traill said she didn't think she was about the house.'

'Ah! And Miss Traill, I suppose, kept the telegram for Miss Hope?'

'Yes, sir. She said she'd hand it to her when she came in, sir.'

It was, of course, possible that the man was mistaken, and that Consuelo had returned without his knowledge; but my mind was now given up to apprehensions. I inquired anxiously for Uncle Wilfrid, and, learning that he was still progressing favorably—sleeping very quietly at present—I not only gave orders that the other servants should all be interrogated on the subject of Consuelo's presence in the house, but went myself to her boudoir, and interviewed a pale and somewhat subdued Miss Traill.

She hugged her detestable mongoose in her arms, and gave me but non-committal answers, until I boldly informed her that I had that morning seen Miss Hope in London.

'Oh!' exclaimed the companion, tossing her large head, 'she did not pay me the compliment of telling me where she was going. Indeed, she went off without my knowledge, and I only discovered that she had already gone when I was up and dressed.'

This warned me to be cautious. The moral atmosphere at Lorn Abbey seemed now to be charged with electricity.
How much Miss Traill, alias Naomi Heckleberry, knew of the actual state of affairs—whether she had learned from the Spider Farm of my visit there—or if she was aware of the suspicion with which the Woman in Grey was now regarded in the house where she had reigned as queen, I could not tell. But she was restless and ill at ease, it was plain to see, and at least felt instinctively that something was wrong.

I dared not, for Consuelo’s sake, question her further, and walked away, endeavoring to conceal an anxiety harder than hers to bear.

I was certain that I had seen the face of the Woman in Grey looking from the train which I had failed to catch. It was possible, however, she had entered it merely as a blind, and had got out at some station near town, only to return there when suspicion was diverted, and lose herself in the great wilderness of London.

Uncle Wilfrid was sleeping; and though I learned that he had inquired for me several times during the past four-and-twenty hours, I did not wish to have him disturbed. Improving, and practically out of danger though he now was, according to Dr. Hasbrouck’s account, he was still exceedingly weak, his nerves as unstrung as those of a hysterical woman. I remembered experiencing somewhat the same symptoms during my convalescence from my wound, comparatively slight as the poison had been, and, knowing how I had then longed for and welcomed sleep, I determined to wait until he should wake of himself.

I decided, on receiving this intelligence, that I would return to the station, find out how many stoppages the train in which Consuelo had been made between Paddington and Martenhead, and also whether she had been seen at our station.

Time was of value, and I had the horse which Uncle Wilfrid had given me saddled. He was fresh, not having
been taken out for days, and we reached the station in an incredibly short time.

A porter took the horse for me, standing at a respectful distance from the pawing hoofs and restlessly champing mouth, and I went to the station-master to make my inquiries.

To my bewilderment, I was soon able to learn that Miss Hope had returned to Martenhead by the train mentioned, had refused a fly, but had been seen walking away in the direction of Lorn Abbey.

Could it be, I asked myself, that, after all, she had been in the house when I arrived?

I started for home more slowly, holding the horse in with an effort. I wanted a little time for reflection. As I came to the first turning, the animal swerved a little, for something had suddenly sprung up from the long grass at the side of the road.

It was a boy, carrying a basket full of green things that looked like weeds; and though he darted up the path to the left, leading away from the main road, I had no difficulty in recognizing him as the extraordinary creature who had once come to me in London, and sold me his knowledge of the lying telegram which had brought Uncle Wilfrid and Paula to Martenhead.

'The son of the herb-woman,' I said to myself, looking after the lithe, ragged figure of the child. And the sound of the words on my lips brought a new idea to my mind. Might it not be possible that Consuelo had gone to the herb-woman's house?

She might intend to remain there until after dark, and then venture to Lorn Abbey, for reasons that Gordon had suggested. At all events, I knew where the place was. It was not more than a mile or so out of my way, and I thought the chance of finding her there was worth a trial.

Not having received my telegram, she would not know how strong was Gordon's and my desire that she should
remain at Lorn Abbey until one of us had communicated with her, and she might indeed—as he had said—intend to go where none should follow her.

Though it was permitted me to give her no news of hope for the future, no word of comfort or love, I must, at least, prevent her escaping beyond our reach—perhaps never to hear the tidings of her emancipation from the old bondage of fear and shame.

The boy's anxiety to avoid me, after catching sight of my face, encouraged me in the hope that the Woman in Grey might be with his mother. I thought it very possible that he had been stationed at the cross-road to keep guard.

I followed him swiftly—had soon overtaken and passed him.

The herb-woman's was but a humble four or five roomed cottage, standing on the edge of some pastureland and a wood. There was a little porch, arbored over with creepers, and on each side a window on the ground-floor.

Various bunches and wreaths of dried herbs were fancifully displayed in one of these lower windows, as though by way of advertisement. That on the other side of the door was curtained with chintz, which completely veiled the room within from the sight of passers-by.

I brought my horse so suddenly to a standstill before the door that he reared, and, backing suddenly, struck a hind-leg against one of the pillars of the porch, which jutted out to a level with the road.

The frail structure must have shaken with the force of the blow, and, as I pulled away, and leaped from the horse's back, meaning to tie him somewhere for the few moments I must be inside, the chintz curtains were parted, and a face looked out.

There was a little involuntary cry, which sounded like alarm, and the curtains fell again, vibrating to and fro. But I had seen the face with a great shock of surprise, and bounded to the door—the horse and everything else forgot-
ten, save that unwittingly I had come upon the track of a mystery which had baffled us, one and all.

I shook the door violently. It was locked, and no one came to open, but I could not hesitate. I had already that day obstructed an officer of the police in the performance of what he believed, though mistakenly, to be his duty. A small matter of housebreaking after that could be little or nothing to me. With a few blows of my fist, and pushing with my shoulder, I had wrenched out the hasp which held the bolt, and the door flew open so suddenly that I staggered into the little room within, barely saving myself from a fall.

It was empty, and I scarcely noticed its contents, though my head brushed against the dusty bunches of herbs depending from the ceiling.

My one thought was to reach the door which led into the room of the chintz curtains before the owner of the face I had seen could have time to escape.

As I sprang to it, another door at the rear opened with a rattling of the latch, and the figure of a thin, elderly woman appeared against the background of a kitchen interior. I readily guessed it to be the herb-woman herself; but though she exclaimed at me in shrill protest at my intrusion, I turned a deaf ear to her cries, and grasped the handle of the latch, which was the sole fastening of the inner door.

It resisted my effort to open it, but presently gave way before my remorseless onslaught. Then I crossed the threshold, and deliberately shut myself in with the person upon whom I had forced my presence.

There had been a swift rush of woman's draperies, and Paula Wynne stood at bay before me, pressing her body against the farthest wall.

'Cruel! cruel! How dare you push your way in when I—when you knew it was against my will?' she panted, both hands, ringless now, and thinner than of old, pressed against her breast.

Without a word I advanced towards her, and, grasping
the arm which flashed out to hold me off, gently, but firmly, looked down into her eyes.

‘I thank God that I have found you,’ I said. ‘Paula, you have been guilty of a deadly sin, and the time has come when, if you are not ready to do it of your own free will, you must be compelled to make such atonement as is in your power.’

‘You are brutal!’ she exclaimed. ‘It is I who have been injured.’

‘You know you are speaking that which is untrue,’ I answered.

She looked up at me with a defiant light in her eyes.

‘How you hate me!’ she cried. ‘And how you love her!’

‘Paula,’ I said quietly, ‘I tell you that I do not urge you to atone for what is done because I have any hope of winning the woman you have injured. It may be that I shall never look upon her face again.’

‘What!’ she almost hissed. ‘Have you found her out for what she is?’

‘I have not “found her out.” I have only learned that always she has been innocent and wrongly accused. Yet from to-day she belongs to another man.’

‘Tom Gordon, the barrister, you mean?’

‘Yes, I mean Tom Gordon.’

She wrenched her arm away from me, and, to my surprise, clasped both hands before her face, bursting into a wild tempest of tears.

‘Oh, how he has deceived me! How he has lied and cheated and schemed from the beginning of it all! I thought to have revenge. He has not even given me that.’

‘Of whom are you speaking, Paula?’ I questioned more gently, for a woman’s tears had always power to move me.

‘Of the man—ah, curse him a hundredfold!—whom I have been mad enough to make my husband!’

‘Your husband?’

‘Yes, I’ve lost you, Terry, through my own fault. I have
been his tool always. I can see it now, and I have seen it for long; but not so plainly as to-day, when you tell me that you and she are parted.'

'You have not yet told me his name,' I said.

'Oh, his name! Don't you guess it? It is that fiend Haynes-Haviland!'

I had guessed the name, but I wished to hear it from her lips.

'Poor Paula!' I said, sighing. 'You have sinned, but you are suffering for it now.'

Her tears convulsed her.

'Oh, Terry!' she wailed. 'If you only knew all! But you shall. I will tell you the whole story.'

'Poor Paula!' I repeated, 'I am sincerely sorry for you.'

But even yet, I think I spoke more mechanically than from my heart. I raised her to her feet, and she hung a dead weight in my arms. That last terrible day in the inkle-room, when she had clung thus and wept, came back to me, and I shuddered.

I put her with a forced tenderness into an armchair, and bent over her.

'You will be happier when you have told me, Paula,' I said—'happier than you have been for long. Is there anything I can do for you before you speak? Will you have a glass of water or wine?'

'I wish it could be poison,' she moaned. 'But I am a coward. I am afraid of pain, and the dark that might come afterward. No, no; get me nothing. Only let me hold your hand. After all, we're cousins, you know. Nothing can change that. And every mistake, every false step of mine, has been because of my love and jealousy.'

'Once, before you went to Italy, you told me that you did not care, and I believed it,' I answered, justifying myself in her eyes and my own; for, despite all that had passed, her passionate words roused an inexplicable feeling in my heart that in some way I had been to blame, that I had not done
well. 'You knew it was easy to believe, for you never led me to think until afterwards that you had cared for me.'

'I hardly knew myself until it was too late. But when I came back from Italy and saw you with her—oh, Terry, you can never dream what I have suffered!'

'Will you tell me your story, Paula?' I said evasively.

'Go first to the door, and see if that woman is listening. I dare say she would levy blackmail if she could.'

'Why do you stay in her house, and why did you shun me, distrusting her as you do?'

'I wanted to be near the Abbey. It was he who suggested this hiding-place. Do you wonder I did not wish to see you alone, before I had heard from him?'

I went to the door, and looked out to find the room empty.

'Even if she was there before, she will hardly dare to venture back now that she knows herself suspected,' I said, 'I think you may speak without fear.'

I drew up to Paula's side the only other chair the bare little room contained, and took the hand which she imploringly held out to me.

'In Italy,' Paula began, 'we met Mr. Haynes-Haviland. His name suggested nothing to me until one day, happening to mention Lorn Abbey and Uncle Wilfrid, he remarked at once that he had been the former owner, but had added to his name of Haynes, on account of some money that would thus come to him.

'From the time that he knew Sir Wilfrid Amory was my uncle, he devoted himself to me. I spoke of Consuelo Hope, and my suspicion that she had known a good deal about Lorn Abbey in the past. I informed him how I had employed a detective, with little Jerome's help, and learning how Fanny Edwards, a servant at the place about the time of the murder, had gone to America, believed they were one and the same. He asked me to describe the woman's appearance, and I did so.

'At first he seemed to think with me; but when I had
mentioned that her features were fine and well shaped, he
was puzzled. Fanny Edwards's coloring had been blonde,
and she was tall, with a good figure; but she had had a
snub nose and a large mouth, with thick lips. Then, when I
spoke of the pearl glove she wore on the left hand, he gave
an exclamation that frightened me. I had never heard many
of the details in that murder story; but he told me how
Florence Haynes had been bitten on the left hand by the
old woman in her death-struggle.

'It was supposed that she—the murderess—was dead, of
course; but he explained to me that there might have been
some trick, and that Florence Haynes was perhaps really
living, disguised somehow as Consuelo Hope.

'I think he understood how I felt towards her; and pro-
testing his love for me, he offered to help me in getting rid
of her if I would promise to be his wife.

'I never meant to keep my word to him, Terry. Then we
came to England, I and the Annesleys, and he travelled with
us. We both expected that, in spite of some disguise, he
would at once recognize her when they met. But he was
utterly bewildered. Sometimes he thought it must be she,
and again he would fear he was mistaken. If he could only
see what was under the glove, he said, he would be sure.

'Then came that Sunday when I walked over to the Abbey,
to find you alone. I had sent for Jerome, and between us we
had composed an anonymous letter to Uncle Wilfrid. You
may despise me, Terry, but I was sorely tempted. When I
started out from The Nest I had no thought in my mind of
what was to come afterward. I wanted to see you, and I did
not wish either Jerome or—the other to know where I was
going.

'What passed between you and me you must remember.
Then I left you, really meaning to go home; but, as I walked
along the lawn, I saw Consuelo Hope looking down at me
from a window. My husband had already suggested that if
I could make an opportunity to find out what was under the
pearl glove, and to accuse her, if the scar of teeth was there, it would be far better than for him to do it. I thought I might be able to bring that about; so I called to her, and she came down to me.

'We went back into the ingle-room together. I was ignorant that you had been wounded then. When I had seen what was on her hand, and she locked me into the room, vowing I should not leave it to expose her, I was not sure but that she meant to kill me.

'She pushed against me as I fought for the keys of the window and door, and I slipped on the polished floor, falling down. At that instant came a sound from the other end of the room, as though a number of articles had suddenly tumbled from a height.

'She had more cause than I to fear we had been overheard. I did not care; I was only thankful not to be alone with her any longer. She left me, and ran toward the ingle-nook.

'As she did so, I heard a faint clinking noise close to the place where I was beginning to rise from the floor, and, looking up, I saw a sliding-door opening in the oak panelling of the wall. No one would ever have dreamed it was there who had not known beforehand—not even the cleverest detective, I am sure.

'It showed a very narrow, dark space, and out of it George Haynes-Haviland leaned, eagerly beckoning to me with one hand on his lips.

'I was thankful for a chance to leave the room and frighten that wicked woman still further. Without a sound I went to him, after one glance that told me she was stooping down, with her back to me, far off in the ingle-nook.

'As I joined him, he reached out and caught up an Indian silk scarf which was spread over a small table, close to the opening in the wall. I wondered at the time why he did this, but afterwards I knew.

'Then he slid the door in the panel into place. It was dark
as pitch where we stood, but he put his arm round me, and began whispering. He had heard everything that had passed, and if I would consent to remaining where I was until after dark, he would take me away, and tell me how we could not only bring the murderess to justice, but give me back my place in Uncle Wilfrid’s will.

‘In such a cause I was ready to do anything he bade me. He let me out of the secret passage into the cellar underneath the house. From there he helped me through a small window, and then we came straight here to the herb-woman, whom he had known in the days when he had lived with his stepmother at Lorn Abbey.

‘I have been here ever since, except for two days, when I went away with him to be married. He brought me a disguise, and drove me himself in a carriage into the next county. He had got a special license, and I was married to him by my middle name, Victoria, in a little village church. The poor curate never dreamed he was performing the service over the missing Paula Wynne.

‘George Haynes-Haviland had told me that no sooner was my back turned than you had engaged yourself openly to Consuelo Hope, and that now Uncle Wilfrid would doubtless leave my portion of money to her, unless prevented. Then he proposed to me the plan that was afterwards carried out, and I agreed, for I hated the woman so. If she hung for me, it would be no more than she deserved for killing Mrs. Haynes.

‘He bribed an assistant in a London dissecting-room to procure him a female body. It was dressed in my clothes, wrapped in the Indian scarf from the ingle-room; my rings were squeezed on the fingers, and the head was removed that the deception might not be discovered.

‘I had been half mad with anger toward her for having won you and my inheritance, though afterwards I would have given anything, if it could have been undone. But it was too late. And after the inquest, and the failure of the
plan through you—despite the evidence George Haynes-Haviland had persuaded Jerome to give—he threatened that my part in it should be known, unless I married him at once.

‘You were lost to me. I persuaded myself I cared only for revenge, and so I consented. The day after the marriage he told me how he had listened outside the window of the ingle-room, and then, when I had gone, rushed in and wounded you. He had meant to kill you to get you out of his way; but I dared not betray him, and he knew it. We were bound together in sin.

‘He still insisted it had been for love of me; but I began to understand that it was Uncle Wilfrid’s money he wanted, and was working for. Oh, how I hated him! But I was in his power. Now, Terry, you know the whole story.’

Save for the existence of the secret door in the ingle-room, which—so far as I knew at that time—even Marland had not ascertained, she had told me but little which I had not partially surmised. Now all was very plain. My newly-cleared vision pierced further back, through the veil of years, and discerned something which Tom Gordon’s future statements must prove or disprove. Ah! if this clarity of mental sight might have come earlier! That I, not he, might have been the one triumphantly to vindicate her fair fame!

‘Paula!’ I said remorselessly, ‘you know only in part what you have done. You have married this man—this devil in man’s shape, rather, with the stolen face of a saint. You have said that he has plotted against the life of an innocent woman; but you have not learned yet to what manner of man you have given yourself. He has tried to kill Uncle Wilfrid, and has stolen his will. He was the murderer of his stepmother, old Hannah Haynes. I feel it, and, though it has yet to be proved, I am morally sure.’

‘My God! my God!’ she cried brokenly. ‘And I am his wife!’
CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MYSTERY OF LORN ABBEY.

I now felt myself to be in possession of evidence almost sufficient to clear Consuelo of the latest accusation which had been put upon her, and I wanted to be away. But Paula had fainted, and I could not leave her until I knew that she was being tended, and likely to recover.

'I went out and caught your horse, sir, as he was going off,' said the herb-woman, as I found her among the trophies of her trade in the adjoining room. 'My boy's holding him for you.'

I thanked her, and remained for a few moments until Paula was able to understand my assurance that I would return to her, and then I went to find my horse.

The boy looked up to me with bright, gypsy eyes as he pocketed my half-crown.

'I expect you'd give me somethin' more, guv-nor,' said he, 'if I told yer what else I know. Was you lookin' for a tall, fair lady?—you knows what one I mean.'

To save time in bargaining—at which he was an adept—I took a sovereign from my pocket.

'Speak out, and you shall have it,' I returned.

'She was at this house a bit ago. Only mother and me knew, not she in there'—motioning toward the chintz curtains. 'She bought somethin' that mother keeps pretty dark, and by the queer, white look on her face, it popped into my head she wanted it for herself.'
'What do you mean?' But I knew what his answer would be—'Poison!'

This was what she had meant, then, when she looked at me so wistfully in Gordon's chambers as she murmured something which sounded like 'Good-bye.' I did not greatly doubt the truth either of the boy's statement or surmise.

What wonder if she caught eagerly at the idea of death as the one avenue open for her! Suicide was cowardly. I had heard her say so one day in speaking of some case we had been discussing; but she had said, too, 'Circumstances alter cases, perhaps.' Now she had found the truth which lay in the proverb, then so lightly quoted. To put herself out of the way, before her friends' hearts might be made to ache for her fate, before their pride might be wounded by the publicity which they must share with her—she would argue—could not be cowardly. In her place, I told myself, I might take the same step.

If only I knew where she had hidden herself! It it were not yet too late to let her know that the sacrifice was not needed—that her innocence was known!

'How long is it since she left here?' I questioned.

About an hour before you came, guv-nor.'

'An hour! What might not have happened in that time! And I had been with Paula another hour since.

One more question, and he could help me no further.

'Do you know which way she went?'

Lest the uncanny elf should delay me with further bargaining, I flung more money at him, catching him by the thin shoulder when he would have stooped to pick it up.

'Afterwards—not now!' I commanded; and he yielded to my grasp if not my words.

'Straight to Lorn Abbey as fast as ever she could go,' he asserted. But she didn't go in by the front-door. She hurried round the lawn, and stepped through a window that stood open—a window all made of painted glass. I waited a while, and presently in that little round window, most up to
the top, I seen her lookin’ down for a minute. The sun was shinin’ on her hair, till she drew it in; and though I hung round for a bit I didn’t see her any more.’

I paused for no more questions, but, vaulting on to the horse’s back, I lashed him fiercely.

A fantastic and terrible thought was taking form within my mind. The seed of it had been sown by the boy’s words. It seemed to me that there was only one reason why, having reached the Abbey, the Woman in Grey should quickly mount to the space above my room in the tower—the space sacred to the works of the great clock, and to them alone.

There was some secret there—some secret which she only knew and could make use of; perhaps a hiding-place where she might take refuge, and die with an impenetrable veil of mystery forever shut down between her and the outside world.

I cursed my stupidity and dilatoriness now that I had not long, long ago, before these days of fierce anxiety and trouble had come upon us, studied the chart which the Woman in Grey had given me. I had always meant and wished to do so. But time had gone, and the chart had remained forgotten until now, when it might be too late.

Once in the house, bound for the beginning of my quest, a sudden thought stopped me. I rang the bell near the stairway, and sent for Wemyss, who was always to be trusted. Of him I inquired for Haynes-Haviland. Was he still in the house?

He was, Wemyss informed me, and very seriously unwell Dr. Hasbrouck had pronounced him. He had some chronic trouble with the heart, which had now given him a sharp turn, owing to the shock of his fall.

‘Lies! lies!’ I said to myself. But aloud I inquired whether Mr. Haynes-Haviland had been informed of my return to the Abbey some hours previous.

‘I think not, sir,’ said Wemyss. ‘He hasn’t his own man with him, and our servants don’t go often to his rooms.’
'I would prefer that he should not know I have come back,' I directed.

'Very good, Mr. Terry,' responded Wemyss. And I hastened up the stairs. I had what seemed to me a sufficient reason for giving the order, but I little dreamed of the consequences which were to come of it, nor yet of the awful drama which—indirectly through this command of mine—was to be enacted at Lorn Abbey that night.

My first thought on reaching my room was of an ebony box which usually stood on a table, and in which I had placed the chart. Now a big bowl of flowers, which had its own place somewhere else, had been set down there. I pushed it aside, to find that the box had been taken away.

The conviction impressed itself upon my mind that Consuelo herself had done this. Knowing instinctively that I would keep the chart hidden away in some securely locked receptacle, she had searched for such a one, and secreted it, on the chance that she was right.

If this were true, it was plain that she was obstinately determined to hide herself—dead—from those who would make search for her. I thought with horror of the old legend in the song of the 'Mistletoe Bough'—how the form of the 'fairy bride' had lain concealed in the chest into which she had crept while the years that made up a century rolled out.

Cheated of the chart, which might have helped me in my strange search, my thoughts instinctively turned to the Amory Catechism, which, if it had any meaning at all, must bear upon the secret of the tower.

I did not know where Uncle Wilfrid kept the Caxton Bible and the 'Catechism,' and he was in no condition to be worried with questions. But, when a boy at Eton, it had been my boast that I had only to read my Virgil once through, to spout off page after page by heart, and even now my memory served me as well in most other ways.

With all my might, I now set myself the task of recalling
the 'Catechism's' rigmarole of words. For a few moments my brain refused to respond, remaining a blank, but suddenly I seemed to see line after line, written in the air, exactly as they had been on the parchment.

I mentally slurred those that came first, concerning the 'depths' where something unnamed had lain, until, by 'the right of possession,' it had been reclaimed from the 'Evil One and the monk,' to be kept by the Amorys until the 'hour of disaster be at an end.'

'Where may it then be found?' the catechismal questioning proceeded.

'When the hour is right, that which is green shall move, and the shining of light may reveal the way.'

'Does the way tend upward or down?'

'First the one, then the other, as the chart directs.'

And the chart was lost to me!

Still, I had common-sense enough, at last, to connect the green disc above, among the works of the clock, with the secret, whatever it might be. That was something. Mother-wit and circumstances—under Providence—must direct the rest.

'When the hour is right,' I said to myself. I remembered that the clock had been striking when I had observed the disc to move. Later it had gradually ceased vibrating until it had become entirely motionless again.

This conclusion seemed to point to the fact that, if the movement of the green-painted disc disclosed any secret opening, it was closed at all times save when the clock—with which it seemed to have a superficial connection—was striking the hour.

Now, unfortunately, it had only just struck. If my conjectures were correct, I should have to wait in utter helplessness for another hour. Then again hope rose within me. The clock struck the quarters also. Possibly the disc might yield up its secret at these intervals as well.

Taking the precaution to lock the door which led to the
tower stairway behind me, I went up, my heart knocking in my ears.

 Darkness had fallen, completely and suddenly, though it was but just past seven o'clock. As I came out into the open space above my room, I heard a wild Niagara of rain deluge the roof, so close above my head, and a stony spattering of hail.

 So early was it in the summer evening, that I had not thought of the need for artificial light; but now I found that it would be impossible to work without it. I should have been obliged to go down again, cursing the delay, had I not, as I moved near to the disc, stumbled against some object, thrust in a corner, which proved to be a lantern. It was old and rusty, and somewhat battered, showing that it had not been imported to Lorn Abbey by any one of its new tenants; but a bit of candle still remained, and would burn, as I speedily ascertained by experimenting.

 Having coaxed a clear and steady flame into existence, I closed the wooden shutters which protected the small windows, that the light might not be seen from outside, and attract attention to my strange occupation.

 Here, in the tower, with the door which led up from the floor on which my room was situated locked, I was practically isolated from the rest of the house.

 I must, in any event, wait until the clock struck the quarter past seven before I could effectually set to work, and meanwhile, I occupied the time by examining the green-painted metal disc.

 It somewhat resembled the cover of a huge pot without the handle, and was set perpendicularly against the wall. It appeared, as I measured it with my eye, holding the lantern close, to be from a half to three-quarters of an inch in thickness, and in diameter it might have been something over a couple of feet.

 Directly in front of it depended a series of chains and weights, belonging to the curiously constructed clock, and an
iron bar ran down the side of the wall, which was attached to the disc by a series of flat, connecting rings.

To all appearances it was tightly fastened against the rough stonework of the wall itself. No aperture behind it was visible, nor could I move it with the applied force of hand and arm. As I bent down, to peer at it and search out its mechanism, by the aid of my upheld lantern, something clinging to the rounded outer edge caught my eye. Just a scrap of some soft woollen fabric, which had been torn and impaled upon a point of metal; but my heart gave a throb of mingled fear and exultation as I detached a little fluttering rag of Consuelo’s dove-grey dress.

There was something chilling and sepulchral in the thought that she had gone to this hidden place, whose secret she had wrecked from it, as to a living grave. The sordid part of death by her own hand she had avoided. All the horror of discovery, the exposure and publicity, the trouble which the presence of a body, thus robbed illegally of life, creates in a household—all the consequences which selfish misery entails upon its family or friends. How horrible that she had coolly calculated this! And yet, in a way, how characteristic of her proud and many-sided nature!

How few there were who would have dared what she had dared, even to thwart a Nemesis so unjustly cruel! She had gone to death alone, where no cry wrung from her by repentant anguish could reach the ears of the world. She must have told herself how we would search for her, ever uncertain what fate had overtaken her, while all that was mortal of her lay mouldering well-nigh within our reach. One more tragedy to add to the many that overshadowed the House of Fear.

My only hope now was that she might have lacked courage, or lingered over her preparations. In the place where she had gone, there would be no need for haste.

I raised the fragment of her gown to my lips, and as I did so the quarter-hour struck.
The disc remained motionless, however, and I realized with a sinking of the heart that evidently only the hours were noted in the mechanism.

The storm increased. The air was vivid with electricity, and, simultaneously with the roar of thunder that seemed to shake the foundations of the old Abbey, the clouds were torn across with jagged knife-blades of lightning, that rent the sky from horizon to zenith.

Suddenly there came a crash, as though the thunderbolt of mythical story had been hurled headlong at the tower in which I sat. The room, with its network of wheels and chains and bars and pendulums, was bright as noonday, each detail of the clock's mechanism standing clearly out, with its attendant shadow. The glare seemed to go from white to a strange, unearthly blue.

I sprang up involuntarily, believing for an instant that the house had been struck by lightning. Somewhere beneath me I heard the sound of a muffled fall; and though the weird illumination died, and the clamor subsided to a dull, grumbling reverberation, I became aware that the electricity had affected me in some curious manner.

I had not been struck, but a sense of utter prostration was upon me. I staggered, and suffered somewhat the sensation of having been shattered in nerve and body by a fall. I could not draw my breath without an effort, and found it difficult to collect my scattered wits. For several moments, I think, I must have slept, or at least have lapsed into semi-unconsciousness, from which I was aroused by the clock's striking eight.

I dragged myself up again, as a man does in waking from a heavy, drugged slumber, knowing that he has business upon which life's gravest issues hang. It was like a blow between the eyes to realize that the disc was still motionless.

A great fear assailed me that Consuelo had destroyed the one means of communication between herself and me; or it
was possible that there were only certain hours at which the hidden room might be made to render up its secret. I racked my brain to remember what the clock had struck that night when, in the interval of watching the men who dragged the moat, I had noticed the vibration of the disc. I could not do so at first. I could only recall that it had been early evening.

Then it came back to me slowly, and I knew that I had heard seven of those ominous-sounding bell-notes. Seven! The very hour that had struck before I came up into the clock-tower to-night. It was impossible to tell how long my waiting must be before, as the ‘Catechism’ set forth, the hour should be right.

Courage ebbed away from me, and time passed unnoted at last. Nine came, then ten, and each time I suffered disappointment. The storm had long since passed away, and a cool, rain-laden air blew toward me between the old-fashioned shutters.

My eyes were on my watch the greater part of the time. How the minute-hand seemed to crawl! At last it touched twelve, while the shorter one pointed to eleven. I looked up with weary eyes at the disc, and with the first stroke of the hour it began to move.

I sprang toward it with an inarticulate cry, catching at the edge as though to pull it forward, and separate it from the wall. It must be now, or not again for the next four hours. Experience had told me as much as that, and I felt that I could not live through them, as I had lived through the last. If I did not succeed while the clock gave voice to ten more of its resonant notes, all was lost indeed. I tore at the metal till my fingers bled. I heard myself groan. It was as the voice of someone else. Drops of sweat poured off my face, and yet I shivered with cold.

Eight—nine—ten—and with a sudden push I sent the disc quivering out of its place, sliding along the wall.

Eleven! the clock boomed out.
Before me, where the disc had been, was a round aperture in the stone wall, very nearly as large as the metal lid or door itself.

Torn and floating wreaths of cobwebs, which had been but lately disturbed by the passage of some solid body, hung in festoons across the mouth of the opening.

It was but barely large enough for a man to enter by forcing himself along serpent-like. I thrust in my head and extended arm, pushing the lantern before me, and so discovered that the passage was inclined upward, curving abruptly toward the left.

No wonder, I thought, that the windows were deeply sunk as those of a prison, for, to admit of this passage, small as it was, the wall must here be of an extraordinary thickness.

‘Does the way tend upward or down?’ I repeated, quoting the remembered words of the ‘Catechism’; then answering myself: ‘First the one, and then the other, as the chart directs.’

Not possessing the chart, I must solve the mystery of the secret passage by experience alone.

Holding the lantern tightly and cautiously, for fear of some sudden descent, as prophesied by the ‘Catechism,’ I crawled in, wriggling along like a snake, and helping myself on by digging my elbows into the interstices between the stones.

The passage, having turned, now ran parallel with the room which contained the works of the clock. When I had propelled myself thus for half a dozen yards or more, the space suddenly widened out, and I found myself able to rise upon my knees. Putting up my hand, I ascertained that the stone had been formed into an arch fully a foot above my head as I knelt, and moved my lantern anxiously about.

I had begun crawling on, when luckily, feeling the floor with exploring fingers, it seemed to end, and an empty space opened out beneath. Craning my neck over, the lantern showed me a rough stairway, built of brick and stone.
I brought my legs forward, and began to descend.

The wall was close on either side, and there seemed always a low, shelving roof, against which I struck my head once or twice, making it ring with the force of the blow.

Had not my whole mind been filled with thoughts of Consuelo, I should have been pricked with curiosity as to the object of this curiously and ingeniously constructed passage.

There was no doubt that the tower itself had been built to conceal the place to which this opening gave access.

What had been the motive strong enough to induce Robert Victor Amory, Lord Loveless, the friend of Charles I., to give up years of his life to planning and perfecting the hidden room and this approach to it? What secret had he wished to keep?

There was an odd, echoing silence about the place—a silence which I felt had been unbroken for two centuries or more, and which seemed to be intensified, rather than disturbed, by a stealthy scurrying that rustled past me once or twice.

Rats had solved the mystery of this House of Fear many a generation ago.

I must have nearly reached the bottom of the stairs now, I calculated, judging by the situation of my own room underneath, for I believed that the chamber which hid the secret of Lorn Abbey must lie between the two floors.

My ceiling was low. So also was the roof covering the space in the tower occupied by the works of the clock. I wondered now that I had not thought before of the discrepancy between the height of the tower itself and that of the two rooms which it contained, deducing something out of the common from the suggestion it conveyed. I was sure that there must be at least six feet of space unaccounted for, save by the theory of the secret room, which I was on the verge of proving to be fact.

I could stand almost upright at last, and I had gone down
exactly sixteen shallow steps. Thick darkness lay beyond, and that fatal silence, which to my fancy held Consuelo like some Merlin spell.

I put out the hand with the lantern in it, and, to my surprise, found the curtain of blackness more solid than I had thought.

The exit from the low archway under which I half stood, half crouched, was filled in with a piece of drapery—who could tell how old?

As I grasped it, and would have pushed it away, I hesitated. I told myself now that hope must be abandoned. Were Consuelo behind that veil, and alive, I must have known it ere this; yet, aware that, the curtain once lifted, all doubt must at once be brought to an end, I had scarcely physical or mental strength to put an end to my suspense.

I tried to call her, and the name died upon my lips.

'I must go on—I will go on!' I said within my mind. Still my hand held the curtain nervously.

Suddenly, as I stood irresolute, a cry so piercing, so fearful, rang out and shattered the silence, that I started; an awed astonishment answering it in my nerves like an echo. Catching my heel in the step which I had just descended, I stumbled, and crashed backward, dropping the lantern in the attempt to save myself, and pulling down the curtain, rotten with mould and age, in my fall.

It was torn from its fastenings with a sharp sound of rending cloth, and dropped about my face in muffling, musty folds.

I heard the shivering of glass in the lantern, and in an instant all was darkness; while a smell of candle-smoke floated up to me.

Still, as I disengaged myself from the fallen curtain, the cry continued. It had never ceased, but had lengthened into so long-drawn a wail of horror and agony that it was almost impossible to conceive that it had been sustained by human lungs.
I knew that it was not Consuelo who had uttered it, for, shrill and high-pitched as it was at the last, it had been unmistakably the voice of a man.

As I flung the curtain from me it had died into silence, and not a sound followed—not even a scurrying of the rats which had hustled by me and past the drapery.

More fortunate than I had been at the Spider Farm, my box was now well plenished with matches. I struck several together in a bunch, and took another step downward.

I had calculated that this step would be of a uniform height with the others which I already knew; but it was much deeper. I pitched forward, and fell upon my knees on a stone floor several feet below.

The match-box had been dashed from my hand; and as I groped for it, my fingers came in contact with something which seemed, as I felt it in the dark, to be a prostrate body.

My thoughts flew to Consuelo at once, and yet the material I touched was not like that of the dress she had worn. It had the soft feel of velvet, and, finding a loose edge, I fingered a raised surface, which resembled leaves and flowers, heavily embroidered in silk and delicate gold or silver wire.

I felt my way along, and touched a sleeve; then downwards, until I started back with a loud cry, for I had held the bones of a skeleton hand in mine!

Shaking myself free from the spell which the place and its doom of darkness had cast over me, I groped again for the match-box, and found it.

Hardly conscious of the stinging pain in my knees, on which I had fallen upon the stone floor with considerable force, I got myself away from the thing which lay there, and, springing to my feet, struck a dozen wax-matches.

After all, it was real—no phantasy of a disordered brain. The figure of a tall man, dressed, as the sense of touch had already shown me, in silk and velvet, embroidered with dim and tarnished gold. Long dark hair flowed away from the monument of bone which had once been the foundation for
a massive forehead. Two rows of perfect teeth grinned a ghastly welcome to the stranger, and I could almost fancy the glow of eyes burning deep down in the fleshless sockets. Grasped in a bony cage of fingers, in the hand which lay extended to my feet, was a key of curious workmanship. Close beside it lay my broken lantern.

Standing half upright, as I had been, with my bunch of matches held high, I had seen nothing save the skeleton. Darkness, invincible and impenetrable, stretched beyond, mocking my wild longing for sight of the Woman in Grey. Now, therefore, I stooped, and lighted the lantern again. Then, when the flame grew, I raised it aloft, and strained my eyes to pierce beyond the circle of its illumination.

Overhead was a low roof of stone. I could not lift myself because of it to within six inches of my natural height. Along one wall ran a bench, covered with a cushion that showed red as blood when the light flashed over it. At the end was a dark object, which, for form and size, might have been a coffin; and against it, like a soft heap of snow, drifted by the wind into a winding sheet, lay drapery that gleamed in the thick dusk.

I moved closer—slowly, fearfully; and something like a sob broke from me as I caught the glint of Consuelo's hair. 'My darling!' I implored on my knees beside her; 'only speak to me—let me know that you are not dead!' But the hand I had caught up was cold and unresponsive, the little fingers limp and pliable in my own.

Through a mist of unshed tears I saw her lie there like a broken lily, and the light of the lantern on the stone floor near at hand shone into the eyeballs of rats that watched and waited with a malicious patience for the end of human hopes and fears.
I moved closer; and a sob broke from me as I caught the glint of Consuelo's hair. Page 358.

—A Woman in Grey.
CHAPTER XXX.

THE TREASURE-CHEST.

So great, so infinite seemed my love, that I felt it might even bring back to her fair body the life which had fled.

I raised her, and wrapped her in my arms, as though to warm her with the warmth of my own heart, and it was holding her thus that her eyes opened, and looked wonderingly into mine.

A faint shudder ran through her, and shook me as it did her.

‘Thank God!’ I cried. And hot tears dropped from my eyes upon her face.

‘Is this after death?’ I heard her murmur.

Straight from my heart rose words of passionate love; but, remembering the promise wrung from me by Gordon, I choked them back. She would live, I hoped. And the sacrifice which had been exacted must be carried out, for the sake of her future, to the bitter end.

‘You have not left the world that you have known,’ I answered. ‘I have found you before it was too late.’

‘I meant—I must die—for the sake of all!’ she muttered.

‘Not so. Your innocence is known, and will be proved. I have come to tell ou that.’

For the first time she seemed to wake from some strange dream of pain and wonder, and realize her position. Her eyes roved round the place, faintly lighted by the lantern.

‘I remember,’ she said. ‘But how—came you here?’
'I was led to suspect where you had gone, and with what purpose. And then—I came in, as you came.'

'After all, you learned the secret—the secret that once I wished you to discover, but which now I would have hidden from you if I could.'

'Yes; I learned it, though I knew that you had tried to make it hard for me at the last.'

A deep sigh heaved her bosom.

'Ah, if you had been merciful, and let me go! I should have been gone long, long ago, only I was too late for the moving of the disc. I had to wait up there by the works of the clock till seven struck. It was very hard. It tried my courage, though my mind was made up what to do.'

'Until seven!' I echoed. 'And it was not five minutes later that I reached the room coming up from my own. You were there all that time! And I was in the house. Great Heaven! if I had only known, what agony of spirit I should have been spared!'

I had let her slip from the tight clasp in which I had held her, and her head was supported upon my knee. I had dropped her hands, and she rested against me in sheer physical weakness. I knew how she needed tender words and loving arms about her. But I had sworn to make her despise me for my coldness; and, lest Tom Gordon should forswear his bargain, I must not break my vow.

'I had reason to fear that you had come here meaning to take your own life,' I went on. 'Tell me that you had not yet attempted——'

I could not speak the words, fearing her answer, fearing that even now the influence of some subtle poison might be working in her veins.

But she understood.

'I had not had time—yet,' she said faintly. 'Even here I knew there must be a storm raging, though I could not see the lightning. I lit a candle which I had brought with me when I came, and I had got out the phial with something I
meant to take. But first, wicked woman as you think me—
wicked woman as I am, perhaps—I wished to try and make
my peace with God. I wanted to ask forgiveness for what it
seemed to me must be done. I was on my knees, and then
came a terrific crash. I thought that the house might be
struck, and I feared for Sir Wilfrid’s life. I sprang to my
feet, and a strange sensation seemed to catch and wrench
my nerves, just as though a great iron hand had grasped
and shaken me. I felt myself falling, and after that I knew
no more.’

Her words brought back to me a recollection of the
muffled sound I had heard almost simultaneously with the
flash of lightning which, though it had not struck, had had
so prostrating an effect upon me. I had heard of a species
of nervous collapse induced by electricity in a storm, but
had never experienced anything of the sort until to-night.
Now I knew that, save for the power of the lightning, which
had overcome her and her resolve, I should not have found
Consuelo living when I came to her.

She raised herself a little, supporting herself by a hand
upon the floor.

‘You know—what is there?’ she whispered, her eyes
straining toward that hidden spot where lay the skeleton, in
its bravery of velvet and embroidery.

‘Yes, I have seen.’

‘I did not know, when I found my way here, that I was
coming to—that. Do you realize who it is? Do you know it
must be that Lord Loveless who built the tower with the
clock, and who wrote out the “Amory Catechism,” that those
who came after him might find what was hidden here?’

‘It may be so—must be so, I suppose; for the dress is of
that time, and this would explain his sudden disappearance.
He must have died here. And the “Amory Catechism” was
meant to reveal what for some reason he must have long
planned to do.’

‘No, it was not that,’ said the Woman in Grey, brightness
and life coming into her eyes again. 'Did you never suspect?—even after all my hints to you? I have not come to this place before. I never was even sure how it was to be reached. I would not, until to-day, let myself quite master all the secret, lest I should be tempted to do myself, what long ago I planned to do—what, since I learned to know and care for you, I meant should be your task and privilege. I wanted you to find what I was sure lay buried here; and I hoped you would remember, whatever might have happened to me, that it was I who gave you the key which unlocked the secret to your family.'

'What secret, then, if you do not mean that poor skeleton lying there?'

'I mean the treasure which Lord Loveless took from the moat where it had been concealed by the monks in bygone days, and hid it thus deeply, that it never might be wrested from him in Oliver Cromwell's time of power. When the Restoration came, he would no doubt have brought it to light, and possibly have shared his treasure with the son of the King he had loved. But he died—by some irony of fate—in this tomb which he himself had made. And his bones have lain here, guarding the secret that in life he had so passionately preserved. It is yours now, Terry—yours and Sir Wilfrid's; for, though you do not come of the Lorn Abbey branch of the Amorys, the only one who could possibly claim it makes over all rights to you.

'So much I have done for you. At least, if I have brought trouble and shame upon you, I have given you wealth. There was something else I meant to have done, too; but that was only in case the clouds which have darkened my life had been cleared. That cannot be now. And all that I will ask of you, since you have brought me back to life, is to let me go, and not seek to find me, or to learn where I have gone.'

'Did you not understand all that I meant?' I asked, 'when I said to you that your innocence will be proved? I meant
that not only will you be proved guiltless of this new charge which has so cruelly been brought against you in this house—so nearly a fatal house to you—but the old mystery will be cleared up as well.'

'Who will do this?' she asked, looking earnestly into my eyes.

'Gordon. He holds all the clues in his hands.'

'Ah, yes, I believe that it is in his power. But only on certain conditions. I thought that some day I might find out for myself all that he has learned, and vindicate my own innocence without indebtedness for that to him. It was part of the mission to which I had devoted myself, for a reason you may never hear now. But the detective knows who I am. And so it is too late.'

'Gordon will make no more conditions—with you,' I said.

'It is strange,' she answered, her eyes still seeking to read mine. 'With nothing to gain in the end?'

I made no answer.

'And you?'—very wistfully and softly.

Again I was silent, though my soul cried out in pain unbearable.

At last she had made herself certain of what my constrained manner must have been telling her. She knew that the olive-branch of forgiveness for my unfaith which she had held out was not to be accepted.

She did not even look at me. I heard her draw a deep breath, and then she rose to her feet, refusing the help I would have given.

'No,' she said. 'I am quite strong now. I do not need you any more.'

There was a deeper meaning in her words than the discarding of my assistance for the moment. The anguish of voluntary renunciation had begun for me. If only she could have looked into my heart as she thus drew away from me, and I made no motion to stay or hold her.

'Life opens with a bright promise for you again,' I said,
with a coldness which covered the fire within. 'Let me guide you from this horrible place.'

'Have you no wish to see what Lord Loveless hid so carefully here?' she asked.

'No,' I replied. 'It may lie here forever, unseen by any eyes, for what I care.'

'Yet you shall not go without.' She caught up the lantern as she spoke. 'I ask you, because you owe it to me, to open this chest.'

She pointed to the coffin-like object against which she had lain when my lantern’s light first showed her to me.

'There is no key,' I objected.

'Not here. But you have no fear of those poor bleached bones lying there. If he knew he would gladly yield up the treasure to one of his own kin. Many have sought to solve the mystery. Among others, the poor woman for whose death I was imprisioned. She was clever enough to guess at the meaning of the "Amory Catechism," thought to be a mere jingle of nonsense by careless ones who ought to have been wiser than she. It was in the hope of finding what lies in that chest that she spent thousands of pounds in buying this house, where she was to die. Now—will you bring the key?'

I obeyed, and with a certain reverence laid down the skeleton hand again. Then, moving towards the chest, I fitted the key into the lock. After all, some of the strange legends which had clung, ivy-like, round the House of Fear seemed to have had foundation of truth. Everyone who knew Lorn Abbey knew the story of the Abbot’s treasure in the moat—the Abbot who had hidden it there, meaning to betray his vows and escape to some far corner of the earth, where he might begin a new life, spending his ill-got gains. Everyone knew the story, but no one had believed it, laughing rather at the legend of the Abbot’s murder by the monks, and the ghost which flitted ever through the Abbot’s Walk by night, wandering by the moat’s edge, and trying to pierce the water with its filmy, evil eyes.
I raised the lid of the chest while she held the lantern high. A quaintly fashioned mantle of crimson velvet covered what was underneath; but I flung it aside, and a quantity of richly jewelled golden vessels, such as are used by Roman Catholic priests for the Sacrament, were revealed. A sparkle of precious stones shone up to me in the candlelight, and a fragrance, subtle and pervading, seemed to rise, incense-like, from the chest.

One by one I lifted out the glittering utensils. Last of all came a figure of the Virgin, wrought of gold and ivory and silver, with much splendor of diamonds and rubies outlining the carved folding of the drapery.

Under these things lay a large square box of silver, and a well-filled bag of dark green silk. The box had no key or lock of any kind, and within lay a crown, broken in four pieces. It was small, and might have been of foreign make; but the jewels which crusted it were magnificent. In one of the several portions was set a great rose-colored diamond, as large as a robin's egg; while round it, in a pattern like a star, blazed a mass of clear white brilliants, each one of unusual size and beauty.

'This alone is a fortune,' said the Woman in Grey, with no suggestion of eagerness in her way of speaking. 'Once, I dare say, I should have been like other women, delighting in the beauty of these things. But now they would not be more to me than so many bits of bright glass, did I not rejoice that—still through me, in a way—they will come to Sir Wilfrid Amory.'

'There may be some member of the Lorn Abbey branch living yet,' I answered. 'My uncle will know. And if it be so, the contents of this chest must belong to him or her.'

'If there be such a one,' she said, with a note of hidden emotion in her voice, 'I think it will be proved that there is no right like Sir Wilfrid's. Will you not open the bag?' she went on. And I started from a reverie, of I knew not how long duration.
It was very heavy, and silken cords tied it together at the mouth. As I blundered over the knots, I pondered upon the fingers that had touched it last.

Now I knew it was from this bag the perfume came; for, as I poured the contents upon the floor in a shining stream, out with the jewelled chains and massive necklaces and rings came a species of pouncet-box, filled with a powder which sifted forth in all directions, sending up a strange and almost overpowering fragrance. Never had I seen so motley a collection of jewels, all magnificent, all of most ancient and curious fashion.

Even in the days of Charles the First, most of them would surely have been remarkable for their antiquity as well as value.

Thousands of pounds' worth—what a hoard the greedy Abbot had amassed!

Beneath the silver box and the bag I came upon a layer of loose gold coins, and, taking up a handful, I saw that all were of the date of Henry the Seventh's reign.

'Ve have seen all now, I think,' I pronounced indifferently.

'Much of the mystery will never be revealed. But it is undoubtedly a fortune—for whom must be determined, perhaps, by the law. And now—shall we go? We may leave the chest open, and the contents scattered as they are, I think. No one else has penetrated the secret save ourselves.'

'There is something there which you have missed,' said the Woman in Grey, pointing as she spoke to a folded bit of parchment lying near the little golden pouncet-box. She seemed unwilling to touch the treasure, or even anything connected with it herself. I must do it all.

The sweet-scented powder fell out of the creases as I opened them, and spread the parchment out. Something was written thereon in faded ink.

'"I, Robert Victor Amory, fourth Earl of Loveless,"' I read aloud, '"herein certify that the treasure concealed in
this chest is rightfully my property, and that of my heirs who shall come after me. The crown, the silver box, and certain jewels, notably the necklaces and rings and arm-ornaments such as women wear, are heirlooms of the Amorys, and must be so forever.

"That which remains I myself recovered from the moat, on my own land, believing the tale which set forth that treasure had been buried thereabout. Search was made at night, and in time was rewarded.

"My beloved Master and King having been most foully murdered by the miscreant known as Oliver Cromwell, neither the lives nor the possessions of his friends are safe. Much of my wealth has been spent, and will be spent, in the good cause; but these treasures must be retained, that the glory of our family may not perish in days to come. All has been hidden while there was yet time, and a way has been devised by which the knowledge of my secret shall be preserved to my heirs.

"It may be that my body shall have perished before the days of disaster have been brought to an end. But if he whose hands open this chest wherein the treasure lies be of Amory blood, let him take heed that all is to be his, with the blessing of his progenitor. If by some evil fate an alien be the finder, let him beware of the sin of avarice and theft, lest the curse of Robert Victor Amory be heavy upon him, filling his life with woe unutterable."

There was no more. And all that we might ever learn of the old Amory mystery and tragedy we knew.

'This I will keep, that Uncle Wilfrid may see it,' I said. 'And these poor bones must be buried with all reverence in the family vault, where Lord Loveless's sons and descendants lie. Now I have done as you wished, and made the secret ours, will you go with me to the outside world again?'

We had not now to wait for an intimation from the clock that the disc would move to let us pass out. I had left it
pushed aside from the opening in the wall, and I believed that it would so remain.

The first part of the journey was easy enough. But at the top of the stairway, and the commencement of the narrow winding passage, the difficulties of the journey began. However, Consuelo had experienced them before, and expressed herself as fearless.

From time to time I looked back, or called, to ask if she were safe. Always she answered quietly: 'Yes; I am coming.' And at last I reached the termination of the passage. I felt that it had come to an end; but when I attempted to put my hand through the opening which I knew must be there, I found it closed. Some mechanical contrivance, upon which I had not counted, had replaced the disc again.

It was then but little past one o'clock. It would be three before we might hope for the vibration of the disc, due every four hours, as we now had ascertained, at the striking of the clock.

'I would rather wait here,' Consuelo's voice replied not far behind me. 'I went through so much in that terrible place. Anything rather than go there again—ever—ever!'

And so we waited. Sometimes I spoke to her, hoping to keep up her courage, even with the cold words which alone I dared to speak, trusting that human companionship alone would be something to her. She would answer, but never did she address a word to me save when I had elicited it.

Once I felt her steal a little nearer, and I knew that she had heard or seen one of the rats she so greatly hated and feared.

Never, I thought, had a man and woman been placed together in a stranger situation. There was danger in it, too, for I could not put away the thought that the mechanism of the disc might have been injured by my unaccustomed fingers, and that escape might not be as easy of accomplishment as it seemed. If, when the time should arrive for the vibration which would be the signal for our freedom, it did
not come as we expected, it might be our lot to die as the 
inventor of the mechanism had died. No cry from us would 
reach those in the house below, or, if it did, it would be 
well-nigh impossible to trace it to this place. And there was 
the secret of the disc itself to solve. Though we had pene-
trated it (I, by hints dropped from time to time by Con-
suelo), there was grave doubt whether others, not so assisted, 
and knowing nothing of the hidden room, would discover the 
connection with the machinery of the clock.

I thought of this, and recognized our danger, and yet 
there was a certain joy in it. If death were coming to us, if 
Consuelo were lost to Gordon, then, at the last, I might tell 
her why I had been cold. I might beg for her forgiveness, 
and when she knew my reason she would grant it, I was sure. 
Love would be ours in death, and for me would be sweeter 
and more desirable than years of what the world would call 
prosperity apart.

Here, so close to the disc, we could distinctly hear each 
quarter hour tolled out. To Consuelo I said nothing of the 
danger I anticipated. I had no right to believe that she 
would find the happiness that I found in the thought of 
death with me.

Two o'clock came, and then three times we heard the 
quartes strike. I remembered that when I entered I had 
had such time as was consumed by the eleven strokes to find 
the spring which pushed the disc aside, and even then I had 
done it more by chance than skill. Now we were on the 
wrong side, and the disc would cease to move when the clock 
had struck three times.

I stretched my arm out, and passed my fingers over the 
surface of the metal, lingering at the edges and searching 
for some projection, however small. I must do all in my 
power to save Consuelo from the terrible fate which menaced 
her; and yet—and yet I fear that there was joy rather than 
anguish in my heart, when my fingers did not accomplish 
their task.
I pulled out my watch and looked at it. Two minutes—one minute more! Then my hand was on the disc, ready to seize the opportunity when it should arrive.

At the first stroke I heard Consuelo, close behind me, draw a quick breath. What was in her heart? Did that sigh mean a longing for life and freedom apart from me, or——

I dared ask myself no more.

All my soul I put into the effort to free her. The vibration had begun, and as it increased, a slight gliding to the left of the disc revealed to my exploring fingers an insignificant depression in the metal, large enough to insert the end of my thumb. Instantly, as I touched it, I knew that I had found the key to freedom.

With an effort, I pushed the disc aside, quickly thrusting through the opening my head and shoulders. Now the way was safe for her, for I would not let the disc fall shut again, I resolved, whatever the mechanical device for closing it might be.

In two minutes more I stood among the chains and wheels of the great clock, and had brought Consuelo after me.

The light of earliest dawn already paled the little flame of our candle and made our faces show wan and weary-eyed.

I opened the door which led to the tower stairs, and held it that Consuelo might pass through. As she did so our eyes met, and I was sure that I read in hers that which I had hidden in my heart—regret that we were not destined to die together.

The opening of that door was like a farewell, though the word was not spoken.

Slowly and in silence we went down the stairs. The door at the bottom was fastened, as I had left it. I unlocked it for Consuelo, and she went out. As I joined her on the platform outside the closed door of my room, a curious, stealthy noise within startled us. Something was scratching intermittently but furiously on the wood. There was something hateful and uncanny in the sound, issuing thus in the dead
of night from my room, which ought to have been empty and silent. In a flash I remembered the mysterious hand which once had wandered across the dark panelling and disappeared. Foolishly I seemed to associate this strange noise with that never-explained apparition of the past.

My impulse was to open the door and look in, but for Consuelo's sake I would not give way to it, wishing to guide her down these stairs which separated my part of the house from that which lay beyond.

I would have passed on, but she paused, saying:

'What's that?'

'A rat in the old wainscoting, perhaps,' I said. Yet I did not believe that it was a rat.

'No,' she returned. 'There's something odd about it. Will you not open the door?'

'Let me first take you down,' I urged.

'I would rather wait and look. Ah, that terrible room—the memory that it holds for me! Can I ever forget the night when I heard the awful cry, and coming from my room to learn what it was, and to help Mrs. Haynes, I found myself struggling in the dark with someone who struck at me, and marked me with this.'

She held up her hand, covered now with the glove of pearls.

'It is true I bade you take that room for your own, for I knew that it would bring you near the secret of the tower, which I wished you to solve. The room would not be to you horrible, as it would always be to me, though until to-night I never felt a superstitious fear of entering or passing it. It was associated with the guilt of another—not mine, or I could never have chosen it to make my first appearance to you. Had I been the murderess you believed me to be, I would never voluntarily have crossed the threshold—or, if I had done so, I must have perished when I found myself inside. But to-night the past seems to repeat itself. The storm—for there was a storm that night—and now the
sound of something moving, scratching inside, as though there were someone there, gives me a thrill of horror. I cannot go down till you have opened the door and let me see how foolish my imaginings have made me.'

Obediently I turned the knob. To my intense surprise, the door was locked, and as I pushed against it the scratching noise ceased.

'Who can be there?' I asked myself; and the half-superstitious shudder which had shaken Consuelo's nerves shook mine as well.

'That cry we heard came from this room. I am sure of it now,' said the Woman in Grey.

'It can hardly be,' I answered. 'Others would have heard it beside ourselves. The servants would have come, and this door would have been broken open long ago. Remember, nearly four hours have passed since then.'

'You do not realize how far away, and how entirely shut off from this are all the other sleeping-rooms,' she returned. 'If everyone had gone to bed and to sleep, there would be ten chances to one that nobody heard. They might as well be miles distant. I know, for on that other night none of the servants heard. Only I, and I was awake, restless and nervous, and had not gone to bed. To-night we were so near this room of yours. Had the sound come from another place it would hardly have reached us so distinctly. I tell you there is something terrible behind that door. We must know what it is.'

The scratching had begun again now, more furiously than before.

Her feeling had communicated itself to me. I knew now that I could not pass by that door without knowing what it hid. Locks had defied me vainly more than once during the past few days. Two doors had given way to the force of my shoulder since the night I had left Lorn Abbey to encounter my adventures at the Spider Farm, and I doubted not that this could be made to do the same.
I flung all my weight against it—once, twice, and then again, before it yielded. But at last there came a cracking noise, and the door opened inward. As it did so, something small and lithe and dusky ran past our feet. My eyes followed it with an uncontrollable disgust. It was Miss Traill’s pet—the mongoose.

‘See—that is all,’ I said. ‘Somehow the creature got imprisoned in this room, and was scratching to get out.’

‘There is more,’ she whispered; ‘I feel it. Will you go in?’

I stepped across the threshold, and the faint light of dawn came to me through uncovered windows.

The body of a man, with his back turned to me, half lay, half sat, in a high-backed armchair. I could see his feet extended along the floor, and a limp hand drooping downward over a little spot of crimson that lay like a red flower on the rug of white bear’s fur,
CHAPTER XXXI.

CAN SHE FORGIVE?

An awful face! A face that had once been beautiful with the beauty of a pictured saint. Eyes open and staring; the lower jaw dropped, and the mouth twisted in a spasm of fear. Even the beauty of the once placid features was wholly marred and blurred. It was the countenance of a malicious devil, who had died in extremity of terror; yet, changed as it was in outline as in color, it was that of Haynes-Haviland.

To look at the face was to know that the man who had worn it until now as a mask had been capable of all evil. A shudder of disgust ran through me. I felt like one in a vision, who sees before him the incarnation of wickedness and human violence.

My eyes left the face, and travelled down to the helpless, trailing hand. On the back were the marks of sharp, small teeth, that had worried and torn and bitten deep. I could not doubt that they had been the teeth of the mongoose. Yet it was impossible to believe that the little animal, even roused to sudden ferocity though it might have been, could have caused death by its bite. There was a mystery here. . . .

'Come away!' I said hastily to Consuelo, who stood white and trembling. 'This is no sight for you. Something horrible has happened—just what, or how, we can't tell yet, but——'

'Can we not?' she cried. And her voice rang out with
sudden passion. ‘I can tell you. It is the judgment of Heaven. I know now (though I may be no nearer proving it than when I only suspected) that George Haynes was the man who murdered his stepmother, in this very room, seven and a half years ago. It was he who, trying to escape unseen, grappled with me in the dark, and left stains of blood upon me—stains that helped to shut me in a prison cell. It was he who set his teeth into my hand, when I would have held him, crying out for help. Did I not tell you that, had I killed Hannah Haynes, I should have died if I had crossed the threshold of her room? He has crossed it, and he has died. Can you not see and understand it all? I can, at least, for again I can bring myself to live through that awful night. The clock had struck twelve just as I heard the scream which was the poor old woman’s death-cry. Do you not remember, on that first night when you saw him at the ball, how this man’s face changed and paled when the clock began to strike, and how the cloud seemed to lift from it when eleven strokes only sounded? I saw, and I thought what it might mean. But there was no suspicion against him—there never had been. He had been too clever for that. I should merely, in the beginning, have made my own case worse had I attempted to blacken him. It would have been set down to jealousy and malice. Then I did not know. I only wondered and half believed. Now I am sure.

‘He knew the old story about the secret room and hidden treasure, of course, and he knew why his stepmother bought the place. But he believed her a fool for doing so. Often, in the old days, I have heard him say that. He thought it was but one of the many foolish tales that were told about the Abbey. Had he not so believed, he never would have sold the house to Sir Wilfrid; but of late, I am sure, he has thought differently. Since the time when Miss Traill stole my chart—and, thanks to you, I recovered it—I have seen those two walking together, whispering privately.

‘Long ago, when I—when I was in prison for the crime I
believe he committed, he came to see me there. Naomi Traill—she was Naomi Heckleberry then—caught a glimpse of him, and it was not a face to forget. She feared him when he arrived here on the night of the ball, though he had not seen her before. But that was while she still thought she had more to gain from me. She hoped that I would find the treasure in the hidden room, and share it with her and with her brother, because of what they had done for me—for all of which they had been paid twice over. I had been foolish ever to speak to her of my belief that the secret existed; but that was before I knew you, and decided that the right to it should be yours, not mine.

‘When she found that she could gain no promise from me, she tried to find out the secret for herself, and she stole the chart, which she had discovered I possessed. Afterwards, I am sure that she went to George Haynes, and told him so much that he began to believe himself a fool for having sold Lorn Abbey. I think he fancied there was some hidden way of entrance from your room to the secret room, and that, knowing you were away, he determined to avail himself of the one chance he might have, and find it, if he could. Everything was different in the room now from what it had been, when he crept in here to rob and kill his stepmother; and he counted on his strong nerves to carry him through. But, you know, he had heart disease—he has always had it since a child. Sometimes he would be ill with it.

‘I think that he shut himself into this room, and that, somehow, the mongoose had crept in here. That the clock struck the hour of twelve, and that, perhaps at the same moment, he heard something stirring. Then his courage would have gone, and he would have been filled with a great and awful fear.

‘See, there on the floor lies a candle, which he must have dropped from his hand. That proves that he was holding it when something startled him. Can you imagine anything more horrible than suddenly to be left in the dark in the
room where you yourself had committed a murder; to hear the storm raging as it raged the other night; to hear the clock strike the hour which must have rung in your ears ever since; to fear that something was moving, coming near to you, and that you had locked the door, and, in the pitchy darkness, could not find it again?

'He must have touched the mongoose and hurt it, or it would not have bitten him. But he would not have known what creature it was. It must have seemed the ghost of his own crime. Do you think he had forgotten how he bit me that night—on the hand, as the mongoose has bitten him? Would it not seem to him like the judgment of God? I am sure that his own conscience, through the physical weakness of his heart, has killed him. There is no mystery of murder here.'

We left him alone, and shut the door upon him. It was not yet four o'clock, and the house echoed its own stillness. Everyone in the other far-distant bedrooms slept in ignorance that Death had come, leaving his stamp upon a face which yesterday had smiled and plotted and looked forward to years of life.

'The thing that has happened must be kept from Uncle Wilfrid,' I told myself. And, besides Uncle Wilfrid, so far as I knew, there were only servants in the house. Yet someone must be told. The dead man must not be left to lie there neglected until the household chose to wake of itself and find him.

We went down the tower stairs together, silently, as I busied myself by thinking what was to be done. The door at the bottom was closed, as I had guessed we should find it, else that cry in the night would have surely reached other ears than mine; and now, as we opened it, I thought I heard another door softly closing in the distance somewhere.

'Go at once to your own room,' I said to Consuelo. 'Whatever is to be done, I will do. Someone is stirring, and you must not be seen here with me now. Leave it to me to
explain all the strange happenings of these hours. No one need ever know why you went to the secret room.'

Half to my surprise, she obeyed. I was not used to such unquestioning obedience from the Woman in Grey. Without another word she left me, and I watched her moving down the hall. At last she disappeared, and I knew that she had turned into the corridor which led to her own rooms.

As I stood still, undecided yet as to what I should do, I heard footsteps coming up the stairs from the floor below. All else was absolutely silent, with the hush of a sleeping house, or I should not have heard the slight sounds with such distinctness, for the wide hall with the main stairway and the big window of stained glass which lighted the landing was farther on. The passage from the tower in which I stood merely connected with it. But, as it was, the faint noise made by the footfalls reached me; and I could tell myself without doubt from which direction it came.

I walked softly toward it to ascertain who it might be that roamed about the Abbey at this hour of the night.

The old house had been added to by many generations of Amorys, and consequently, as I have said, was a veritable labyrinth of wings, passages, and unexpected flights of stairs.

As I passed through an archway I came face to face with a man who had just been slowly ascending a series of steps which led up from the main hall on the first-floor, and into the wing of the house where, for the sake of seeing Consuelo to her room, I had ventured.

‘Gordon!’ I exclaimed suddenly and sharply. So great was his surprise at the sound of my voice, that he violently started, and, being on the top step of the stairs, would have fallen backward had I not sprung at him and caught his arm.

‘I did not know you were here,’ he said, recovering himself.

‘Nor did I know that you were here.’
I had dragged him a foot or two away from the stairs, and now I let my hand drop from his shoulder.

'H'm!' He looked back at the steps, and the dark, polished floor which glistened duskily beneath. 'That would have been a nasty fall. I might have smashed my spine, or knocked the back of my head in, if I'd come a cropper there. I wonder, Darkmore, why you didn't let me go and take my chance? Nobody could have blamed you; I least of all.'

'In the first place it didn't occur to me,' I answered frankly. 'I acted by impulse in doing what I did. In the second place, had I had plenty of time to think, I should have done the same.'

'What! You would have deliberately saved the one man who stands in your way, when you had such an excellent chance to get rid of him—or, at least, to see him disabled?'

'Certainly I would. So would you, in my place. I would have done my best for you, in any event, in common decency. Besides, you forget your testimony is necessary to save Miss Hope. Had I paused to reflect upon the pros and cons, I should have had a double incentive.'

'No, I don't forget that. But I did forget you were ignorant that I had already told everything I know both to Marland and Sir Wilfrid Amory. So, you see, my existence has ceased to be important as far as you and she are concerned.'

'I am thankful for that,' I said. 'As for this little accident, which has just been luckily averted, let us say or think nothing more of it. Miss Hope is safe, and in the house. How is it that you are here, and wandering about at this odd hour?'

'I would ask the same of you, for I had thought you had gone away in search of her. But I will answer your question first. When I got your telegram, Marland and I came down at once. I had made it all right with him. As you said, he is a good fellow, and bears us no grudge. He is ready to
admit that he made an ass of himself with his misleading suspicions; though, after all, they were natural enough, even in a detective. He was so used to being right in his deductions he couldn’t easily believe himself wrong. And it seems he had found out some things, and was on the way to find out more. He had discovered the place where Miss Wynne has been hiding, and the fraud about the body, though he had believed that the little wretch Jerome, who has only been a cat’s-paw, was responsible for all. If he had given himself time, and not jumped to conclusions, he would have found out the whole truth sooner or later. But he knows now. I’ve told him what it has taken me years to unearth, and the thing will be a lesson to him. He’ll never believe in circumstantial evidence again.

‘When Marland and I arrived at the Abbey, Sir Wilfrid had waked from sleep, and been inquiring for you. The doctor, who was in the house, pronounced him well enough to see me, and listen to what I had to say, since it was nothing but good news. I decided that he should know everything at once—everything I had to tell. He couldn’t be given a better tonic.

‘It was Marland’s duty to inquire after Haynes-Haviland, for we both had the best of reasons for wanting to make sure that he was within reach. Your doctor assured us that he was in the house, suffering from some acute trouble with his heart. His being hurt by the fall he had might have been all a sham, got up by way of an excuse for remaining at the Abbey; but the heart disease was genuine enough. A sudden shock might be very serious, the doctor thought, and Marland, when he had got permission to see him, promised to be careful.

‘However, when he went to the door he got no answer. It was unlocked, and he opened it, but the bird was flown.

‘After all he’d heard from me, he suspected that Haynes-Haviland would go to Miss Wynne before trying to escape from the neighborhood, if it was his intention to escape; and
he went after him post-haste, but had his search in vain. He had discovered a secret panel in the room here, from which Miss Wynne disappeared, and thought it might be that Haynes-Haviland had now made use of it to get away. He thought, too, it might account for some eavesdropping and peeping within the past few days, also the disappearance of Sir Wilfrid’s will, which would have been important to you and Miss Hope if he had died. Marland had no luck, however; was off to The Nest late last evening, and hasn’t yet returned. Perhaps he’s following up some trail or other; but one thing is certain, and that I’ll tell you: Haynes-Haviland killed his stepmother, and got her money. He will be found, and he will be arrested and hanged for the murder, which he palmed off, with such vile ingenuity, on someone else.’

‘Yes; he will be found,’ I answered slowly; ‘but he will not be arrested or hanged.’

‘The devil he won’t! Why not?’

Then I told him all.

‘There was a cry, then?’ questioned Gordon at last. ‘I was dozing about midnight, and something seemed to wake me suddenly. I had the impression that I had been roused by a scream, but I listened for a long time, everything was still, and I fancied I must have dreamed it. I spent the night in your uncle’s room. Because, after I had told him the story of what I knew, he seemed to look upon me as a species of angelic messenger, and preferred, since I was willing, that I should remain with him. Sometimes we have both dozed. He has slept uneasily from time to time, but his anxiety to know where you and Consuelo had gone has pressed upon him heavily.

‘By Jove! I’ve passed a strange night. I’ve drunk a tremendous lot of whisky—more than I can remember taking at any one sitting before. Only ten minutes ago I crept out of the room and downstairs to the dining-room for more. My throat felt like a lime-kiln. I thought I was the only
one in the house who wasn't asleep, and then I ran against you. No wonder I was surprised."

'No wonder, either, that I was surprised,' I repeated.

'Yes; so surprised that you saved me from a beast of a fall, which might have finished me, or made a cripple of me. You say you would have done the same anyway. Well, it shows you what my opinion of you must be, when I tell you that I honestly believe you would.'

'I thank you for so much,' I returned, somewhat coldly, for his praise was not sweet in my ears.

'You mean you don't think you've much else to thank me for?'—gruffly.

I was silent on that score, saying abruptly:

'Miss Hope is in her own rooms. She has no longer any need of my care, and the right of guardianship has passed over to you. I need hardly assure you that when I found her in the secret room my bargain with you was remembered and faithfully carried out. I have given her reason to believe me a man of stone—a snob who turned from her because her garments had been smirched with the dust of misfortune. And I am certain that so great was the shock, she has already learned to despise me for it. You will be glad of this.'

'H'm! Yes, I am glad,' he echoed. 'Very glad, of course.'

Together we went to Uncle Wilfrid, Gordon having first peeped into the room to ascertain that he was awake and anxious for news. The nurse was with him, but stepped out, that we might talk with him alone, for the excitement of my arrival would only be a beneficial one.

A wave of tenderness rushed over me as I bent above the bed and looked down upon the pale, cameo-like face shining white in the cold light of dawn.

It was the first time I had touched and spoken to him since the night before I left Lorn Abbey for the Spider Farm. How much had happened since!

He had been down in the dark valley, and now he had
returned again, to feel the warmth of earthly love about him, and the pressure of welcoming hands.

He might still be happy. Belief in the one dear woman had been given back to him, and she would still be the sweet ruling influence of his life. He would be sorry that she and I were parted; but he would never know how or why.

‘Gordon tells me you know all the sad story,’ he said. ‘To think that it was I—I who doomed her to prison! Obstinate fool that I was, I would have staked my life upon her guilt! Heaven! To think that it should have been Consuelo—that delicate, white girl—that queen among women! Can it be possible that she may be brought to forgive me, not only for the past, but for the injustice I have done her in my heart during these last days?’

‘She came into your house knowing that great mistake of the past,’ I answered. ‘For the rest, she will think, perhaps, that you have something to forgive her, too.’

‘What should I forgive?’ he asked incredulously.

‘In a way, she deceived you, you know,’ I slowly answered. ‘No, she never deceived me, nor anyone, I would pledge my word. I have thought of all the past since we have known her, and never once has she said of herself one word which was false. We were given to understand certain things about her, and she allowed them to pass uncontradicted, that was all. Can you say she has ever lied to you?’

It was true she had not. Not even at the graveside on that first night. She had been reticent; she had even been misleading; she had permitted me to be mistaken, and to take things for granted. But Consuelo Hope had never soiled her lips with falsehood, I could answer Uncle Wilfrid truthfully.

‘Gordon has been much to me through these hours of waiting,’ he went on. ‘Gordon has been to Consuelo—I can’t call her by another name—such a faithful friend as man has hardly ever been to woman. For her sake, and for the sake of what he has done for her, he would be my friend, even
did I not heartily respect him for what he is himself. In this I know you are at one with me; isn’t it so, Terry?”

It was hard to answer. My lips stiffened in the pronunciation of the words which conveyed something indefinite concerning gratitude for the past.

‘He has fought for her, step by step, for years, never allowing himself to feel discouraged at any rebuff of Fate,’ said Uncle Wilfrid, with a grateful glance at Gordon. ‘He has learned at last, of a certainty, that Haynes-Haviland should have suffered in her stead. His absence at the time of the murder was only a cloak for the intended crime. He was away long enough to prove the alibi. He stole back from London to Lorn Abbey in the night, when he was supposed to be sleeping in town. He knew that the will, made in Florence Haynes’s favor, was virtually void, as most of the money had been removed from the bank. Indeed, the will would help to screen him and ruin her. Why should he kill the old woman? There was apparently nothing to gain.

‘But the money was in her bedroom safely hidden, as Hannah Haynes thought. This man found it, carried it away, and buried it until he could remove it to a safer place. There is more—much more; and how he discovered it all, little by little, through the years, you shall hear when there is time. There is proof for everything—proof enough to hang the murderer twice over. There is no fate too awful for him, and yet my heart misgives me, Terry. To have him brought to justice, Consuelo must, to a certain extent, be sacrificed. The fact that she and Florence Haynes are one and the same must come out. She must be dragged into publicity for the second time. She would be the principal witness. She would have to tell how she escaped from prison, and would at last receive but the “Queen’s pardon” for what she did not do—for the mistake which well-nigh ruined her young life.

‘Were it not for this the world need never know. The secret would lie between us. Florence Haynes’s grave, they
tell me, is down by the moatside. No one need know save ourselves that it is empty. There would be no wrong in letting the world think that an injured woman had died before she could be justified, it seems to me. But Haynes-Haviland will speak.’

‘Haynes-Haviland will never speak,’ I said. ‘He has been punished for the murder he did, and the murder he attempted to do when he came a few days ago to stay under this roof. The hand of God has fallen upon him and crushed him, Uncle Wilfrid. He is dead.’

I had meant to wait until he should be stronger before letting this news reach his ears; but now, when I saw that, though it might shock him, it would relieve his mind of a torturing anxiety, I felt it would be best that he should know.

Gordon had only told him on entering the room that I had come back, having found and brought Consuelo with me. But now I went on and related to him the whole story of our finding the body, with its bitten hand.

Morning was bright in the sky when I had finished, and the day was coming in with banners of gold and crimson.

‘Go and find Consuelo for me, Terry,’ pleaded Uncle Wilfrid, with longing in his eyes. ‘Go and beg her to come to me, and tell me she forgives. It is much for me to ask; but she will be the more ready to grant it if the request comes through you. She loves you, Terry—I never knew how well until the day when you had genc, and left no word. You know, Mr. Gordon, that they are betrothed?’

I would not look at Gordon. I could not look at Uncle Wilfrid, and see the pain which my words must give. But they must be spoken. That last sentence had left me no choice, for he would soon find out the truth, and I could not let him feel that he had been deceived.

‘Consuelo and I have decided that—that we will be brother and sister, nothing more,’ I said. And then I hurried on: ‘Let Gordon call her. I have graver business to attend to, and it must be done without delay.’
In Gordon’s presence he would not question me. And before Gordon had left him I had gone.

* * * * * *

It was all done. The proper authorities had been acquainted of the tragedy which had taken place in the night at Lorn Abbey—history thus repeating itself, even to the room. It had been ascertained, without a doubt, that Consuelo had been right in her surmise, or inspiration—the man had actually died of heart failure. There had been no violence, save that tell-tale bite. And, beyond the deductions which we had already formed, the story of that night, and exactly what had happened behind the locked door of the tower room, would forever remain a secret between a dead man and a mongoose.

I had not again seen Uncle Wilfrid. I had been absent from the house as long as I could find an excuse, and I had made up my mind that as soon as the coroner’s inquest should be over, and I no longer needed, I would go away, if Uncle Wilfrid was well enough to spare me.

Half my little patrimony I had given to the old man in the Rue de Lacheneur; but I had still something left, and I thought it might be possible that Uncle Wilfrid would understand, and not take it unkindly, if I threw over my position at the Home Office, and went abroad again for at least a year.

I should miss the man who had been more than a father to me, but he would have Consuelo; and England would be intolerable to me for a time.

It was nearly noon when I entered the ingle-room, and sat down for a moment to rest. I felt jaded and spiritless and old. I threw myself down with a heavy sigh, but thought had scarcely begun to separate itself in my brain from sensation, when the door opened and Marland came in.

‘I have been looking for you, Mr. Darkmore,’ he said. ‘In fact, I was sent to find you. I’ve been back since six o’clock
—that is, about the time you went out, and I know that I’ve made a mess of things again. I may say, we made a mess of this case all through; and it’s the only one to which I shall be obliged to look back with shame. I’m glad you and Mr. Gordon took a high hand with me yesterday, though I can tell you I was mad enough then. If you hadn’t done as you did, I might have made some mischief not easy to undo; and there’s my hand.

‘As to last night, I know now I went off on a wild-goose chase, but on the way to the cottage called The Nest the lightning in that storm was too much for me. I wasn’t struck, but I was completely prostrated, and for hours lay on my back in the mud. Already I’ve heard of one or two other such cases. It was an eventful storm.’

‘And an eventful night,’ I added.

‘It was. Well, sir, we bear each other no grudge, I hope. And now you are wanted upstairs. I asked for this chance to speak to you, and got it. I shall always respect you, and wish you well. You’re a man after my own heart, and I’m not ashamed to have been downed by you.’

A word or two I said in reply, and then asked, as though casually, if Marland had seen Miss Hope with Sir Wilfrid when he left the room to come to me.

‘No, Mr. Darkmore, she wasn’t there; and I’m sorry for it, or I should have begged her pardon for all that’s come and gone, and a man can’t do more. I happen to know Miss Hay—Miss Hope and Sir Wilfrid haven’t yet seen each other this morning, for Mr. Gordon, it seems, found her in a deep sleep of exhaustion on a sofa in her boudoir, and would not rouse her. The doctor went to see her later; he said she was all right, and must be allowed to sleep.’

Learning that there was no fear of meeting Consuelo, I took leave of Marland, whose last words to me were, that Miss Traill had disappeared, having left her beloved mongoose behind. She had not meant then, after all, to come back, when she had gone away the day before. And no doubt
she had abandoned her miserable pet to disarm suspicion of her intentions. Evidently she had learned, or suspected, that trouble was brewing for the Woman in Grey, and had determined to be absent when the blow should fall.

(Perhaps I may as well say here that she was never seen by any of us again, and that, when I had drawn attention to the crimes at the Spider Farm, the place was found to be deserted, nor was any trace of the strange inhabitants, or Mr. Nobody of Nowhere, ever found.)

Marland gone, I went upstairs to obey the summons I had received.

Uncle Wilfrid's door was slightly ajar, and, with a tap on the panel, I opened it, then started back, as I saw Consuelo standing near Gordon at the bedside. I would have gone quietly away, but my uncle called me, and I had to face the inevitable.

'Come, Terry, and hear me ask this much-wronged girl to forgive me for the injustice I have done her,' he said. 'She has waked, and has been brought to me. And you are in time to hear me humble myself.'

'Ah, do not speak like that,' she said softly, without seeming to see me. 'There is nothing for me to forgive, but much—much for you to pardon, dear Sir Wilfrid.'

Down she went on her knees by the bedside, and the sun made a halo for her hair. He laid his thin hand upon it, and she went on, speaking softly:

'Though I have lived a lie in your house, I think you will forgive even that, though I may not deserve forgiveness when I tell you all I have to tell. It is time to speak now, when you know that I am innocent. I vowed that otherwise you should never hear the truth. I vowed that, until the day my name was whitened in your eyes, I would never wear a color which other happier women may wear. I would be a Woman in Grey until my fair fame should be established once again, and I should have a right to a name which I have never borne.'
'Once a sad woman fled with her little girl from a husband in whose love she did not believe. She went to America, and when she was reported burned in a terrible fire with her child, she resolved that she would be dead to the world. Then a servant of her family, who had come into money and bought the old home, took the mother and daughter in, hiding them till the poor lady died. The girl this servant had a whim to bring up as her own relative, because she believed she owed the father an old grudge; and she never really loved the child. Never, until the girl had grown to eighteen years, did the woman tell her the truth; and on the very night that she had told it she was murdered. Do you understand, dearest father? Do you know it is neither Florence Haynes nor yet Consuelo Hope who begs your forgiveness and love, but Floria Amory, who bears the same name as her dead mother?'

For long there was silence in the room, and the old man and the beautiful woman were in each other's arms.

I had never dreamed of such a revelation as this, and yet, now that it had come, I felt, somehow, no shock of surprise. She had spoken of one who had a 'right' to the treasure in the secret room making over that right to me and to Uncle Wilfrid. Now I could see what she had meant; for, as I have said long ago, Uncle Wilfrid had married his cousin, an Amory of the Lorn Abbey branch, and through her, being the last of the line, Consuelo would indeed have a right to own or give away whatever might be supposed to belong to the Lorn Abbey Amorys. The chart she had found, and learned to understand, and, for the love of me, she would have given me other treasure beside that of her priceless love.

Now, the only real treasure I had lost. The other was as dross to me.

Uncle Wilfrid spoke at last words of endearment, such as I had never heard before from those reserved lips.

'Now he knew the reason of the wonderful resemblance to
his lost wife,' I heard him say; and as he so said I learned
the secret which he had never told, even to me—the secret of
the strange attraction, the strange influence of the beautiful,
mysterious Consuelo Hope.

'You have told me, Terry,' he said at length, when he had
remembered me, 'that you and this dear girl were to be
nothing to each other; but——'

'They shall be all to each other!' Tom Gordon's voice
cried out, sharp with pain. 'It was I who held them apart. I
meant to keep it up at first, but, by Heaven! I can't. I made
him swear that he would let her hate him if I would estab-
lish her innocence. It was all for her sake; and I will show
him now that I can do as much for her as he. Take her,
Darkmore. You deserve her, and she is yours.'

She came to me, her face alight with love and sudden
rapture of surprise.

We forgot everything for a moment, and when we remem-
bered, Gordon was gone.

Uncle Wilfrid and I were left alone with her who was
to be henceforward the bright lode-star of our lives—the
Woman in Grey.

THE END.