

"Write from my dictation, post the letter yourself, and observe the most rigid silence respecting it to my family."

"I obeyed his instructions. The letter was brief, and addressed to his lawyer in London. It alluded slightly to his increased indisposition and requested his friend to lose no time in repairing to E—th, where he wished to consult him respecting his will."

"A journey from the metropolis into Devon was not then, as now, an affair of twenty-four hours, and ten days elapsed before Mr. Helsham's man of business reached us. His unexpected arrival threw the family into the most painful agitation; but by the invalid himself the attorney was cordially and eagerly welcomed. Their conference was long; but, as the distressed young man that evening voluntarily confided to me, *very unsatisfactory*. Mr. Underwood candidly told his anxious client that he could make no valid will for the next three weeks,—till, in fact, he was of age."

"I will take your instructions," he added, observing the young man's distress, "will carry out your wishes in every particular, but take care to have the will drawn up, and ready in every respect for execution, the moment you are twenty-one—till then you are powerless."

"The invalid expressed audibly his distress and disappointment."

"Three weeks will soon pass," suggested his companion.

"But if I should die in the interim?"

"Then," replied the lawyer, "you will be unable to make any provision for your family. They must be left to the kindness and consideration of the next heir."

"In other words," said young Helsham, "to absolute beggary?"

"And as the sick man repeated to me, during a sleepless night, this painful conclusion, his lips quivered with agony. I endeavoured to console him; I reminded him that he had youth on his side, that ease and quiet would do much to stay the progress of disease, that no expedient was omitted to counteract it, and that, in truth, the interval one-and-twenty days, was very short."

"Not in my case, nurse,"—was his gloomy reply.

"The excitement consequent on this interview, and the feelings of bitter disappointment which it left behind, were prejudicial to him. His manner underwent an entire change. Previous to his lawyer's visit he had been submissive, calm, and cheerful; now he was anxious, irritable, and impatient. No attentions seemed to soothe him, no vigilance to satisfy him; every feeling was absorbed in a passionate desire to live over his minority; and the anxiety with which he watched every new symptom, the eagerness with which each morning he scanned the countenance of his medical attendant, as if to read his fate there, the restless impatience with which he counted the lagging hours,—all this it was painful to witness. To himself, moreover, it was destruction. Henry Helsham's bitterest enemy could have suggested no surer scheme for hastening his end than his own unhappy suggestion of Mr. Underwood's visit, and the incessant excitement which followed it."

"And, amid all this anxiety, all this restlessness about the present, was there," said I, interrupting her, "no thought bestowed on a higher and nobler state of existence?"

"The aged woman was silent, and I repeated my inquiry."

"Religion was not fashionable in that family!" was the revolting reply.

"The remark, every way offensive, was from her lips, under her circumstances and within those walls, appalling. I told her so. Reckless of all reproof, she drew breath, and hurried on."

"Twelve of the twenty-one days had expired when the will came down. For the first time the family seemed to take alarm,—all but Major Helsham. He persisted in saying 'it was only a cold—a severe, and rather obstinate cold. The will!—tut! I think nothing of that. I've known men to live five-and-forty years after making their will! A lad with Harry's prospects die? A likely thing indeed! If he's not better next month, I'll take him to Madeira. A sea-voyage, and a short sojourn at Madeira, will set up any man. Doctors run tame about my house, as if it were a county hospital! A lad's appetite fails him, cough comes on, he looks rather pinched in the face, and in an instant those blood-suckers, the fee-nanting doctors, surround the mother and groan her into the belief that her son is on his death-bed! I beg I may hear no more of such nonsense!"

"He was obeyed; he did hear 'no more nonsense' on the subject. The next tidings brought him were too clear to admit of cavil. The day on which the will arrived was one of considerable excitement. Its contents were made known by the failing youth to his mother. He told her in feeble accents, that if she wished any alteration to be made, that was the time to suggest it. Tears were her reply; and in an agony of grief I half led her, half carried her, to her apartment. It was in vain that I urged the necessity of quiet, and besought the sisters to restrain their feelings while in their brother's presence. I might as well have shouted to 'The Parson and Clerk' at Dawlish." The Miss Helshams were quite as unpenetrable to counsel, and in taking up their position quite as immovable. The whole family, the major always expected, seemed I thought to vie with each other in the noisiness and extravagance of their grief. If they knew how obstreperous lamentation distracts the dying person—how it unnerves and unsettles him—how it aggravates his sufferings, and hastes his end affectionate relations would avoid it. The issue was exactly what I expected. Towards evening the ill-fated young man burnt with hectic fever; thirst, which nothing could assuage, parched him; violent and rapidly-succeeding fits of coughing distressed him, and rendered sleep impossible. Such was the aspect of affairs till about three in the morning, when the fever began to subside, the cough to be less frequent, I ventured to hope the worst of that weary night was over. Suddenly he spoke in, I fancied, an unusual and peculiar tone; a strange, gurgling sound in the throat followed. I ran towards him—blood was gushing from his mouth and nostrils—he had ruptured a blood-vessel!

"To raise him instantly, to ring for assistance, to apply cold water freely, to hold him upright in my arms till further help could be procured, seemed to be the act of a single instant; and it was successful. He revived, smiled, and whispered, 'Summon my surgeon.' He came; approved of what had been done; and told me what, in truth, I knew before, that this new symptom was alarming; and that the case had now become critical." A second physician, Dr. Luke, was called in. His directions were peremptory, and he insisted on their observance. The family were excluded from the sick-room. Positive orders were given

to maintain it in perfect quiet. Windows and doors—it was November—were thrown open, that the lowest possible temperature might be obtained. A single sheet and counterpane formed the whole covering allowed the invalid. Speech was forbidden. In future he was to communicate his wishes on a slate. It was singular how completely, throughout these trying circumstances, one idea possessed him. His first question was, 'whether he should live till that day se'night—his birthday?' His next, 'whether, in that case, he should be in full possession of his faculties?'

"The reply of the physicians was ready and cautious. With respect to his first question they told him they hoped he would live much beyond the period he had named; but that everything depended on his keeping himself perfectly quiet, and shunning whatever would excite emotion. As to his second inquiry, 'it was well known that with persons labouring under his complaint the faculties generally remained unclouded to the last moment.' They again counselled silence, and withdrew. To the weeping mother below they were more communicative. They told her 'no opinion as to the result could then be hazarded. If the next eight and forty hours went by without any recurrence of the bleeding, all immediate danger, they hoped, might be then said to have passed away. The new symptom was alarming; but its return might, possibly, be obviated by good nursing; care, quiet, and vigilance.' They then rose, looked grave, bowed over their respective fees and departed.

"The specified period did not elapse without bringing with it a renewal of the dreadful symptom. Again the vessel opened, and again life was with difficulty preserved. His thoughts then turned to a fresh object. He directed his cousin, his heir-at-law, to be sent for—*express*. It was imagined, for no explanation could be sought or given, that his object in summoning Mr. Lemuel Helsham was to interest him in behalf of his mother and sisters; to represent to them their destitute condition, should he die a minor; to commend them to his kind offices; and, if possible, to extract from him some promise in their favour. Such, at least, was the impression throughout the household. Not that even then, wasted and debilitated as he was, the sufferer ever wholly despaired of carrying out his cherished plan. The will was kept in a small blotting-case, on a stand by his side; and when he was too weak to speak, he would, on waking from sleep, point to it, and inquire *with the eye*, if it were there. It was invariably, on these occasions, exhibited. He smiled, and was satisfied. Poor fellow! it was the one idea which held him to the last!"

"The cousin came. He was a harsh-looking, harsh-visaged man, of forty. He scanned curiously, and without emotion, the pallid, sad, and gentle face, that was earnestly raised to him; expressed in civil terms his 'regret' at the spectacle; professed his 'willingness to do what propriety would justify,' hoped there 'would be no need for his meddling with matters at all; said the Exeter doctors were thought clever, Dr. Luke especially; 'knew that there was no cure for decline;' but had heard that while there was life there was hope!"

"The invalid listened; gazed up sadly and piteously into that hard, dark, passionless countenance; caught its mercenary meaning, and turned, with bitter and burning tears, away. It was the first and only time I saw him so moved."

"Eighteen out of the twenty-one days