

I will, and then shook it up like a draught. Ha, ha! I'll decant it; I like doing it."

The doctor rose to decant the wine, standing at the buffet to do it facing a mirror, and with his back to the table, where the young man had again sullenly seated himself. In the round shining surface of the mirror the room was repeated in sharp clear miniature. The bottle was still gurgling out its crimson stores into the broad silver wine-strainer, when the doctor, casting his eyes upon the mirror, observed John draw swiftly from his breast-pocket a little flat black phial and pour a dozen drops of some thick fluid into the half-full glass which stood beside his uncle's plate.

He took no notice of what he had seen, nor did he look round, but merely said:

"John, I'm sorry to trouble you, but we shall want some brown sherry; there is hardly enough for to-day. Get it before we sit down to the real business of the evening."

The moment John Harkness left the room, the doctor, with the quickness of youth, sipped the wine, recognised the taste of laudanum, threw open the door leading into the surgery, dashed the wine down a sink, then shut the door, and refilled the glass to exactly the same height.

"Here is the sherry, governor. Come, take your wine."

The doctor tossed it off.

"I feel sleepy," he said—"strangely sleepy."

"Oh it is the weather. Go into that green chair and have a ten minutes' nap."

The doctor did so. In a moment or two he fell back, assuming with consummate skill all the external symptoms of deep sleep. A deep apoplectic snoring breathing convinced the doctor's adopted that the laudanum had taken effect.

A moment that hardened man stood watching the sleeper's face; then, falling on his knees, he slipped from the old doctor's finger his massive seal-key.

The instant he turned to run to a cabinet where the doctor's case-book was kept, the old man's stern eyes opened upon him with the swiftest curiosity; but the old man did not move a limb nor a muscle, remaining fixed like a figure of stone.

"He's safe," said the coarse, unfeeling voice; "and now for the case-book, to fix it against him if anything goes wrong."

As he said this, the lost man opened the case-book and made an entry. He then locked the book, replaced it in the cabinet, and slipped the key-ring once more on the doctor's finger. Then he rose and rang the bell softly. The old servant came to the door.

"The governor's taken rather too much wine," he said, blowing out the candles; "awake him about twelve, and tell him I'm gone to bed. You say I'm out, if you dare; and mind and have the trap ready to-morrow at half-past nine. I'm to be at Mrs. Thatcher's."

When the door closed upon the hopeless profligate, the doctor rose and wrung his hands. "Lost, lost!" he said; "but I will still hide his shame. He shall have time still to repent. I cannot—cannot forget how I once loved him."

Sternly the doctor set himself to that task of self-devotion—stern as a soldier chosen for a forlorn hope. "To-morrow," he said, "I will confront him, and try if I can touch that hard heart."

When the servant came at twelve, the doctor pretended to awake. "Joe," he said, "get my chaise ready to-morrow at a quarter to ten; mind, to the moment. Where's Mr. John?"

"Gone to bed, sir. Good night."

"He makes them all liars like himself," said the old man, as he slammed his bedroom door.

VI.

"How is your missus?" said the young doctor, as, driving fast through Crossford the next morning, he suddenly espied Mrs. Thatcher's servant standing at the post-office window.

The old coachman shook his head.

"Very bad, sir; sinking fast."

John Harkness made no reply, but lashed his horse and drove fiercely off in the direction of the sick woman's house.

"It all goes well," he said, half aloud. "I had half a mind to stop the thing yesterday when I saw her; but these fellows press so with their bills, and the governor's so cursed stogy. I really must press it on. It's no crime. What is it? Only sending an old woman two or three days sooner to the heaven she is always whining for. Yet she was fond of me, and it's rather a shame; but what can a fellow do that's so badgered?"

So reasoned this fallen man, steeped in the sophistries which sin uses as narcotics to stupefy its victims.

Arrived at the door, he threw down the reins, tossed back the apron, and leaped out. He was excited and desperate with the brandy he had already found time to take. All at once, as he passed his fingers in a vain way through his whiskers and shook his white great-coat into its natural folds, he glanced upward at the windows. To his surprise, but by no means violent regret, he saw that the blinds were all down.

"By the Lord Harry!" he muttered, "if the old cat hasn't already kicked the bucket! Vogue la galère, that'll do. Now then for regret, lamentation, and a white cambric handkerchief."

He pulled at the bell softly. In a moment or two the door was opened by a servant, whose eyes were red with crying. At the same instant Miss Paget stepped from a room opening into the hall. She had a handkerchief to her face.

"Oh, John, John," she sobbed; "my dear, dear aunt."

"Then she's really gone," said Harkness, with well-feigned regret. "Here, Letty, come into the back parlour and tell me about it. Why, I didn't think the old lady was going so soon."

"Not there, John, not there," said Letty, as she stood before the door.

"I'll go up and see her at once."

"No, no, John, you must not. Not yet."

"Why, what's all this fuss about, Letty?" said Harkness, angrily. "One would think no one had ever died before. Of course it's a bad job, and we're all very sorry; but what must be, must be. It is as bad as crying over spilt milk."

"Oh, John, you never spoke like this before. You never looked like this before. John, you do not really love me." And she burst into a passionate and almost hysterical weeping.

"Nonsense, nonsense, Letty; you know I do. We can marry now, now she's left me her money. I've got rather into a mess lately about tin. It's that old woman who lies up-stairs, and my stinky hard old governor, who kept us so long from marrying and being happy. We will marry in a month or two now, let who will say nay. By George! if there isn't the bureau where she used to keep her papers. The will must be there. There is no harm in having a look at it. Where are the keys, Letty? Go and get them from her room. She's no use, I suppose, for them now? She kept them tight enough while she was alive. Come, hurry off, Letty; this is a turning-point with me."

Letty threw herself before the old bureau, the tears rolling from her eyes. "Oh, John, John," she said, "do not be so cruel and hard hearted. What evil spirit of greed possesses you? You were not so once. I cannot get the keys. Wait. Have you no love for the dead?"

"Stuff and nonsense. I want no whining sentiments. I thought you were a girl of more pluck and sense. Get away from that bureau. I'll soon prise it open. It's all mine now. Mind, I'm queer this morning. Things haven't gone smooth with me lately at all. Get away."

He pushed the weeping girl from the desk, and thrusting in the blade of a large knife, wrenched open the front of the bureau. A will fell out. As he stooped to snatch it up the door opened, and the old doctor stood before him. There were tears in his eyes as he motioned Letty from the room. She gave one long look back, and the door was locked behind her. There was a terrible stern gravity in the old man's pale face, and his mouth was clenched as if fixed with the pang of some mortal agony.

John Harkness stepped back and clutched hold of the shattered bureau, or he would have fallen.

"John," said the old man, "you have deceived me. I loved you, loved you Heaven only knows how tenderly. There was a time when I would have bled to death to save you an hour's pain. There was a time when I thought more of your smallest disappointment than I should have done for the loss of one of my own limbs. I fostered you; I took you from a bad father, and brought you up as my own son. I have been foolishly indulgent, and now, like Absalom, you have taught me bitterly my folly. You have forged—you have lied. Yes, don't dare to speak, sir. You have lied. Blacker and blacker your heart became as you gave yourself to self-indulgence and sin. Further and further you erred from the narrow path; faster and faster you drove down hill, till at last, forsaken by the good angels, and urged forward by the devil, the great temptation came, and you fell into crime. Not a word, sir; you see I know all. Old as I am, 'twas love for you made me subtle. I found out, your forgeries. I discovered your false entries of patients' names. I traced you out in all your follies and vices, and finally I saw you, when you thought me asleep, take the key-ring from my finger, and make those entries in a forged hand in my case-book, that might, but for God's infinite mercy, have led to my being now in prison as a murderer. You may start; but even a horrible cold-blooded crime did not appal you. It is fear, and not repentance, that even now makes you turn pale. The sin of Cain is upon you. Even now, eager faces are looking up from the lowest abysses of hell, waiting for your coming; while, from the nearest heaven, the pale sad face of one who loved you as a mother, regards you with sorrow and with pity."

"Father, father!" cried the unhappy and conscience-stricken wretch, and held out his hands like one waiting for the death-blow from the executioner. "Have mercy. Spare me. I did not kill her. She would have died, anyhow. I am young; give me time to repent."

"John, I will not deceive you as you have deceived me. My sister still lives. I discovered your intended crime, and gave her antidotes. She may yet recover, if it seems good to the all merciful Father; still you had murdered her but for me. Tell me not of repentance. Time will show that. I shall never hear in this world whether or not your repentance is true or false. Here is one hundred pounds. That will start you in another hemisphere for good or for evil. I wish, for the honour of our family, to conceal your shame, and the last spark of love that is left, urges me to conceal your intended crime. Letty you will see no more. I, too, am dead to you for ever. It is now one hour to the next train. Spend that time in preparing for your journey. At the nearest seaport write to me, and I will forward all that belongs to you. Your debts shall be paid. I shall tell people that a sudden spirit of adventure made you leave me and start for Australia."

"But Letty—one word," groaned the discovered criminal. "I love her—one word. I forgot her for a time in my cruel selfishness; but I love her now—mercy—one—"

"Not one word. She is ignorant of your crime, but she knows that you are unworthy of her love. Mind, one struggle, one word of opposition, and I throw you into prison as a forger, and a man who had planned a murder. Go; when that door closes on you, it is as if the earth of the grave had closed over my eyes. We shall meet no more. Go. Speak to no one; and remember, that the will you hold in your hand leaves not a single farthing to yourself. Go. We part for ever. If you write, I burn the letters unopened. Go."

The young man stood for a moment as soldiers are sometimes said to do when a bullet has pierced their hearts. His face was the face of a corpse, but no tears came. The blood was frozen at its source. Then he stooped forward, kissed the old man on the forehead, and rushed from the house.

In five minutes afterwards the door softly opened, and Letty entered. The doctor took her hand. They knelt.

"Let us pray for him," he said, solemnly. "Letty, his fault you shall never know, but you