

nights, death staring me in the face as I watched—that I, whom you would have trusted in the direct extremity—was an assassin."

"Lucius," cried Geoffrey, starting up with a look of horror, "are you mad?"

"No, Geoff. I am reasonable enough now, Heaven knows; whatever I might have been in that fatal time you, You want the truth, and you shall have it, though it will sicken you as it sickens me to think of it. I have kept the hideous secret from you, not because I had any fear of the consequences of my act—not because that I am not ready to defend the deed boldly before my fellow men—but because I thought the horrid story might part us. We have been fast friends for so many years, Geoff, and I could not bear to think your liking might be turned to loathing."

Tears, the agonising drops which intensest pain wrings from manhood, were in his eyes. He covered his face with his clasped hands, as if he would have shut out the very light which had witnessed that horror he shuddered to recall.

"Lucius," exclaimed Geoffrey, at once anxious and bewildered, "all this is madness! You have been overworking your brain."

"Let me tell my story," said the other. "It will lighten my burden to share it—even if the revelation makes you hate me."

"Even on your own showing I would not believe you guilty of any baseness," answered Geoffrey. "I would sooner think your mind distraught than that I had been mistaken in your character."

"It was no deliberate baseness," said Lucius quietly. He had in some measure recovered his composure since that burst of passionate grief. "I did what at that moment appeared to me only an act of justice. I took a life for a life."

"You, Lucius!" cried the other, his eyes opening with horror. "You took the life of a man—yonder—in America?"

"Yes, Geoffrey. I killed the man who blighted my sister's life."

"Good God! He is dead then—this scoundrel—and by your hand."

"He is. And if ever man deserved to die by the act of his fellow man that man most fully merited his fate. But though in that awful hour, when the deed of horror which I had witnessed was burnt into my brain, I took his life deliberately and advisedly, the memory of the act has been a torment to me ever since. But let me tell you the secret of that miserable time. It is not a long story, and I will tell it in as few words as possible."

Briefly, but with an unflinching truthfulness, he told of the night scene in the forest; the ruffian's attempt to enter the hut; and the bullet which struck him down as he burst open the window.

"You lay there, Geoffrey, unconscious; sleeping that blessed sleep which God sends to those whose feet have been journeying on the border-land betwixt life and death. Even to awaken you roughly might have been to peril your chance of recovery. The firing of the gun might have done it. But my first thought was that he, the assassin and traitor who had slaughtered the faithful companion of our dangers and privation—that he, brutal and merciless as any savage in the worst island of the Pacific—should not be suffered to approach you in your helplessness. I had warned him that if he attempted to cross our threshold I would shoot him down with as little compunction as if he had been a mad dog. I kept my word."

"But are you certain your bullet was fatal?"

"Of what followed the firing of that shot I know nothing; but I have never doubted its results. Even if the wound was not immediately fatal the man must have speedily perished. The last I saw was the loosening clutch of his lean hand as he dropped from the window; the last I heard was a howl of pain. My brain, which had been kept on the rack for many a dreary night of sleeplessness and fear, gave way all at once, and I fell to the ground like a log. I have every reason to believe that what I suffered at that moment was an apoplectic seizure which might have been fatal but for Schanck's promptitude in bleeding me. After the shock came brain fever, from which, as you know, I was slow to recover. When my senses did return, I seemed to enter upon a new world. Thought and memory came back by degrees, and the vision of that scene in the forest grew slowly out of the confusion of my brain until it became a vivid picture that has haunted me ever since."

"Had you met the man who betrayed your sister, would you have killed him?" asked Geoffrey.

"In fair fight, yes."

"He who rules the destinies of us all decreed that you should meet him unawares. You were the instrument of God's vengeance upon a villain."

"Vengeance is mine," repeated Lucius thoughtfully. "Often, when reproaching myself for that rash act, I have almost deemed the deed a kind of blasphemy. What right had I to forestall God's day of reckoning? For every crime there is an appointed punishment. The assassin we hang to-day might pay a still heavier price for his sin were we to leave him in the hands of God."

"Lucius," said Geoffrey, stretching out his hand to his friend, "in my eyes you stand clear of all guilt. Was it not chiefly for my sake you fired that shot? and for my own part I can assure you that cold-blooded scoundrel would have had a short shrift had I been his executioner. So let us dismiss all thought of him, with the memory of the last murderer who swung at

Newgate. One fact remains paramount—a fact that for me changes earth to Paradise; your sister is free."

Lucius started, and for the first time a look of absolute fear came into his face.

"What?" he exclaimed. "You will tell her that her husband fell by my hand? You forget, Geoffrey, that my confession must be sacred. If I did not pledge you to secrecy, it was because I had so firm a faith in your honor that I needed no promise of your silence."

"Let me tell her only of that man's death," "She will hardly be satisfied with a statement unsupported by proof," answered Lucius doubtfully.

"What, will she doubt my honor?"

"Love is apt to be desperate. The lover has a code of his own."

"Not if he is an honest man," cried Geoffrey. "But Janet has been once deceived, and will be slow to trust where she loves. Put her to the test. Tell her that you know this man is dead, and if she will believe you and if she will be your wife, there is no one, not even yourself, who will be gladder than I. God knows it is a grief for me to think of her lonely position, her life-long penance for the error of her youth. I have entreated her to share my home, humble as it is, but she refuses. She is proud of her independence, and though I know she loves me, she prefers to live aloof from me, with no other society than her child's."

They talked long, Geoffrey full of mingled hope and fear. He left his friend late in the afternoon, intending to go down to Stillington by the mail train, to try his fortunes once more. Lucius had told him he was beloved; was not that sufficient ground for hope?

"She will not be too exacting," he said to himself. "She will not ask me for chapter and verse, for the doctor's certificate, the undertaker's bill. If I say to her, upon my honor, your husband is dead, she will surely believe me."

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

A CHANGE CAME O'ER THE SPIRIT OF MY DREAM.

That calm delight which Lucius Davoren had hitherto felt in the society of his betrothed, and his happy expectation of a prosperous future to be shared with her, were now clouded over with new doubts and fears. His mind had been weighed down by the burden of a dreadful secret, from the moment of that discovery which had showed him that the man he had killed and the father of the girl who loved him were one and the same. Those calm clear eyes which looked at him so tenderly sometimes wounded him as keenly as the bitterest reproach. Had she but known the fatal truth—she who had always set the memory of her father above her affection for himself—could he doubt the result of that knowledge? Could he doubt that she would have turned from him with abhorrence, that she would have shrunk with loathing from the slightest touch of his blood-stained hand.

Vain would have been all argument, all attempt to justify his act, with the daughter who clung with a romantic fondness to her lost father's image.

"You killed him," She would have summed up all arguments in those three words. "You killed him. If he was wicked, you gave him no time for repentance; you cut him off in the midst of his sin. Who made you his judge, who made you his executioner? He was a sinner like yourself, and you thrust yourself between God and His infinite mercy. You did more than slay his body; you robbed him of redemption for his sin."

He could imagine that this girl, clinging with unreasonable love to that dead sinner's memory, would argue somewhat in this wise, and he felt himself powerless to reply. These thoughts weighed him down, and haunted him even in the company of his beloved. Yet, strange to say, Lucille did not remark the difference in her lover, and it remained for Lucius to perceive a change in her. His own preoccupation had rendered him less observant than usual, and he was slow to mark this alteration in Lucille's manner, but the time came when he awakened to the fact. There was a change, indefinable, indescribable, but a change which he felt vaguely, and which seemed to grow stronger day by day. The thought filled him with a sudden horror. Did she suspect? Had some circumstance, unnoticed by him, led the way to the discovery he most dreaded, to the revelation of that secret he hoped to hide from her for ever? Surely no. Her hand did not shrink from his, the kiss he pressed upon that pure young brow evoked no shudder. Whatever the trouble was that had wrought this change in her, paled the fair young cheek and saddened the sweet eyes, the perplexity or the sorrow was in herself, and had no reference to him.

"Lucille," he said one evening, a few days after his interview with Geoffrey Hosack, as they paced the garden together in the dusk, "it seems to me that we are not quite so happy as we used to be. We do not talk so hopefully of the future, we have not such pleasant thoughts and fancies as we once had. Very often when I am speaking to you, I see your eyes fixed with a strange far-off look, as if you were thinking of something quite remote from the subject of our talk. Is there anything that troubles you, dear? Are you uneasy about your grandfather?"

"He does not seem so well as he did three weeks ago. He does not care about coming

down-stairs now; the old weakness seems to have returned. And his appetite has fallen off again. I wish you would be a little more candid, Lucius," she said, looking at him earnestly. "You used to say he was improving steadily, and that you had great hopes of making him quite himself again before very long; now you hardly say anything, except to give me directions about diet."

"Do you wish me to speak quite plainly, Lucille," asked Lucius seriously; "even if what I have to say should increase your anxiety?"

"Yes, yes; pray treat me like a woman, and not like a child. Remember what my life has been—how full of care and sorrow. I am not like a girl who has lived only in the sunshine. Tell me the plain truth, Lucius, however painful. You think my grandfather worse?"

"I do, Lucille, very much worse than I thought him three weeks ago. And what is more, I am obliged to confess myself puzzled by his present condition. I can find no cause for this backward progress, and yet I am watching the symptoms very closely. I have this case so deeply at heart, that I do not believe any one could do more with it than I. But if I do not see an improvement before many days are over, I shall seek advice from wider experience than my own. I will bring one of the greatest men in London to see your grandfather. A consultation may be unnecessary or useless, but it will be for our mutual satisfaction."

"Yes," answered Lucille, "I have the strongest faith in your skill; but, as you say, it might be better to have further advice. Poor grandpapa! It makes me wretched to see him suffer—to see him so weak and weary and restless, if not in absolute pain, and to be able to do so little for him."

"You do all that love and watchfulness can do, dearest. By the way, you spoke of diet just now. That is a thing about which you cannot be too careful. We have to restore exhausted nature, to renovate a constitution almost worn by hard usage. I should like to know all about the preparation of the broths and jellies you give your grandfather. Are they made by you, or by Mrs. Wincher?"

"Wincher makes the broths and beef-tea in an earthenware jar in the oven, I make the jellies with my own hands."

"Are you quite sure of Wincher's cleanliness and care?"

"Quite. I see her getting the jar ready every morning when I am in the kitchen attending to other little things. I am not afraid of working in the kitchen, you know, Lucius."

"I know that you are the most domestic and skilful among women, and that you will make a model wife, darling," he answered tenderly. "For a poor man, perhaps," she answered, with the smile that had been rare of late, "not for a rich one. I should not know how to spend money, or to give dinner-parties, or to dress fashionably."

"That kind of knowledge would come with the occasion. When I am a great surgeon you shall be a lady of fashion. But to return to the diet question. You are assured that there is perfect cleanliness in the preparation of your grandfather's food—no neglected copper saucepans used, for instance?"

"There is not such a thing as a copper saucepan in the house. What made you ask the question?"

"Mr. Sivewright has complained lately of occasional attacks of nausea, and I am unable to account for the symptom. That is what makes me anxious about the preparation of his food."

"Would it be any satisfaction to you if I were to prepare everything myself?"

"A very great satisfaction."

"Then I will do it, Lucius. Wincher may feel a little offended, but I will try and reconcile her to my interference. It was a great privilege to be allowed to make the jellies."

"Never mind if she is vexed, darling; a few sweet words from you will soon smooth her ruffled feathers. I shall be glad to know that you prepare everything for the invalid. And I would not do it in the kitchen, where Wincher might interfere. Have a fire in the little dressing-room next your grandfather's room, and have your saucepans and beef-tea and so on up there. By that means you will be able to give him what he wants at any moment, without delay."

"I will do so, Lucius. But I fear you think my grandfather in danger."

"Not exactly in danger, darling. But he is very ill, and I have been thinking it might be better for you to have a nurse. I don't say that he requires any one to sit up at night with him. He is not ill enough for that. I am only afraid that the care he requires may be too much for you."

"It is not too much for me, Lucius," answered the girl eagerly. "I would not have a stranger about him for worlds. The sight of a sick-nurse would kill him."

"That is a foolish prejudice, Lucille."

"It may be; and when you find I nurse him badly, or neglect him, you may bring a stranger. Till then I claim the right to wait upon him, with Mr. Wincher's assistance. He has been my grandfather's valet—giving the little help his master would ever accept—for the last twenty years."

"And you have perfect confidence in Mr. Wincher?"

"Confidence!" exclaimed Lucille, with a wondering look. "I have known him all my life, and seen his devotion to my grandfather. What reason could I have to doubt him?"

"Little apparent reason, I admit," answered Lucius thoughtfully. "Yet it is sometimes

from those we least suspect we receive the deepest wrongs. These Winchers may believe your grandfather to be very rich; they may suppose that he has left them a good deal of money; and might—mind, I am only suggesting a remote contingency—they might desire to shorten his life. O, my dearest," he cried, pained by Lucille's whitening face, "remember I do not for a moment say that this is likely; but—as I told you few moments ago—there are symptoms in the case that puzzle me, and we cannot be too careful."

Lucille leaned upon him trembling like a leaf, with her white face turned towards him. A look of unspeakable horror in her eyes.

"You don't mean—" she faltered; "you cannot mean that you suspect, that you are afraid of my grandfather being poisoned!"

"Lucille," he said tenderly, sustaining the almost-fainting girl, "the truth is always best. You shall know all I can tell you. There are diseases which baffle even experience; there are symptoms which may mean one thing or another, may indicate such and such a state, or be the effect of a condition exactly opposite; there are symptoms which may arise alike from natural causes or from a slow and subtle poison. This is why so many a victim has been done to death under the very eye of his medical attendant, and only when too late the hideous truth has dawned upon the doctor's mind, and he has asked himself with bitter self-reproach, 'Why did I not make this discovery sooner?'"

"Whom could you suspect?" cried Lucille. "I am confident as to the fidelity of Mr. and Mrs. Wincher. They have had it in their power to rob my grandfather at any moment, if gain could have tempted them to injure him. Why, after all these years of faithful servitude, should they attempt to murder him?"

This was said in a low tremulous voice, terror still holding possession of the girl's distracted mind.

"The thought is as horrible as it appears impossible," said Lucius, whose apprehensions had as yet assumed only the vaguest form. He had never meant to betray this shadowy fear, which had arisen only within the last twenty-four hours, but he had been led on to say more than he intended.

"Let us speak no more of it, dearest," he said soothingly. "You attach too much importance to my words. I have only suggested care; I have only told you a well-known fact, namely, that the symptoms of slow poisoning and of natural disease are sometimes exactly alike."

"You have filled me with fear and horror!" cried Lucille, shuddering.

"Let me bring a nurse into the house," pleaded Lucius, angry with himself for his imprudence. "Her presence would at least give you courage and confidence."

"No; I will not have my grandfather frightened to death. He shall take nothing but what I prepare for him; no one shall go near him but I, or without my being present."

"By the way," said Lucius thoughtfully, "you remember that noise I heard the evening we went up to the loft together?"

"I remember your fancy about a noise," Lucille answered carelessly.

"My fancy then, if you like. I suppose nothing has ever happened since to throw a light upon that fancy of mine?"

"Nothing."

"You are quite sure that no stranger could obtain admission to those up-stairs rooms, or to any part of this house?"

"Quite sure."

"In that case we may rest assured that all is safe, and you need think no more of anything I have said."

He tried with every art he knew to soothe away the fears which his imprudent words had occasioned, but could not altogether succeed in tranquillising her, though he brought the *Amati* violin into requisition, and played some of his sweetest symphonies—melodies which, to quote Mrs. Wincher, "might have drawn tears out of a deal board."

Nothing he could say could dispel the cloud which he had raised; and he left Lucille full of trouble and self-reproach, beyond measure angry with himself for his folly.

CHAPTER II.

LUCIUS IS PUZZLED.

When Lucius made his early visit—now always the first duty of every day—to Cedar House on the following morning, he found that Lucille had already acted upon his advice. The dressing-room—a slip of a room communicating by double doors with Mr. Sivewright's spacious chamber—had been furnished in a rough-and-ready manner with a chair and table, an old cabinet, brought down from the loft, to hold cups and glasses, medicine bottles, and other oddments; a little row of saucepans, neatly arranged in a cupboard by the small fireplace; and a narrow little iron bedstead in a corner of the room.

"I shall sleep here at night," said Lucille, as Lucius surveyed her preparations, "and if I keep those two doors ajar, I can hear every sound in the next room."

"My darling, it will never do for you to be on the watch at night," he answered anxiously. "You will wear yourself out in a very short time. Anxiety by day and wakefulness by night will soon tell their tale."

"Let me have my own way, Lucius," she pleaded. "You say yourself that my grandfather wants no attendance at night. He told me only this morning that he sleeps pretty well, and rarely wakes till the morning. But it will