

back the shutter, and there he was! "Oh, Master Frank, my boy!" I cried; and just then, hearing the noise, in comes the master!

"Well, I can't tell you the scene there was then. Master Frank told us how, fearing his father would find some way to stop his marriage, that very day, seeing he was one-and-twenty, and nothing could be said he had gone and married the young lady he'd spoken of. It seems he thought to slip in and bring her forward before all the company, thinking his father, for shame's sake, wouldn't say a word. But there had been a heap of delays, and a train missed; and, when they did arrive, 'twas so late, the house was dark and the company gone. So then he thought, if he could get in unbeknown, he'd find me, and get me to make his peace. And there the young lady was standing behind him—a poor, pretty, timid young thing. Oh, but you looked like her the first night you came; and often now you mind me of her!

"Maybe, if Master Frank's plan had succeeded, and the poor young thing had once been introduced as his wife, the master might have made the best of it and cooled down, for shame's sake, before the company; but now he was furious. He would hear nothing, right or wrong; and, though I begged him on my knees to have them in, if only for that night, he swore that inside his house they should never set foot! Poor Master Frank. He had counted too far on his father's love. He turned white, and made an oath in his bitterness as he would never ask again for forgiveness, or seek his father's face. He just put his arm about his pale trembling young wife and turned away off into the darkness.

"I tried to follow, but the master wouldn't have it.

"Let them go!" says he. "I'll never see them more!"

"Poor man, he never did! He repented after, when, before the year was out, they was both dead; and he tried hard to trace their little child. I think her people kept the baby away for pride, for he could never find it."

"Did you never know more about her?" I ask. "Who was she?"

"A Miss Hartley, from Farmcroft in Yorkshire."

"Farmcroft!" I exclaim. "My people come from there; and Hartley was my aunt's maiden name. But it is so common in that part."

"Very like," says the old woman, regarding my face with attention; "still it would be strange now if you was a cousin of some sort. I never saw the poor young lady but that once; but you did mind me of her strangely as you stood at the door that first night you came."

Mrs. Norris does not leave me till I am in bed and have given her my promise to sleep like a good child.

I have every intention of keeping my word; but at first no artifices will win oblivion. I have had a headache all day. The night is hot. I am feverish and excited by the news I have received of Frank, an excitement which Mrs. Norris's tale has temporarily diverted, but not dispelled. On the contrary, my imagination has been roused; and, as, after weary tossing, drowsiness at last steals over me, the Frank of her story and my husband get mixed up together in feverish half-waking dreams.

The picture down stairs comes back to my mind. "Like Frank after some bad illness." It must be like him now then. His father was cruel to him—Mr. Eyreton that is—would he be good to Frank when he comes home? Will he come? It is a week since he was wounded. If he were alive he would write.

Then comes uneasy slumber, and with it come horrible dreams—Frank lying dead, and I kept away from my last sight of him by Mr. Eyreton; Frank alive, but wounded and in pain, trying to crawl to me, while some invisible barrier keeps us apart; Frank imprisoned by his uncle in the desolate room below—no, not Frank—the pale-faced image of my husband. The door is locked; Mr. Eyreton never enters it. Frank does not come to me!

I awake, terrified and bewildered. Dreams and reality are so entangled in my confused brain that I cannot separate them. Vainly I strive to reason away my vague fears. If Frank were in the room below, I must have seen him the last time I was down there. It was only that dreadful picture. Well, I will go and see.

Half ashamed of this foolish impulse, which nevertheless I am constrained in some strange fashion to obey, I rise and throw on some clothes. As I am about to leave the room, I remember the child. Some evil may happen to him while I am gone, suggests an excited brain. He may awake frightened, says struggling reason. Snatching up a thick shawl, I wrap it round him and take him in my arms. The little fellow wakes, and I hush his wondering cry. Satisfied that he is with me, he obeys my injunction to be silent, and nestles down in my arms.

The moonlight makes the corridor as light as day. Cautiously I pass along it and descend the wide low-stepped staircase. I have forgotten to bring a light, but it is not needed. We traverse the hall and pause before the door of the old drawing-room. The handle is stiff, and a slight difficulty in turning it rouses me from my state of semi-somnambulism.

For one moment the utter folly of my errand overwhelms me. What idiotic fancy has brought me prowling down to the hall in the small hours of the night, dragging my baby from his warm bed to wander along draughty passages?

But here I am; and, being here, I will enter the room, look round, and quiet once and for ever my excited fancy, then go sensibly back to bed. Turning the handle, I pass the threshold and stand just inside the open door.

Though knowing the room to be unobstructed by furniture, I hesitate to advance. An unreasoning dread of "the dark" is constitutional with some persons. I have been subject to it from a child; and, though the moon shines in through the door from the hall, her rays scarcely light the great empty room. There is a dim unbearable twilight. See that picture I must before I retrace my steps; therefore I stand irresolute, lamenting my stupidity in not bringing either lamp or candle.

I can distinguish the picture's position, for the moonbeams have marked out the tarnished frame with a line of light. Suddenly, as I gaze, the line widens, widens slowly till the whole frame stands out against the dark wall. Turning with an involuntary shudder of fear to discover the cause of this phenomenon, I see that the shutters of the window which I opened on my first visit to the room are slowly moving back.

"The wind—nothing more. Be brave!" I whisper to my beating heart.

The next moment they are noisily pushed farther apart; and there, in the open window, with only the low half door between us, stands the figure of the picture—the white face, with its strange dreadful likeness to my husband, the blue cloak thrown round one shoulder—all, all the same!

My heart stops beating, the darkness seems closing round me. My little Frank, whose innocent heart knows nothing of spiritual terrors, sees the likeness, and, stretching out his arms, calls—

"Papa—papa!"

I clutch him tightly to my breast, turn, try to fly, and sink down in a swoon.

When I come to myself, I am lying on the bed in my own room. The night-light burns steadily on the dressing-table; little Frank lies sleeping in his cot. Gradually the horrors through which I have passed recur to my mind. Were they indeed but a bad dream? Am I even yet awake? Asking myself this question, I try to rise in bed in order to look round the room and assure myself that all is real. To my surprise, I am unable to move; my strength has vanished.

"It is certainly a dream," say I mentally. "Such helpless feelings are common in dreams."

I fall asleep again almost immediately, and when next I open my eyes it is broad day. I lie quiet for some time, with not even the wish to move as the incidents of the preceding night pass before my mind.

At last I notice that the child is not in his cot, and over a chair, half hidden by the curtains of the bed, lies a blue cloak. It is no garment of fantasy, but solid blue cloth; and, as I stretch forward to examine it, I notice buttons, the device of which is not unfamiliar to me. Surely no ghost would adorn its raiment with the crest of my husband's regiment! As I stare in wonder at the well-known sign, a slight noise attracts my attention. Who is this rising from the fireside chair and stepping forwards towards me? The face is pale indeed, and one arm is resting in a sling; but, even as my senses fail, the face bent over me with such a look of tenderness, the loving well-remembered voice, tell all. No ghost, no spirit from another world, could have so real a presence. Oh, Frank, my Frank!

They all make a great fuss over me, and treat me as an invalid; but my strength is returning very fast, though they tell me there were two long days between the night that Frank found me swooning in the old drawing-room and the morning when I woke to recognise his old Lancer cloak lying by my bed. He and I have had much to tell each other. He was badly wounded, and lay ill in hospital for days and weeks, too ill to hear or know anything. When he began to recover, and reflected how long I had been without news, he was frightened at the thought of my anxiety, and longed to scrawl, if it were but one line; and he did make a left-handed attempt, but I suppose there was some mistake, for I never received it.

Then came the tidings that he was to be invalided home. He travelled day and night to join me. My letters having always been cheerful, he knew nothing of the peculiarities of my life at the Court, and came straight on the night he arrived in England, never heeding the lateness of the hour till he arrived at the Sloughbury station and found it impossible to procure a conveyance. He walked, lost his way, and reached the house quite tired out, to find all dark and no sign of life and wakefulness. Hoping to see a light in some servant's room, he went round to the other side of the house, climbed the low pleasure-ground wall and then saw that one of the windows of the old drawing-room was open and the shutter ajar. He determined to try whether he could not get in and spend the night in some arm-chair, or even on the floor, wrapped in his cloak.

As he pushed open the shutter he saw little Frank and me standing in the moonlight, and heard the baby-voice call to him. Ah, my baby's innocence, that feared neither ghost nor goblin, was quicker to greet him than all my anxious love! As I fell, Frank sprang in and tried to raise me with the arm he had free; and, as he was bending over me, the door creaked, and, looking up, he saw old Mr. Eyreton, who had been roused by my fall, and had come to discover the cause.

Frank was much mystified, and did not know how to end the scene. He could not lift me without help, and old Mr. Eyreton seemed quite incapable of rendering any. At last Mrs. Norris was alarmed by the noise