

CHAPTER III

THE scene of the tragedy, that shop in the Strand, was well-lit and well-appointed. But he, Savage Keith Rickman, had much preferred the dark little second-hand shop in the City where he had laboured as a boy. There was something soothing in its very obscurity and retirement. He could sit there for an hour at a time, peacefully reading his Homer. In that agreeable dusty twilight, outward forms were dimmed with familiarity and dirt. His dreams took shape before him, they came and went at will, undisturbed by any gross collision with reality. There was hardly any part of it that was not consecrated by some divine visitation. It was in the corner by the window, standing on a step-ladder and fumbling in the darkness for a copy of Demosthenes, *De Corona*, that he lit on his first Idea. From his seat behind the counter, staring, as was his custom, into the recess where the coal-scuttle was, he first saw the immortal face of Helen in Leuce.

Here, all that beautiful world of thought lay open to the terrific invasion of things. His dreams refused to stand out with sufficient distinctness from a background of coloured bindings, plate glass and mahogany. They were liable at any moment to be broken by the violent contours of customers. A sight of Helen in Leuce could be obtained only by dint of much concentrated staring at the clock; and as often as not Mr. Rickman's eye dropt its visionary freight on encountering the cashier's eye in its passage from the clock to the paper.

But (as he reflected with some humour) though Mr. Rickman's ideas so frequently miscarried, owing to that malig-