

prepared for such a stroke, his crime rose before him like some menacing phantom.

Beatrice, urged by repeated messages from her father, at length appeared in the drawing-room.

Almost the moment his guests had retired, Mr. Carwardyne took his overcoat, hat and great stick, and cautiously went out by a small private door, rarely used. Emerging into the grounds, he carefully skirted round by the shrubbery, until he reached a postern door. This was unfastened, and going out, he closed it with a cautious hand.

By an adroit inquiry with one of the grooms, he had ascertained where this woman, Peggy Wilnot, had taken up her abode. The situation of the cottage he knew perfectly well, and could have found his way there blindfold, though he had never entered its doors.

What his special intentions were, he could not have told. A wild whirl of thoughts disordered his brain. He felt as if one had risen from the dead to accuse him.

Yet this woman had not, seemingly, come to accuse him to the world: only, by some wretched mischance to his own, and only child, his girl—the one being whom, after himself, he dearly loved.

Ten minutes' rapid walking brought him to the poor little cottage where the fatal secret had been told.

The woman lay evidently dead on her miserable pallet. Beside her stood the Rector. The dim light fell on the dead woman's face, casting from the figure of the Rector a terrible towering shadow, that reared itself menacingly, it seemed, to the guilty eyes of Selwyn Carwardyne.

On the rickety table, amid phials, plates, basins, cups, and other litter of the invalid chamber, lay a written paper, with a clumsy ink-bottle, and a pen of the commonest quality. A small book, either a Bible or prayer-book, rested beside it.

"Her dying confession!"

The surmise ran like electric fire through Selwyn Carwardyne's brain. He would have given five hundred pounds, had he possessed it, to know if this suspicion were correct. The door was only a few steps from the bed by which the table stood; Charles Etherage seemed lost in thought; one swift movement, and the paper would be his. If the guttering candle were overturned, there would be only the feeble glimmer of the fire in the grate, and he could easily escape in the obscurity.

The temptation was too great to be resisted. With a step perfectly inaudible, he stole up to the table, and had stretched out his hand to snatch the paper and extinguish the candle, when Charles Etherage turned.

With singular presence of mind, Squire Carwardyne dropped his hand, straightened up his half-crouching figure, and said, as coolly as his quickly-beating pulse would admit:

"This poor creature, I understand, sent for me."

"It is too late," replied the young Rector, taking up the paper, folding it, and placing it in the breast-pocket of his coat.

Squire Carwardyne instantly knew, from the tone of his voice and the coldness of his manner, that the secret was in Charles Etherage's keeping. All, or how much? He gazed steadfastly at the calm, spiritual face, as if trying to read the very soul of the young man.

"Why do you stay here?" he asked.

"Dr. Arnold has gone to desire the nurse to return. When he comes back, I shall be released."

"That paper—"

"Contains the history of a great crime, with the names of those who were guilty."

"You intend to bring those criminals to justice?" demanded Squire Carwardyne, his face blanching.

"I do not know."

"What was the nature of the crime?"

"You know it already. Only the chief author of the crime is now living. He—"

"Go on."

Steps were heard outside.

Squire Carwardyne clutched the arm of the young man tightly.

"It is the Doctor," he said. Does he know?"

"He does not. Your secret rests with me for the present."

"My secret?"

But the medical man, followed by two women, pushed open the door of the room. A few words passed between him and the Rector; then the latter took up his hat, as if about to depart. Squire Carwardyne had drawn back into the obscurity of the dim corner near the door, so that Dr. Arnold should not see him; then he slightly preceded Charles Etherage, dark and dreadful thoughts careering through his brain. He went down to the little wooden gate, and there lingered until the Rector came out. Then the two walked slowly, silently down the road leading towards the separate homes of both.

Suddenly the Squire said:

"Will you explain the mysterious words used by you just now? You seemed to hint that I had some interest in the paper which—"

His voice failed; his throat seemed full of hot sand.

Charles Etherage stopped abruptly.

"Mr. Carwardyne, I now understand what, earlier this night, was a deep, heart-rending mystery to me; the conduct of one whom I love and reverence beyond all on earth! My heart is pierced with grief.

That poor, dying woman confessed to me that she had shared in a great crime. Nearly thirty years ago a man was with his dying cousin, who had drawn up a will, leaving large estates to his young wife and infant son. This man substituted a second will for the real one, stealthily exchanging the one for the other, the dying man being too weak and ill, and too trustful in his deceitful relative, to be able to detect the fraud.

"This Mrs. Wilnot, with her husband's servants in the house, participated in the fraud, being largely bribed by the chief criminal. The deceived man died; the traitor, who was a lawyer, and had drawn up both wills, provided a slender independence for the widow and infant son, but took the rest. I suppose the world wondered at the disposition of property; but I know nothing of that."

"Did she tell you the name of the lawyer?"

"Did she tell you the name of the lawyer?" asked his hearer, in a frightful, hollow whisper.

"Thou art the man!"

A dead silence; then Squire Carwardyne said:

"Did she tell you the name of the widow of the man himself?"

"She was about to do so; but her strength failed her. It was only at the last she mentioned names at all."

"Is the paper signed?"

"It is, although not completed."

"What will you do with it?"

"I do not know."—The tones showed the agony the speaker endured. "I dare not think till I am calmer, for it has been an awful shock to me. Mr. Carwardyne, I loved—I love your daughter, and I believe she loves me. Think, then, of the anguish with which I suffer this crushing blow!"

Squire Carwardyne did not reply; but continued to walk moodily along, crunching the fair, spotless snow beneath his tread.

"He does not know that his own is the name which he would have spoken. Had his mother not died in his boyhood, he would have heard something of the story years ago," ran the Squire's thought.

"I must have that paper at all hazards."

"Good-night," abruptly said the Squire.

"Good-night."

No good wishes, no hearty, smiling interchange of pleasant congratulations on the holy, peaceful season, as there might have been three or four hours ago. Squire Carwardyne strode on, swinging his oaken cudgel. The young Rector paused near his own gates, as if to gain time to think.

How long Charles Etherage thus stood meditating he never knew. He was aroused from his moody, conflicting reflections by a sudden blow, which was meant to slay him, and which would have done so, had not his thick felt hat partly warded it off; and he stooped with the celerity of lightning to turn and grapple with his assailant.

Charles Etherage could not tell with what object he had been attacked. He surmised, even in the turmoil of the moment, that his valuable gold watch and chain, and the one ring, set with large diamonds, which he wore, had aroused the cupidity of some wandering prowler.

Young, vigorous, well-trained in athletic sports—which he had practised when at college—he over-mastered his enemy, after a brief and desperate struggle, and pinned him on the ground, placing one knee on the fellow's chest.

At that moment the moonlight shone out radiantly.

Charles Etherage looked into his assailant's face, and gazed with horror. He uttered one cry of fear and despair, and then half rose.

"Squire Carwardyne!" he exclaimed.

The wretched man had swooned, and lay back, his face white almost as the snow upon which he lay.

Charles Etherage rose, and stood gazing upon him, struck with a sense of the deepest misery, and too much confounded to be able to render any aid towards restoring his cruel, treacherous foe.

Presently Squire Carwardyne opened his eyes; but he made no attempt to raise himself. He spoke feebly, and the young Rector bent down to catch his fluttering words.

"I am felled—utterly baffled and ruined! I yield to a malevolent fate. The money for which I sinned has done me no good; and this night, I had well-nigh stained my soul with murder! For pity's sake, silence those horrid, jangling bells; they drive me to frenzy. The name that woman could not speak was your own—Charles Etherage. I robbed you and your widowed mother. I have speculated madly, and lost all, or it will be lost unless a miracle happens."

The Rector thought his brain must be wandering.

"Why have you tried to do this dreadful deed?" he said.

"I thought to secure that fatal paper, and that it would never be discovered who had slain you. No one would suspect or dare to accuse Squire Carwardyne, of Ferndale Hall. I thought I should then be safe. All is lost. All is done with for me!"

Charles Etherage, moved to pity and forgiveness, lifted him, and drew him with difficulty to his feet.

"Can you walk? Will you come with me to my home? I will send a messenger to Miss Carwardyne to let her know that you are in safety."

"In safety!" echoed the unhappy Squire, with hollow laughter. "I suppose I shall be lodged in a criminal's cell to-morrow or the day after."

"Could you not seek those whom you have wronged?"

"Have I not told you that it is to yourself I owe justice?" impatiently exclaimed Squire Carwardyne.

"I have the real will—unsigned it is true—in my iron safe at home. I give up all, though the now heavily-mortgaged estates are little worth restoring."

"Is this true? You deceived my father thus, and impoverished my mother, embittering her days until her early death?" indignantly cried Charles Etherage.

"Even so," sullenly replied the culprit.

He was so exhausted that it was with difficulty he could manage to walk the short way on to the door of the Rectory.

Before the summons of the Rector could be answered, he cried:

"I must return to the Hall. I have guests there, and they will wonder at my absence. I shall be disgraced! Yet what matters it? My child—"

He broke down, and gave way to a passionate outburst of tears and sobs that shook his exhausted frame.

"You swear that I am the one to whom you must answer for your wicked misdeeds?" said Charles Etherage.

"On the sacred word of a man who may be standing near to death, I swear it. If you will let me go to my own home, if you will come with me, I will deliver the real will into your hands."

The door was opened, and the master of the house supported his miserable charge into the sitting-room nearest at hand. This discreet servant looked amazed, but said nothing, and, as the Rector did not desire her attendance, she was about to withdraw, when he said:

"Tell Adams to get the trap ready at once as I wish to go to the Hall."

Then he closed the door of the room, and made Squire Carwardyne drink some wine.

Neither said much; each felt the situation acutely.

Presently a quiet tap was heard, and the servant came to say that the little pony-carriage was ready.

They went out, still in silence, and were soon rattling away to Ferndale Hall. Squire Carwardyne begged that they might go to the postern door, as he dreaded lest anyone should discover his absence and return; he sought to put off the evil hour of public detection as long as he could.

The gate was sufficiently wide to admit the pony, although not the vehicle; Charles Etherage, even at that moment of distraction, remembered the poor dumb creature who loved him, and, loosening it from the harness, led it through, and placed it under a sheltering out-house, throwing the horse-cloth over it. Then the two men entered the house. The Squire led the way to the library, closing the door fast when they were within.

He unlocked a handsome iron safe that stood in a corner, and, taking up a parchment deed, gave it in silence to the young Rector.

Charles Etherage examined it with a throbbing heart. It was indeed the will of his dead father. He felt like one in a dream. Rousing himself, he regarded the Squire.

The old man lay back in the great arm-chair like one in a stupor, his eyes closed, his face pale as death.

A mortal fear seized the heart of Charles Etherage. With a hand shaking as if from ague, he touched the old man's arm.

Not a sign showed that he was regarded, and he placed his fingers lightly on the pallid forehead.

Selwyn Carwardyne's spirit had flown to its last dread account.

Charles Etherage tried to rally all his forces to regain his lost self-possession. What was to be done? Alone at this ghastly hour, with the dead master of the house, oreading to alarm the beloved being whom he so deeply loved, yet feeling that she must ere long learn that her unhappy father breathed his last—aware that guests were in the house, while ignorant of their number, age, or sex—unable to tell where to find the most responsible of the servants, he felt utterly overwhelmed. Aid must, however, be obtained at all hazards, and at random he drew the spring of the bell by the fireplace.

No response came.

He entered the Squire's room, groped to the fireplace, and, finding lucifers, struck a light, and ignited the gas. Then he rang, feeling that the summons from the Squire's room would be more likely to be heeded than one from the library. Almost immediately a light step, one that made his heart beat with mingled love and affright, echoed along the corridor.

Beatrice, who had heard the first bell, but believed her ears deceived her, had also heard the second. She had not undressed, but was lying in helpless despair.

She recoiled when she saw her lover, and for an instant the awful thought that she had lost her senses flashed across her. Then the almost equally dread thought that something had happened to her father smote her like a thunderbolt. Her already pale face became of a deadly whiteness, and she threw up her hands.

"Is—is he dead?" she whispered.

Despite his powerful effort at self-control, Charles Etherage's face betrayed the truth. To his amazement, the fragile girl drew herself together, and calmly demanded:

"Where is he?—where is my father?"

He hastily told her. There was no help for it. The house was aroused, the two guests alone being left in peaceful ignorance of what was going on.

They carried the dead Squire up to his own room, and sent off instantly for Dr. Arnold. But the guilty man had done with the things of this life, only his evil deeds and his child remained.

The young man whom he had so infamously defrauded would have torn up the terrible paper signed by Peggy Wilnot, and the will which had never been signed by his father. But Beatrice quietly yet resolutely insisted that he must take what was rightfully his.

It was by a happy accident that he hindered her contemplated flight into poverty and obscurity. The young man found that he could manage to take possession very quietly of the estates from which he had so long been shut out. But he represented to Beatrice that far less scandal would be created if she were to marry him—that there would be far less risk of her father's guilt being known and bruited abroad.

Some of the daring speculations into which the Squire had entered after all proved successful, and aided in clearing off the heavy mortgages.

Within two years of that fatal Christmas Eve Beatrice and the Rector were quietly married, but they never in after life forgot that night when Selwyn Carwardyne expiated his guilt, though he left a stain of sin that could only be cleansed by the sweetness of love and devotion.