



UNCLE GEORGE; OR, THE FAMILY MYSTERY. By Wilkie Collins.

Was it an Englishman or a Frenchman who first remarked that every family had a skeleton in its cupboard? I am not learned enough to know; but I reverence the observation, whoever made it.

I arrived at the knowledge that this skeleton existed, and I traced it to the particular cupboard in which it was hidden, by slow degrees. I was a child when I first began to suspect that there was such a thing, and a grown man when I at last discovered that my suspicions were true.

My father was a doctor, having an excellent practice in a large country town. I have heard that he married against the wishes of his family. They could not object to my mother on the score of birth, breeding, or character—they only disliked her heartily.

George was the unlucky member of our family; the rest were all clever; he was slow in capacity. The rest were all remarkably handsome; he was the sort of man that no woman ever looks twice at.

His profession was the same as my father's. He had, like my father, the best medical education that London and Paris could afford; and he profited by it, by dint of dogged industry, so as to be quoted among his medical brethren as one of the promising surgeons of his time.

There are very few of us, however dull and unattractive we may be to outward appearance, who have not some strong passion, some germ of what is called romance, hidden more or less deeply in our natures. All the passion and romance in the nature of my Uncle George lay in his love and admiration for my father.

When my father had been married a little while, he took his youngest brother to live with him as his assistant. If Uncle George had been made president of the College of Surgeons he could not have been prouder and happier than he was in his new position.

So much for what I have heard from others on the subject of my Uncle George. My own personal experience of him is limited to what I remember as a mere child. Let me say something, however, first about my parents, my sister, and myself.

My sister was the eldest born and the best loved. I did not come into the world till four years after her birth; and no other child followed me. Caroline, from earliest days, was the perfection of beauty and health. I was small, weakly, and, if the truth must be told, almost as plain-featured as Uncle George himself.

Even Uncle George, fond as he was of me, was fonder of my beautiful child-sister. When I used mischievously to pull at his lank scanty hair, he would gently and laughingly take it out of my hands; but he would let Caroline tug at it till his dim wandering gray eyes winked and watered with pain.

When I was eight years old and Caroline was twelve, I was separated from home for some time. I had been ailing for many months previously; had got benefit from being taken to the seaside; and had shown symptoms of relapsing on being brought home again to the midland county in which we resided.

I left home, I remember, loaded with presents, rejoicing over the prospect of looking at the sea again, as careless of the future and as happy in the present as any boy could be.

My life at the seaside was a very happy one. I remained with my aunt more than a year. My mother often came to see how I was going on, and, at first, always brought my sister with her. But, during the last eight months of my stay, Caroline never once appeared.

My mother often came to see how I was going on, and, at first, always brought my sister with her. But, during the last eight months of my stay, Caroline never once appeared. I noticed also at the same period a change in my mother's manner.

My father, too, who had at the earlier periods of my absence from home travelled to the seaside to watch the progress of my recovery as often as his professional engagements would permit, now kept away like my mother. Even Uncle George, who had never been allowed a holiday to come and see me, but who had hitherto often written and begged me to write to him, broke off our correspondence.

Weeks passed away, and still I heard nothing except that my sister continued to be ill. One day I privately wrote a letter to Uncle George, asking him in my childish way to come and tell me about Caroline's illness.

I found the housemaid and the cook talking together in whispers, with serious faces. They started when they saw me, as if I had been a grown-up master who had caught them neglecting their work.

In a few minutes they had told me the worst. It was indeed my aunt whom I had heard crying in the bedroom. Caroline was dead.

I felt the blow more severely than the servants or any one else about me supposed. Still, I was a child in years, and I had the blessed elasticity of a child's nature.

I was not surprised by the swollen state of her eyes, the paleness of her cheeks, or the fresh burst of tears that came from her when she took me in her arms at meeting. But I was both amazed and perplexed by the look of terror that I detected in her face.

The next day I was told that I was to go home after the funeral, and was taken out towards evening by the housemaid, partly for a walk, partly to be measured for my mourning clothes.

The evening was cloudy, and it got on from dusk to dark by the time we approached the town again. The housemaid was rather nervous at finding herself alone with me on the beach, and once or twice looked behind her distrustfully as we went on.

me away from the girl, and catching me up in his arms without a word, covered my face with kisses. I knew that he was crying, because my cheeks were instantly wetted with his tears; but it was too dark for me to see who he was or even how he was dressed.

When this extraordinary adventure was related to my aunt, she seemed at first bewildered at hearing of it; but in a moment more there came a change over her face, as if she had suddenly recollected or thought of something.

It was easier to give me this advice than to make me follow it. For many nights after, I thought of nothing but the strange man who had kissed me and cried over me.

I was taken home on the appointed day to suffer the trial—a hard one, even at my tender years—of witnessing my mother's passionate grief and my father's mute despair.

I opened the surgery door, and could see no body. I dried my tears, and looked all round the room; it was empty. I ran up stairs again to Uncle George's garret bedroom—he was not there; his cheap hair brush and old cast-off razor case that had belonged to my grandfather, were not on the dressing-table.

Nobody answered; but my aunt came hastily up the garret stairs. 'Hush!' she said. 'You must never call that name out here again! Never.'

'Is Uncle George dead?' I asked. My aunt turned red and pale, and stammered. I did not want to hear what she said; I brushed past her, down the stairs—my heart was bursting—my flesh felt cold.

My mother gave a scream that terrified me into instant silence and stillness. My father looked at her for a moment, rang the bell that summoned her maid, then seized me roughly by the arm, and dragged me out of the room.

He took me down into his study, seated himself in his accustomed chair, and put me before him, between his knees. His lips were awfully white, and I felt his two hands, as they grasped my shoulders, shaking violently.

'You are never to mention the name of Uncle George again,' he said in a quick angry trembling whisper. 'Never to me, never to your mother, never to your aunt, never to the servants, never to any body in this world! Never, never, never!'

The repetition of the word terrified me even more than the suppressed vehemence with which he spoke. He saw that I was frightened, and softened his manner a little before he went on.

'You will never see Uncle George again,' he said. 'Your mother and I love you dearly; but if you forget what I have told you, you will be sent away from home. Never speak that name again—mind, never! Now kiss me, and go away.'

How his lips trembled—and, oh, how cold they felt on mine! I shrunk out of the room the moment he had kissed me, and went and hid myself in the garden. 'Uncle George is gone—I am never to see him any more—I am never to speak of him again!—those were the words I repeated to myself, with indescribable terror and confusion. The moment I was alone. There was something unspeakably horrible to my young mind in this mystery which I was commanded always to respect, and which, so far as I then knew, I could never hope to see revealed.

line dead, Uncle George gone, and a forbidden subject of talk perpetually and mysteriously interposing between my parents and me.

Though I never infringed the command my father had given me in his study (his words and looks, and that dreadful scream of my mother's, which seemed to be always ringing in my ears, were more than enough to insure my obedience), I also never lost the secret desire to penetrate the darkness which clouded over the fate of Uncle George.

At the end of my two years home, I was sent to sea in the merchant navy by my own earnest desire. I had always determined to be a sailor from the time when I went to stay with my aunt at the seaside—and I persisted long enough in my resolution to make my parents recognize the necessity of acceding to my wishes.

Absence and change of scene had in no respect weakened my desire to penetrate the mystery of Uncle George's disappearance. My mother's health was so delicate that I hesitated for some time to approach the forbidden subject in her presence. When I at last ventured to refer to it, suggesting to her that any prudent reserve which might have been necessary while I was a child need no longer be persisted in, now that I was growing to be a young man, she fell into a violent fit of trembling, and commanded me to say no more.

My investigations led to some results, though they were by no means satisfactory. George had always been looked on with something like contempt by his handsome sisters and his prosperous brothers; and he had not improved his position in the family by his warm advocacy of his brother's cause at the time of my father's marriage.

I found that my Uncle's surviving relatives now spoke of him slightly and carelessly. They assured me that they had never heard from him, and that they knew nothing about him except that he had gone away to settle, as they supposed in some foreign place, after having behaved very basely and badly to my father.

He had been traced to London where he had sold out of the funds the small share of money which he had inherited after his father's death, and he had been seen on the deck of a packet bound for France, later on the same day. Beyond this nothing was known about him. In what the alleged baseness of his behavior consisted, none of his brothers and sisters could tell me.