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was attached to his companion's saddle; but Bellamy, remarking his look of surprise, whispered to him that they merely contained food and articles of clothing for the fugitive. This somewhat calmed the Chevalier's suspicions, and made him almost regret that he should have thought so ill of one who was so solicitous about the welfare of a friend in distress.

After a six hours' ride through the bleak and desolate country, the two horsemen arrived in a broad valley, with undulating sides, thickly studded with bare and leafless trees. An hour past the rain had ceased to fall, and though many thick, heavy clouds slowly sailed, like grim ghosts, across the sky, and threw a fitting darkness over the bright moonlight, the night had cleared to all intents and purposes. At the end of the valley Gifford made out, by the shifting uncertain light, a low embankment around which grew a group of low, stunted, leafless trees. His companion, who latterly had been watching him narrowly, remarked briefly "Tis yonder," and then relapsed into a moody silence.

On arriving before the embankment the pair dismounted, and having secured their horses, proceeded to ascend the slight elevation before them—a work of no little difficulty, for the heavy rains had converted the clayey soil into a thick clinging mire, into which they sunk deep at every step, and the moon being just then obscured by a passing cloud, it was no easy matter for them to pick their way. At last they reached the top, and Gifford, with his hand on the hilt of his rapier in case of any treachery on the part of his companion—for his suspicions had all returned, followed his host along a narrow pathway that ran round the summit.

"This way," said Bellamy shortly, taking a sharp turn to the right; and after a few more steps he stopped. Gifford stopped too.

"Where is he?" he asked in a low tone.

"Hush," returned Bellamy. "Here. He will come immediately." And he gave a long, low cry like the call of the plover. "He comes," he continued, bending down as if to catch the sound of approaching footsteps. Gifford heard nothing, but he stooped too. Just then the moon emerged from behind the cloud that obscured it and threw its silver light on a broad, ghastly, white expanse that lay at his very feet, hedged in by a deep border of gloom that served the more to reveal its ghastliness—a dead, white, silent sea, sunk far down in the bowels of the earth.

"Where is he?" said Gifford again—

"Merciful heaven! what is this? A blow like an electric shock, a fall through space—dizziness, sickness, all the horrors of a nightmare. Still falling! Will it never end? Is there no bottom? How long is this terrible flight though air to last? Will it never end? What is it? A dream? A horrible midnight illusion? Where is Bellamy? Master Bracebridge! Will this never end? Yes. At last. A choking! a splash! a strangling! gasps for air! air! air! Is this hanging? drowning? what? swim? yes I can swim. But no, my arms, my arms are bound. Death? yes, 'tis death!"

But it was only a swoon. Gradually consciousness returned.—"Were am I? What is this burning at my waist, this tightness at my throat? Bellamy! what? he threw me here? Oh! this awful burning! no! it cannot be! We came to see Master Bracebridge! Hush! we may be heard. Oh! this belt of fire, it grips and burns, it eats into my flesh. Eh! packet? Aye, 'tis here. I have it. What? he wanted the packet and threw me here? Fiend! Tortures of the damned, aye, I suffer them all, all! Can this last long? I strangle! I burn! I burn—I strangle! I die! Welcome death, farewell earth! Farewell Beatrice, my poor wife! Oh God! vengeance, vengeance! Is this eternal fire? Yet no, it cannot be. Yonder is the sun—no 'tis the moon! What is it? what is it? Vengeance!—no, forgiveness! The right will triumph! Ha! Long live the King! Down with the crop-ears! Church and King! Wisdom of Solomon? ha! ha! oh! I burn! water! water. Mercy, mercy! Beatrice! The right will tri....."

Christmas morning, bright and fresh—a day to be ushered in with gladness, with hosannas of thankfulness and praise. Slowly the sun rises, gilding the tops of the trees on the Cheshire slopes, down by Master Bracebridge's hiding-place: it is only just dawn, and the white, dead sea lies still and motionless in the dim gray morning light; but at one end of it, not in it, hardly out of it, is a black, shapeless mass. It gets lighter and lighter. The surrounding objects—trees, hills, and roads—come out one by one from the darkness. And this mysterious mass—as the light grows one can make out a cloak, a white, haggard face with long brown hair—nothing else. The sun is gradually mounting the hills. It grows lighter and lighter. The day has dawned—Christmas day, in the year of grace 1669—and as the sun peeps smilingly over the hills, and his rays shine on the valley, on the cold dead sea in its midst, his first glorious light falls on—HALF A CORPSE.

CHAPTER II.

"AUJOURD'HUI."

Christmas time, Anno Domini 1869—and real jolly Christmas weather. Out of doors everything frozen hard, and a foot of snow on the ground, that crises and crackles under your feet, as if to wish you a merry Christmas and many of them. Indoors, huge roaring wood fires, heavy curtains, cartloads of holly and mistletoe, and a great bustle in the regions of the kitchen.

My last Christmas as a bachelor. In February I was to be married to Elsie Ashford. I was a young fellow of six and twenty, master of Asheforde Hall, rather proud of my family—we are the descendants of a staunch old Puritan who did Cromwell good service, and got a substantial return in the shape of Asheforde Hall and the broad acres surrounding it. My position was a good one, my income was certainly not what could be called small, and people said that plain, but rich George Bellamy was a good match for pretty, penniless Elsie Ashford, though certainly I never gave the matter a thought. I loved Elsie with that deep devotion, that mad, blind attachment a man can experience but one in his life, and I was looking forward eagerly to the time when I should have her all to myself. When I first became acquainted with her, Elsie was a shy, timid little governess, supporting a widowed mother and two little sisters out of her hard won earnings. Jack and I—Jack is a younger brother of mine—quarrelled about her before we had known her a week. But I had the advantage over him; he was in no position to marry and knew it, poor fellow, so I proposed, and after some little diffidence on Elsie's part, and some delay, which I considered entirely unnecessary, was accepted. Ah! I shall never forget how happy she made me when she gave me that soft, whispered little "yes" which crowned my hopes, and how I vowed that she should have a model husband, and a lot more nonsense to the same effect. And though she did add that she did not exactly love me, but she hoped she would learn to do so when she knew me better, and she would try, oh! so hard, to make me happy, and she was so grateful to me, and why had I not asked some rich and beautiful lady to be my wife instead of a poor plain governess—why though these were not exactly the kind of remarks an accepted suitor would be best pleased to hear from his adored, yet I set no count by them and put them down to the score of maidenly modesty. And now she was coming down to spend Christmas at the Hall, and to make acquaintance with her future home.

We were going to be a very quiet party at the Hall this year, for Elsie, in her shy quiet manner, had begged that there should be no one to meet her. She was so afraid of strangers—timid little thing—so I had not the heart to refuse her. Besides was she not all but mistress of Asheforde Hall? That was a queer coincidence that, Elsie Ashford to be mistress of Asheforde Hall. To be sure the two names were spelt differently, but I used to tell Elsie jokingly that the old Hall was hers by right; that it had once belonged to some ancestor of hers, in years long gone past, who had lost it and his head at the same time for playing tricks against the peace and order of his sacred majesty King Hal, or for recusancy under good Queen Bess; and that at last old Puritan Bellamy got hold of it.

So we were to be a very quiet party. There were only some nine of us, my mother, Jack, Fanny, my grown up sister, the four children, three little sisters and a brother, and myself. The ninth was Trevor, an old college chum, now a rising young barrister in London, who after oft-repeated invitations had stolen a few days to run down to Asheforde Hall.

I had been musing for half an hour before my study fire, thinking of Elsie, of course, of her visit and of our approaching marriage; enjoying the warmth of the thickly curtained, well-lighted room, and puffing lazily at a long-stemmed, brown-bowled pipe—an old Heidelberg friend. The light, the heat, and the narcotic influence of the tobacco, had lulled me into a sort of half slumber, from which I was roused by a loud ring at the door.

Elsie at last. And I sprang up, wide-awake now, and rushed off to meet her.

I found her in the hall, the centre of a little group composed of my mother and sister and the children, the object of the curious and inquiring glances of the little ones, who had heard so much of the Elsie that was coming to marry brother George.

"Why, Elsie," I cried, "how late you are. What on earth has kept you? We've been expecting you for the last three hours."

She barely took the hand I offered—I didn't venture to kiss her yet, just touched it and let it drop. So like her, shy little thing!

"I am sorry I am so late, Mr. Bellamy—George," I mean—but the train was late. I don't know what delayed it. What a beautiful place the Hall is!"

Just then my brother Jack came in. Poor fellow, how sheepish he looked as he came up and offered his hand. He hadn't forgotten our quarrel. Elsie fairly took his hand, and fairly shook it as she said:

"How are you, Jack? I am so glad to see you."

No shyness there. She greeted him heartily and looked him straight in the face as she spoke. Shyness! Who could be shy with hearty, straight-forward, good-looking Jack, with whom every-body felt themselves immediately at home. "Jack" too, not Mr. Bellamy. The idea of anybody mistaking Jack Bellamy.

"Now boys," broke in my sister, "do be off, like good fellows, and don't stand staring at Elsie, as if she were some wild beast in a menagerie. She must be tired after her long journey, and you keep her standing there, with the door open too, until she must be nearly frozen. I know I am. Br. I declare its nearly twelve o'clock."

Thus sternly admonished of our duty we recovered our senses, and allowed Elsie to be taken off to the dining-room fire. After she had been duly warmed and dosed with hot negus in the way that cold and weary travellers have from time immemorial been treated by their friends after a journey, we prepared to withdraw.

"Good-night, Elsie," I said as she was moving off. "I hope your first slumbers under the roof of Asheforde Hall will be sweet and sound. Above all I trust our family ghost won't take it into his head to pay you a visit."

"A ghost!" exclaimed Elsie, with a frightened look. "You don't mean to say the house is haunted. You are making fun of me, George."

"No, indeed, Elsie," I returned. "Why, did you ever hear of an old manor house that had not its ghost—a sort of faithful retainer, like the old nurse, that bespeaks the antiquity and respectability of the family? But ours is a very mild sort of a ghost, a quiet, gentlemanly party who confines himself to taking occasional strolls from his quarters in the west wing, evidently in search of some old friend of his—in broad day-light even. Oh! I assure you he is a most respectable person, who keeps no late hours, and does nobody any harm. The very children don't mind him. You needn't be afraid of him. He's only half a ghost at best."

Here my mother interposed by dragging Elsie off to her bedroom, and Jack and I went off to the study to have a quiet smoke before turning in.

The next morning I drove over to Stafford on business, and did not return until late in the afternoon, when I brought Trevor with me, whom I had met by appointment at the railway station. We were to go to a party that evening at a friend's house on the other side of the valley, and our guests were to have come with us. But on our return we found Elsie slightly indisposed. The fatigue of the journey had been too much for her, and she had not slept over well, owing, no doubt, to fears raised by my foolish story about the ghost. So we had to go without her, my mother, Fanny, Jack, Trevor and myself. I begged hard to be left behind, but it was no use, my mother was inexorable, and Elsie made such a frightened face, that I was obliged to submit. No doubt she thought I would frighten her out of her senses with my infernal ghost stories.

I know it seemed to me very slow and stupid, that party, and I supposed it did the same to Jack. He moped sadly the whole evening, and created quite a consternation among the girls, with whom he was usually in high favour. I am afraid he nearly lost his temper too, when the Burton girls rallied him on his melancholy, and asked him, "Who are you sighing after, Don Tristezo?"

At last that wearisome evening came to an end. We left rather early, as we were all more or less anxious about Elsie. When we arrived at home, we found the whole house in a commotion. Elsie had been suddenly taken ill. She had been sitting in the dining-room at the time with the children, who said simply that the ghost had come into the room, and that Elsie had fainted; and the old house-keeper, who met us in the hall, added that she had had a terrible fit of hysterics, which had ended in convulsions.

"She's in the dining-room now, Master George," added the old woman. "The doctor is with her, and he says she will be better just now."

I waited to hear no more, but rushed off to the dining-room, followed by the rest, to hear the verdict of the village doctor. I found Elsie lying on a sofa, unconscious; over her bent the doctor, who was applying some restoratives. Several of the female servants stood round, with white, awe-stricken faces. As we entered they left, and the doctor laid his finger on his lips.

I beckoned him aside, and questioned him eagerly, while the others busied themselves with poor Elsie.

"What is it, doctor? Is it dangerous? For God's sake don't keep me in suspense. She is my affianced wife. Tell me the worst."

"Softly, my dear sir," returned the doctor, a soft-voiced, dapper little man with a bald head, a spotless suit of black, and an immense watch chain and seals—a man who prided himself on two things, his medical skill and his extreme politeness. "Softly, calm yourself, my dear sir. It is nothing serious, absolutely nothing. Mere nervous excitement.

A most interesting case. Nervous excitement superinduced by strong unaccustomed emotions, very natural, after all, in the case of a young lady not very far from the most interesting event of her life, her marriage, hem! There is some talk of an apparition, but, my dear sir, we know better than that now-a-days," and the little man shrugged his shoulders, made me a little bow, and laid his hands on his heart.

"You are sure it is not serious," I repeated.

"Quite sure, my dear sir. I will stake my professional reputation on that. You have no cause for alarm."

"Thank God for that!" I ejaculated.

"Meanwhile," continued he, "it is absolutely necessary that our young patient be kept perfectly quiet. No excitement you understand. She has just recovered from a fit of hysterics, and delirium has supervened."

A short, sharp cry of terror interrupted him, followed by a low wail that seemed to pierce my very heart. I was on the point of rushing to Elsie when the doctor stopped me.

"It might be fatal," he said briefly. "You see," he continued, as poor Elsie began to mutter and moan, "as I said, delirium. Nothing dangerous," he added, observing my look of alarm. "Keep her quiet, and I will send up a sedative draught that will do her good. She will be much better in the morning. Bless me," he cried, looking at the great gold turnip that he called his chronometer, "it is almost daybreak. I have the honour to wish you good morning, sir," and he bowed himself out.

"Good heavens!" I thought, "what heartless wretches these doctors are. That man stands there and watches a poor weak girl in pain, and coolly talks about 'an interesting case,' and of her sufferings as 'nothing, absolutely nothing.'"

Elsie was quiet now, but suddenly she broke out again:—

"Jack," she wailed out, in plaintive, heart-rending tone, "Jack! Oh! it's coming again! Don't leave me, Jack!"

Grieved beyond measure as I was at seeing her suffer I could not help turning to where Jack stood. He coloured up violently and hastily left the room. I was just about following him when my mother stopped me.

"George," she said, with something of the old tone of authority that she used to employ to me when I was a small, unruly urchin, "go to your room. Go straight to bed, you are tired and excited. We will take care of Elsie and you shall see her to-morrow."

I obeyed mechanically, muttering as I went, "Elsie? Elsie?" I hardly knew what I said, or why I said it. I strode up the stairs in the same mechanical way, my thoughts were so bitter, I could not account for my actions. At the top of the stairs I met Jack, who had been waiting for me. He said nothing, but simply took my two hands in his, and looked me in the face. His great blue eyes were filled with tears.

"Jack, is this manly, is it honest?"

"George, old fellow," he said at last with a great gulp that almost choked his voice, "it is not my doing. I have remembered my promise, aye, and kept it too, though it was very hard. I have tried to avoid her, to keep out of her sight. George, I am telling the truth."

"But, Jack," I continued, making a strong effort to remain calm, "you —"

No, I could not frame the word. He understood me, however.

"Of course I do," he replied sorrowfully. Can I help loving her, so good, so gentle, so kind? George, I have tried my best to dislike her, to hate her even, but it's useless. I can't. George, George, old fellow, never mind; it was cruel, but she must love you, she wouldn't have taken you else. I shall go away, I can't bear to see her again. I will only wait till Christmas is past, and then I shall leave the Hall, and seek my fortune somewhere, in Australia, Canada, anywhere; there are lots of places where a young fellow can make his way, and it is time that I should think of doing something for myself. Good-night, old fellow. God bless you," and he turned into his room and locked the door.

I walked off to my bedroom, and throwing myself upon the bed gave myself up entirely to my bitter reflections.

I saw it all. She had never loved me, it was my fortune she loved. I was the elder brother, the wealthy heir, and she loved the younger, the portionless brother. But the wealth had dazzled her, and she had accepted me. By Heaven, no, it was impossible! Her mother, aye, that was it, her mother had compelled her to take this step to rescue her from her poverty. Oh! how blind I had been. Why, from the first it was as plain as daylight. Had she not hesitated long before accepting my offer? had she not even told me that she did not love me, and yet, like a fool, I must needs press on her the love she despised. Then, whenever she saw Jack how she brightened up always, and how her whole manner changed. To me she was always cold and distant, and to him, oh! how different. Why, only the night before had she not called me Mr. Bellamy, and him Jack; and had she not added that she was so glad to see him, while