

THE HAUNTED HOTEL.

A MYSTERY OF MODERN VENICE.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

CHAPTER XXV.—*Continued.*

HENRY made no further attempt to dispute with her. She had impressed him with a certain reluctant respect for her own opinion in spite of himself.

‘Have you thought of any better way of arriving at the truth?’ he asked. ‘Who is to help us? No doubt there is the Countess, who has the clue to the mystery in her own hands. But, in the present state of her mind, is her testimony to be trusted—even if she were willing to speak? Judging by my own experience, I should say decidedly not.’

‘You don’t mean that you have seen her again?’ Agnes eagerly interposed.

‘Yes, I had half an hour to spare before dinner; and I disturbed her once more over her endless writing.’

‘And you told her what you found when you opened the hiding-place?’

‘Of course I did!’ Henry replied. ‘I said, in so many words, that I held her responsible for the discovery, and that I expected her to reveal the whole truth. She went on with her writing as if I had spoken in an unknown tongue! I was equally obstinate, on my side. I told her plainly that the head had been placed under the care of the police, and that the manager and I had signed our declarations and given our evidence. She paid not the slightest heed to me. By way of tempting her to speak, I added that the whole investigation was to be kept a secret, and that she might depend on

my discretion. For the moment I thought I had succeeded. She looked up from her writing with a passing flash of curiosity, and said, “What are they going to do with it?”—meaning I suppose, the head. I answered that it was to be privately buried, after photographs of it had first been taken. I even went the length of communicating the opinion of the surgeon consulted, that some chemical means of arresting decomposition had been used, and had only partially succeeded—and I asked her point-blank if the surgeon was right? The trap was not a bad one—but it completely failed. She said in the coolest manner, “Now you are here, I should like to consult you about my play; I am at a loss for some new incidents.” Mind! there was nothing satirical in this. She was really eager to read her wonderful work to me—evidently supposing that I took a special interest in such things, because my brother is the manager of a theatre! I left her, making the first excuse that occurred to me. So far as I am concerned, I can do nothing with her. But it is possible that *your* influence may succeed with her again, as it has succeeded already. Will you make the attempt, to satisfy your own mind? She is still upstairs; and I am quite ready to accompany you.’

Agnes shuddered at the bare suggestion of another interview with the Countess.

‘I can’t! I daren’t!’ she exclaimed. ‘After what has happened in that horrible room, she is more repellent to