

CHAPTER I.

THE BLACK PATCH.

CONSIDERING it was nearly the height of the London winter season, the Great Empire Hotel was not unusually crowded. This might perhaps have been owing to the fact that two or three of the finest suites of rooms in the building had been engaged by Mark Fenwick, who was popularly supposed to be the last thing in the way of American multi-millionaires. No one knew precisely who Fenwick was, or how he had made his money; but during the last few months his name had bulked largely in the financial Press and the daily periodicals of a sensational character. So far, the man had hardly been seen, it being understood that he was suffering from a chill, contracted on his voyage to Europe. Up to the present moment he had taken all his meals in his rooms, but it was whispered now that the great man was coming down to dinner. There was quite a flutter of excitement in the Venetian dining-room about eight o'clock.

The beautifully decorated saloon had a