

tertained during his absence. Having ascertained to his satisfaction, that none had passed the porter's lodge since the day he left Oxenham, he then resumed his former watchfulness over his wife. But he had been absent so many weeks, that the vacant mind of the imbecile Zillah could scarcely be brought to recall his image. She shrunk from him in undisguised terror, and remained sunk in profound silence, as was her custom when in the presence of a stranger. In vain he caressed and fondled her as he had been wont to do; she was so much alarmed at his presence, that in pity to the delicate state of her health, and fearing the effect such continued agitation might have upon his future hopes, he determined to return to London, feeling satisfied that the King had lost his wager. He accordingly presented himself in the presence-chamber, with ill-dissembled glee, but what were his feelings when the King called him into his closet and produced Zillah's bracelet! There was no mistaking the jewel—there could be no other like it, unless hers had been taken as the model, for it was of Mexican workmanship—being a rudely-carved serpent of fine gold, with a carbuncle of great size and beauty, (which Zillah always regarded as a talisman) set in the encasing of the head. Regardless alike of the respect due to his monarch, or of the laugh of the courtiers who were in the secret, Oxenham snatched the jewel, and hurrying from the apartment, mounted his horse, and spurred rapidly for the Hall. He arrived at the home of his fathers a few hours after the birth of an infant heir. But whatever joy such an event might have occasioned him at an earlier period, his soul was too full of gloomy fancies to heed the frail infant or the suffering mother. He sought the well-known bracelet, and heard from the lips of the old nurse, the lying tale which was to screen herself from the charge of carelessness, while Zillah remained silent, terrified by his unaccustomed presence, and exhausted by recent anguish. Oxenham knew the woman's tale was false, and he therefore looked upon Zillah's pertinacious silence and alarm as a proof of her guilt. He uttered no reproach, he gave vent to no burst of wrath, but calmly ordering the babe to be given in charge to a peasant nurse, avowed his determination to remain at Oxenham 'till the Lady Zillah was quite restored to health. Three days had scarcely elapsed, when the lady of Oxenham was seized with horrible pangs, and ere the leech could be brought to minister relief to her sufferings, she was dead! Her hus-

band and old Winifred stood beside her as the shadow of death fell on her beautiful face—every door and window was closed, for the master of Oxenham dreaded the eye of prying wonder, yet, as the dull and leaden hue of the grave settled on her brow, as the last breath left her pale lip, a *bird of raven wing and snowy breast*, was seen to rise from her pillow, and, wheeling thrice round the canopied bed, vanished in the lofty vaulted roof of the apartment. Such was the tale told by the woman, when relieved from the terror of the Lord of Oxenham, and it tended much to strengthen the dark surmises which had gone abroad among the servants, when they beheld the livid spots on the face of their dead mistress, and the blood-red foam which gathered again and again on her rigid lips as she lay in her coffin.

John Oxenham returned to court as reckless in his profligacy, and seemingly as gay in spirit as before, but there was a fearful change in his countenance, and a ghastliness like that of a corpse was upon his brow. His face seemed as if blasted by some lightning stroke of crime, and even as the beauty of his person vanished, so did the charm of his address depart.—Moody and silent, he seemed to plunge into the very depths of vice, less from inclination than from the influence of some invisible agent who hurried him on from one madness to another. Exactly twelve months from the day on which the heir of Oxenham was born, the profligate father lay on his dying bed. A holy priest bent over his pillow, listening to the gasping accents of his confession, and ready to shrive the wretched penitent, when he should have revealed his tale of guilt. What were the words which, at the last, he murmured in the ears of the holy father, no one ever knew; but an exclamation of horror burst from the priest's lips, and at the same instant a *bird of snowy breast and raven wing* rose above the sick man's head, and wheeling three times slowly around his pillow, soared upwards, and vanished even as the mist fades into sunshine.—Every door and window was closed, no real habitant of the air could have entered the apartment, and as the priest gazed, awe-stricken, on the marvellous sight, a deep groan from the bed, announced that the soul of the unabsolved penitent had winged its way to the bar of Judgment.

From that time a curse seemed to fall on the house of Oxenham. The heir of the profligate John grew up among strangers, married early, and died on the day that his child was a twelve