

'Small blame to 'em,' answered the driver crustily. 'Half on 'ems dead.'

'Half of them *dead*?' repeated Gresham in accents of horror. 'There must have been an epidemic, then—what on earth was it?'

'I dunno; you must ask the doctor, Mr. Howard. Epidemic or not, we can't afford to have many sick at the Point, or we should soon have to shut up shop.'

'But I thought it was so healthy,' argued Gresham; 'the advertisement on the railway——'

Here the driver burst out into such a laugh that an old crow, the only living denizen of the landscape beside themselves, rose with a frightened 'caw, caw,' from the ditch beside them, and sailed away into the gathering mist; for the dews were already falling.

'Oh! yes, the Point is healthy enough,' observed the man, 'after he had thus relieved his feelings; but if you think it like that picture at the station: oh lor! however, I belongs to the establishment; and you had better judge for yourself.'

And again he relapsed into taciturnity.

This idea of an epidemic, however, without at all alarming Gresham on his own account, had re-awakened his suspicions of Mr. Walcot's morality. Was it possible that, knowing of this visitation, he had wilfully brought Sir Robert here in his critical state, to fall a victim to the contagion?

'Do you really mean to say, my good man, that one half of the visitors at The Point Hotel this spring have died there?'

'Yes, I do,' was the dogged reply. 'There was two on 'em in all, and now there's only one on 'em.'

Then Gresham perceived that circumstances or Nature had made his companion a cynic, and dowered him with that grim humour which is the ordinary mitigation of that calamity.

'I am Sir Robert Arden's nephew; it is to *his* death, as I suppose, that you have so unfeelingly referred?'

'I didn't mean no unfeelingness,' muttered the man in ungracious apology; 'though, of course, it don't put inn folks in any particular good temper when a party only takes his rooms to die in 'em; and I would not 'a said a word if I had known you was kith and kin to him. You are like the old gentleman, too, now I come to look at you. He was but skin and bone when they landed him, and as yeller as any guinea.'

'Then he was very ill from the first?' sighed Gresham, whom sympathy on Sir Robert's account had rendered insensible to the compliment thus paid to himself.

'I believe you; as ill as ill could be. He only used the sittin' room (it was No. 1 on the first floor) for a day or two, and then took to his bed reglar. Now the other one—maybe you are *his* nephew by the mother's side?'

'No, no; I am not; but I know the gentleman you speak of—well enough; what were you going to say about him?'

'Well, I was going to say,' said the hunchback, with a caution, aroused no doubt by the eagerness of his companion's tone, 'that the other one, *he* is alive enough; here to-day and in London to-morrow, and all over the place.'

'In London to-morrow?' repeated Gresham. 'Is he going to London?'

'Not as I knows on, though it's like enough. It's a way we have of speaking: here to-day and gone to-morrow—which is what happened to your uncle the Baronet. Ah! that was hard: to have a Baronet in our "arrivals" for a week or less, and then to lose him altogether.'

'But when did Mr. Walcot go to London?'

'Well, the day after Sir Robert took and died. He had done all he could for him—that everybody says—when his friend was alive, and never left his side. But when he was dead, I suppose he thought he might be his own master (as he is everybody else's; I