DARK DAYS

BY HUGH CONWAY.

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CHAPTER III.

"THE WAGES OF SIN."

"Go on, go on! till you see the wages of sin—"

Morning! No books: no idle, listless hours for me to-day. Plenty to do, plenty to think about; all sorts of arrangements to make. Farewell to my moody, sullen life. Farewell to my aimless, selfish existence. Henceforward I should have something worth living for—worth dying for, if needs be! Philippa was coming to me to-day: coming in grief, it is true; coming as a sister comes to a brother. Ah! after all the weary, weary waiting, I shall see her to-day—to-morrow, every day! If a man's devotion, homage, worship and respect can in her own eyes reinstate my queen, I shall some day see the bloom come back to her cheek, the bright smile play once more round her mouth, the dark eyes again eloquent with happy thoughts. And then—and then! what should I care for the world or its sneers? To whom, save myself, should I be answerable? Then I might whisper in her ear: "Sweet, let the past vanish from our lives as a dream. Let happiness date from to-day."

Although Philippa would grace my poor cottage for one night only, I had a thousand preparations to make for her comfort. Fortunately I had a spare room, and, moreover, a furnished one. Not that I should have troubled, when I went into my seclusion, about such a superfluity as a guest-chamber; but as it happened I had bought the house and furniture complete, so could offer my welcome guest fair accommodation for the night.

I summoned my solid man. I told him that my sister was coming on a visit to me; that she would sleep here to-night, but that most likely we should go away to-morrow. He could stay and look after the house until I returned or sent him instructions what to do with it. William manifested no surprise. Had I told him to make preparations for the coming of my wife and five children he would have considered it all a part of the day's work, and would have done his best to meet my requirements.

He set to work in his imperturbable, methodical, but handy way to get Philippa's room in trim. As soon as this was done, and the neglected chamber made cosy and warm-looking, I told him to borrow a horse and cart somewhere, and fetch the luggage from Mrs. Wilson's. He was to mention no names; simply to say that he had come for the luggage, and to ask if the lady had any message to send.

Then I sat down in the room which my love would occupy and mused upon the strange but unhappy chance which was bringing her beneath my roof. I wished that I had an enchanter's wand to turn the humble garniture of the chamber into surroundings meet for my queenly Philippa. I wished that I had, at least, flowers with which I could deck her resting place; for I remembered how passionately she loved flowers. Alas! I had not seen a flower for months.

Then I drew out Sir Mervyn Ferrand's letter, read it again and again, and cursed the writer in my heart.

William was away about two hours; then he made his appearance with some boxes. I was delighted to see these tangible signs that Philippa meant to keep her promise. Till that moment I had been troubled by something like the doubt that after all she might, upon calm reflection, rescind the resolution formed in her excitement. Now her coming seemed to a certainty.

Nevertheless, William brought no message; so there was nothing for me to do but wait patiently until she chose to cross my threshold.

Although my pleasing labors of love were ended, I was not left idle. There was another task to be done to-day. I set my teeth and sat down, thinking quietly as to the way in which it might be best performed. To-night I meant to stand face to face with that black-hearted scoundrel known as Sir Mervyn Ferrand!

I consulted the time table. His letter named no particular hour; but I saw that if he carried out his expressed intention of being here to-night, there was but one train by which he could come; there was but one way from Roding to the house at which Philippa had been staying. He meant to walk, his letter said; this might be in order to escape observation. The train was due at Roding at 7 o'clock. The weather was cold; a man would naturally walk fast. Mrs. Wilson's house must be four miles from the station. Let me start from there just before the train arrives, and I should probably meet him about half way on his journey. It would be dark, but I should know him. I should know him among a thousand. There on the open lonely road Sir Mervyn Ferrand, coming gayly, and in his worldly cynicism certain of cajoling, buying off, or in some other way silencing the woman who had in an evil day trusted to his honor and love, would meet, not her, but the man who from the first had sworn that a wrong to Philippa should be more than a wrong to himself! He would meet this man and be called to account.

Stern and sinister as were my thoughts—freely and unreservedly as I record them, as indeed I endeavor in this tale to record everything—I do not wish to be misjudged. It is true that in my present mood I was bent upon avenging Philippa with my own hand; true that I meant, if possible, to take at some time or another this man's life; but at least no thought of taking any advantage of an unarmed or unsuspecting man entered into my scheme of vengeance. I designed no murderous attack. But it was my intention to stop the man on his path; to confront him and tell him that his villainy was known to me; that Philippa had fled to me for aid; that she was now in my custody; and that I, who stood in the position of her brother, demanded the so-called satisfaction which, by the old-fashioned code of honor, was due from the man who had ruthlessly betrayed a woman. Well I knew that it was probable he would laugh at me—tell me that the days of duelling were over, and refuse to grant my request. Then I meant to see if insults could warm his noble blood; if my hand on his cheek could bring about the result which I desired. If this failed I would follow him abroad, cane him and spit upon him in public places.

A wild scheme for these prosaic, law-abiding days; yet the only one that was feasible. It may be said that I should have taken steps to have caused the recreant to be arrested for bigamy. But what proof of his crime had we as yet, save his own, unsigned confession? Who was to move in the matter—Philippa—myself? We did not even know where this wife of whom he had spoken lived, or where she died. There were a hundred ways in which he might escape from justice, but whether he was punished for his sin, or allowed to go scot-free, Philippa's name and wrongs must be bruited about, her shame made public. No; there was but one course to take, and but one person to take it. It rested with me to avenge the wrongs of the woman I loved by the good old-fashioned way of a life against a life.

Truly, as I said, I had now plenty to live for!

The hours went by, yet Philippa came not. I grew restless and uneasy as the dusk began to make the road, up which I gazed almost continually, dim and indistinct. When the short winter's day was over, and the long dark night had fairly begun, my restlessness turned into fear. I walked out of my house and paced my garden to and fro. I blamed myself for having yielded so lightly to Philippa's wish—her command, rather—that I should on no account fetch her. But then, whenever did I resist a wish, much less a command, of hers? Oh, that I had been firm this once!

The snow-storm of the previous evening had not lasted long—not long enough to thoroughly whiten the world. The day had been fine and frosty, but I knew that the wind had changed since the sun went down. It was warmer, a change which I felt sure presaged a heavy downfall of snow or rain. There was a moon, a fitful moon; for clouds were flying across it, dark clouds, which I guessed would soon gather coherence and volume, and veil entirely that bright face, which now only showed itself at irregular intervals.

The minutes were passing away. I grew nervous and excited. Why does she not come? My hope had been to see my poor girl safely housed before I started to execute my other task. Why does she not come? Time, precious time, is slipping by! In the hope of meeting her, I walked for some distance up the road. "Why does she delay?" I groaned. Even now I should be on my way to Roding, or I may miss my prey. [illegible] Heavens! Perish the thought!

But, all the same, every fibre in my body [illegible]

I could bear the suspense no longer. [illegible] Mr. Wilson's on my way to Roding. Yet now I dared not leave my own house. Any moment might bring Philippa. What would she think if I was not there to receive and welcome her?

Five more precious moments gone! I stamped in my rage. After all, I can only do one-half of my task; the sweet, but not the stern half. Shall I, indeed, do either? The train must now be close to Roding. In an hour everything may be lost. The man will see her before she leaves the house. He will persuade her. She will listen to his words; for did he not once love her? He must have loved her! After all, he broke the laws for the sake of possessing her, and—cursed thought!—she loved him then; and she is but a woman!

So I tortured myself until my state of mind grew unbearable. At all hazards I must prevent Ferrand from meeting Philippa. Oh, why had she not come as she promised? Could it be she was detained against her will? In spite of her uninterested manner I distrusted the woman I had seen last night. It is now past seven o'clock. Philippa's house, from which I had reckoned my time, was nearly three miles away. I must give up my scheme of vengeance. I must go in search of Philippa. If I do not meet her I must call at Mrs. Wilson's, find out what detains her, and if needful bear her away by force.

By this time my steps had brought me back to my own house. I called William, and told him I was going to walk up the road and meet my expected guest. If by any chance I should miss her he was to welcome her on my behalf, and tell her the reason for my absence.

"Best take a lantern, sir," said William; "moon'll be hidden, and them roads is precious rough."

"I can't be bothered with that great horn affair," I said, rather testily.

"Take the little one—the bull's eye—that's better than nothing," said William. To humor him I put it into my pocket.

I ran at the top of my speed to the house at which I had last night left Philippa. It took me nearly half an hour getting there. I rang the bell impetuously. The door was opened by a maid servant. I inquired for Mrs. Farmer, knowing that Philippa had passed under this name to all except her hostess. To my surprise I was told that she had left the house, on foot and alone, some little while ago. The maid believed she was not going to return, as her luggage had that morning been sent for.

The first effect of this intelligence was to cause me to blame my haste. I must have missed her—no doubt passed her on the road. No; such a thing was impossible. The way was a narrow one. The moon still gave some light. If I had met Philippa I must have seen her. She must have seen me, and would then have stopped me. She could not have gone the way I came.

But where was she? In what direction was I to seek her? Argue the matter as I would—loath as I was to allow myself to be convinced, I was bound to decide that she must have taken the path to Roding. There was no other. She had gone, even as I was going, to meet Ferrand. She may have started, intending to come to me; but at the last moment a desire to see the man once more—I fondly hoped for the purpose of heaping reproaches on his head—had mastered her. Yes, whatever her object might be, she had gone to meet him. And my heart sank as conviction was carried to it by the remembrance that coupled with her refusal to permit me to fetch her was an assertion that she had something to do before she came to me. That, as I now read it, could be but one thing—to meet this man!

Never again, if I can help it, shall his voice strike on her ear! Never again shall their eyes meet! Never again shall the touch of even his finger contaminate her! Let me follow, and stand between her and the scoundrel. If they meet he will wound her to the heart. Her pride will rise; she will threaten. Then the coward will try another line. He will plead for mercy; he will swear he still loves her; he will bait his hook with promises. She will listen; hesitate; perhaps yield, and find herself once more deceived. Then she will be lost to me forever. Now she is, in my eyes, pure as when first we met. Let me haste on, overtake, pass her; meet her betrayer, and, if needful, strike him to the ground.

As I turned from the house I became aware that a great and sudden change had come over the night. It seemed to me that, even in the few minutes which I had spent in considering what to do, the heavy clouds had banked and massed together. It was all but pitch-dark; so dark that I paused, and drawing from my pocket the lantern with which William's foresight had provided me, managed after several trials to light it. Then, impatient at the delay, I sped up the road.

I was now almost facing the wind. All at once, sharp and quick, I felt the blinding snow on my face. The wind moaned through the leafless branches on either side of the road. The snow flakes whirled madly here and there. Even in my excitement I was able to realize the fact that never before had I seen in England so fierce a snow storm, or one which came on so suddenly. And, like myself, Philippa was abroad, and exposed to its full fury. Heavens! she might lose her way, and wander about all night.

This fear quickened my steps. I forced my way on through the mad storm. For the time all thought of Sir Mervyn Ferrand and vengeance left my heart. All I now wanted was to find Philippa; to lead her home, and see her safe beneath my roof. "Surely," I said, as I battled along, "she cannot have gone much further."

I kept a sharp lookout—if, indeed, it can be called a lookout; for the whirling snow made everything, save what was within a few feet of me, invisible. I strained my ears to catch the faintest cry or other sound. I went on, flashing my lantern first on one and then on the other side of the road. My dread was that Philippa, utterly unable to fight against the white tempest, might be crouching under one of the banks, and if so I might pass without seeing her or even attracting her attention. My doing so on such a night as this might mean her death.

Oh, why had she not come as promised? Why had she gone to meet the man who had so foully wronged her? After what had happened, she could not, dared not love him. And for a dreary comfort I recalled the utter bitterness of her accent last night when she turned to me and said, "Basil, did you ever hate a man?" No, she could not love him!

These thoughts brought my craving for vengeance back to my mind. Where was Ferrand? By all my calculations, taking into account the time wasted at starting, I should by now have met him. Perhaps he had not come, after all. Perhaps the look of the weather had frightened him, and he had decided to stay at Roding for the night. I raged at the thought! If only I knew that Philippa was safely housed, nothing, in my present frame of mind, would have suited me better than to have met him on this lonely road, in the midst of this wild storm. If Philippa were only safe!

Still no sign of her. I began to waver in my mind. What if my first supposition, that I had passed her on the road, was correct? She might be now at my cottage, wondering what had become of me. Should I go further or turn back? But what would be my feelings if I did the latter and found when I arrived home that she had not made her appearance?

I halted, irresolute, in the centre of the road. Instinctively I beat my hands together to promote circulation. I had left my home hurriedly, and had made no provision for the undergoing of such an ordeal as this terrible, unprecedented snowstorm inflicted. In spite of the speed at which I had traveled, my hands and feet were growing numbed, my face smarted with the cold. Heaven help me to decide aright, whether to go on or turn back!

The decision was not left to me. Suddenly, close at hand, I heard a wild peal, a scream of laughter which made my blood run cold. Swift from the whirling, tossing, drifting snow emerged a tall gray figure. It swept past me like the wind; but as it passed me I knew that my quest was ended—that Philippa was found!

She vanished in a second, before the terror which rooted me to the spot had passed away. Then I turned and, fast as I could run, followed her, crying as I went, "Philippa! Philippa!"

I soon overtook her; but so dark was the night that I was almost touching her before I saw her shadowy, ghost-like form. I threw my arms round her and held her. She struggled violently in my grasp.

"Philippa, dearest! it is I, Basil," I said, bending close to her ear.

The sound of my voice seemed to calm her, or I should rather say she ceased to struggle.

"Thank heaven, I have found you!" I said. "Let us get back as soon as possible."

"Back! No! Go on, go on!" she exclaimed. "On, on, on, up the road yet awhile—on through the storm, through the snow—on till you see what I have left behind me! On till you see the wages of sin—the wages of sin!"

Her words came like bullets from a mitrailleuse. Through the night I could see her face gleaming whiter than the snow on her hood. I could see her great, fixed, dark eyes full of nameless horror.

"Dearest, be calm," I said, and strove to take her hands in mine.

As I tried to gain possession of her right hand something fell from it, and, although the road was now coated with snow, a metallic sound rang out as it touched the ground. Mechanically I stooped and picked up the fallen object.

As I did so, Philippa, with a wild cry, wrested herself from the one hand whose numbed grasp still sought to retain her, and, with a frenzied reiteration of the words, "The wages of sin!" fled from me, and was lost in the night.

Even as I rushed in pursuit I shuddered as the sense of feeling told me what thing it was I had picked up from the snowy ground. It was a small pistol! Cold as the touch of [illegible] cluded the possibility of my overtaking her.

Moreover, a strange, uncontrollable impulse swayed me. The touch of that deadly weapon still burned my hand. Philippa's words still rang in my ears. "On, on, on up the road yet awhile!" she had cried. What did she mean? What had been done to-night?

I must retrace my steps. I must see! I must know! Philippa is flying through the cold, dark, deadly night; but her frame is but the frame of a woman. She must soon grow exhausted, perhaps sink senseless on the road. Nevertheless, the dreadful fears which are growing in my mind must be set at rest; then I can resume the pursuit. At all cost I must know what has happened!

Once more I turned and faced the storm. Heavens! anything might happen on such a night as this! I went on and on, flashing my lantern on the centre and each side of the road. I went some distance past that spot where I judged that Philippa had swept by me. Then suddenly with a cry of horror I stopped short. At my very feet, in the middle of the highway, illumined by the disk of light cast by my lantern, lay a whitened mass, and as my eye fell upon it I knew only too well the meaning of Philippa's wild exclamation, "The wages of sin! The wages of sin!"

CHAPTER IV.

AT ALL COST, SLEEP!

Sir Mervyn Ferrand had paid for his sin with his life!

Dead! Before I knelt beside him and, after unbuttoning his coat, laid my hand on his breast, I knew the man was dead. Before I turned the lantern on his white face I knew who the man was. Sir Mervyn Ferrand had paid for his sin with his life! It needed little professional skill to determine the cause of his death. A bullet fired, it seemed to me, at close quarters had passed absolutely through the heart. He must have fallen without a moan. Killed, I knew, by the hand of the woman he had wronged.

A sneering smile yet lingered on his set features. I could even imagine the words which had accompanied it, when swift and sudden, without one moment's grace for repentence or confession, death had been meted out to him. At one moment he stood erect and full of life, mocking, it may be, her who had trusted him and had been betrayed; at the next, before the sentence he was speaking was completed, he lay lifeless at her feet, with the snow-flakes beginning to form his winding-sheet!

Oh, it was vengeance! swift, deadly vengeance! But why, oh, why had she wreaked it? Philippa, my peerless Philippa, a murderess! Oh, it was too fearful, too horrible! I must be dreaming. All my own thoughts of revenge left me. It was for the time pity, sheer pity, I felt for the man, cut off in the prime of his life. While I knew he was alive I could look forward to and picture the minute when we should stand coolly seeking to kill one another, but now that he was dead I hated him no longer. Ah! death is a sacred thing. Dead! Sir Mervyn Ferrand dead, and slain by Philippa!

It could not be true! It should not be true! Yet I shuddered as I remembered the passion she had thrown into those words, "Basil, did you ever hate a man?" I gave a low cry of anguish as I remembered how I had hurled from me the pistol she had let fall—the very weapon which had done the dreadful deed.

Killed by Philippa! Not in a sudden burst of uncontrollable passion, but with deliberate intent. She must have gone armed to meet him. She must have shot him through the heart; must have seen him fall. Then, only then, the horrible deed which she had wrought must have been fully realized! Then she had turned and fled from the spot in a frenzy. Oh, my poor girl! my poor girl!

Utterly bewildered by my anguish I rose from my knees and stood for a while beside the corpse. It was in that moment I learned how much I really loved the woman who had done this thing. Over all my grief and horror this love rose paramount. At all cost I must save her—save her from the hands of justice; save her from the fierce elements which her tender frame was even at this moment braving. And as I recalled how she had sought me yesterday with the tale of her wrong—how she had wildly fled from me a few minutes ago, madly, blindly into the night; as I thought of the injuries she had suffered, and which had led her to shed this man's blood; as I contrasted her in her present position with what she was when first I knew her and loved her, the pity began to fade from my heart; my thoughts toward the lifeless form at my feet grew stern and sombre, and I found myself beginning, by the old code of an eye for an eye, to justify, although I regretted Philippa's fearful act. Right or wrong, she was the woman I loved; and I swore I would save her from the consequences of her crime, even—Heaven help me!—if the accusation, when made, must fall upon my shoulders.

Yet it was not the beginning of any scheme to evade justice which induced me to raise the dead body and bear it to the side of the road, where I placed it under the low bank on which the hedge grew. It was the reverence which one pays to death made me do this. I could not leave the poor wretch lying in the very middle of the highway for the first passersby to stumble against. To-morrow he would, of course, be found. To-morrow the hue and cry would be out! To-morrow Philippa, my Philippa, would ——. Oh, heavens! never, never, never!

So I laid what was left of Sir Mervyn Ferrand reverentially by the side of the lonely road. I even tried to close his glassy eyes, and I covered his face with his own handkerchief. Then, with heart holding fear and anguish enough for a lifetime, I turned and went in search of the poor unhappy girl.

Where should I seek her? Who knew what her remorse may have urged her to do? Who knew whither her horror may have driven her? It needs but to find Philippa lifeless on the road to complete the heaviest tale of grief which can be exacted from one man in one short night! I clinched my teeth and rushed on.

I had the road all the road to myself. No one was abroad in such weather. Indeed, few persons were seen at night in any weather in this lonely part of the country. I made straight for my own house. The dismal thought came to me that unless Philippa kept to the road she was lost to me forever. If she strayed to the right or to the left, how on such a night could I possibly find her? My one hope was that she would go straight to my cottage; so thither I made the best of my way. If she had not arrived, I must get what assistance I could and seek for her in the fields to the right and left of the road. It was a dreary comfort to remember that all the ponds and spaces of water were frozen six inches thick.

I hesitated a moment when I reached her late residence. Should I inquire if she had returned thither? No: when morning revealed the ghastly event of the night, my having done so would awake suspicion. Let me first go home.

Home at last. In a moment I shall know the worst. I opened the slide of my lantern, which was still alight, and threw the rays on the path which led to my door. My heart gave a great bound of thankfulness. There on the snow, not yet obliterated by more recent flakes, were the prints of a small foot. Philippa, as I prayed, but scarcely dared to hope she might, had come straight to my house.

My man opened the door for me. It was well I had seen those footprints, as my knowledge of Philippa's arrival enabled me to assume a natural air.

"My sister has come?" I asked.

"Yes, sir; about a quarter of an hour ago."

"We missed each other on the road. What a night!" I said, throwing off my snow-covered coat. "Where is she now?" I asked.

"In the sitting room, sir." Then, lowering his voice, William added: "She seemed just about in a tantrum when she found you weren't at home. I expect we shall find her a hard lady to please."

William, in spite of his stolidity, occasionally ventured upon some liberty when addressing me.

His words greatly surprised me. I forced myself to make some laughing rejoinder; then I turned the handle of the door and entered the room in which Philippa had taken refuge.

Oh, how my heart throbbed! What would she say to me? What could I, fresh from that dreadful scene, say to her? Would she excuse or palliate, would she simply confess or boldly justify her crime? Would she plead her wrongs in extenuation? Would she assert that in a moment of ungovernable rage she had done the deed? No matter what she said, she was still Philippa, and even at the cost of my own life and honor I would save her.

Yet as I advanced into the room a shudder ran through me. [illegible]

But she kept a stony silence—kept her eyes still turned from mine. At last I called her by her name, and, bending down, looked into her face.

Its expression was one of sullen anger, and moreover, anger which seemed to deepen as she heard my voice. She made a kind of contemptuous gesture as if waving me aside.

"Philippa," I said, as sternly as I could, "speak to me!"

I laid my hand upon her arm. She shook it off fiercely, and then started to her feet.

"You ask me to speak to you," she said; "you who have treated me like this! Oh, it is shameful! shameful! I come through storm and snow—come to you, who were to welcome me as a brother! Where are you? Away, your wretched servant tells me. Why are you away? I trusted you! Oh, you are a pretty brother! If you had cared for me or respected me, you would have been here to greet me. No! you are all in a league—all in a league to ruin me! Now I am here, what will you do? Poison me, of course! kill me, and make away with me, even as that other doctor killed and made away with my poor child? He did! I say he did! I saw him do it! 'A child of shame,' he said; so he killed it! All, all, all—even you—you, whom I trusted—leagued against me!"

She was trembling with excitement. Her words ran one into the other. It was as much as I could do to follow them; yet the above is but a brief condensation of what she said. With unchecked volubility she continued to heap reproaches and accusations, many of which were of the most extravagant and frivolous nature, on my head. At last she was silent, and reseated herself in her former attitude; and the sullen, discontented, ill-used look again settled on her face.

And yet, although I, who loved her above all the world, was the object of her fierce reproaches, no words I had yet listened to came more sweetly to my ear than these. A great joy swept through me; a tide of relief bore me to comparative happiness. Whatever dreadful deed the poor girl had that night accomplished she was morally innocent. Philippa was not accountable for her actions!

As a doctor I read the truth at once. The rapid flow of words, the changing moods, the vehement excitement, the sullen air, the groundless suspicions—one and all carried conviction, and told me what was wrong. Mrs. Wilson's words of yesterday, which warned me that Philippa's health should be inquired into, added absolute certainty.

My professional brethren who may happen to read this will understand me when I say that, although it is long since I have practiced as a doctor, I am sorely tempted, as I reach this stage of my story, to give in detail the particulars which induced me to arrive at such a belief. No physician, no surgeon, lives who does not feel it his duty as well as his pleasure to give an accurate account of any out-of-the-common case which has come under his notice. But I am not writing these pages for the benefit of science; and having no wish to make my tale assume the authority of a hospital report, shall restrain myself, and on technical points be as brief as possible.

In short, then, Philippa had fallen a victim to that mania which not uncommonly shows itself after the birth of a child—that dread, mysterious disease which may, at the moment when everything seems going well, turn a house of joy into a house of mourning; a disease the source of which I have no hesitation in saying has not yet been properly traced and investigated. So far as I know, there is no monograph on the subject, or certainly there was none at that time.

Still, it is admitted by all the authorities that this species of insanity is not unfrequently produced by a severe mental shock, especially when that shock is accompanied by an overwhelming sense of shame. Statistics show us that unmarried women who are mothers, and feel the degradation of such a position acutely, are peculiarly liable to be attacked by the mysterious malady. Esquirol was, I believe, the first to notice this fact, and the correctness of his view has subsequently been confirmed by many others.

Such being the case, it is small wonder that Philippa, waking yesterday morning to receive the intelligence that her marriage with Sir Mervyn Ferrand had been a farce, should have been thrown into a state extremely susceptible to the attack of the disease. Her careless exposure of herself to the wintry air, when last night she sought me and claimed my aid, most probably hastened the attack of the foe. Mrs. Wilson had noticed her strange manner. I myself have remarked upon her rapid changes from calmness to excitability. It was clear to me that even when she visited me last night the mischief had begun to develop itself. I blamed my blindness bitterly. I ought to have seen what was wrong. Considering her agitated state, I ought to have been warned, and have taken precautions; but I had attributed those fitful changes, the meaning of which was now only too plain to me, to the natural agitation experienced by a passionate yet pure-minded woman, who found herself betrayed and brought to shame. Oh, had I but guessed the real cause, or rather the way in which her grief had affected her, all the dark work of that night might have been left undone!

Although in many ways it added to the difficulties and dangers which surrounded us, the discovery of the truth was an unspeakable relief to me. No right-minded man could now call the poor girl guilty of crime. The man's blood was indeed on her hands; yet she had shed it, not knowing what she did. Her frenzy must then have been at its height. The idea of his coming that night must in some way have occurred to her. The desire to see him must have driven her to go and meet him. Her wrongs—perhaps the dread she now felt of him—may have induced her to arm herself; perhaps she carried the weapon for self-protection. Any way, she was mad when she started; she was mad when she drew the trigger; she was mad when she broke from my grasp; she was mad now as she sat by my fire, eyeing me with morose, suspicious glances. She was mad—and innocent!

Her manner toward me troubled me but little. It is a well-known peculiarity of the disease that the patient turns with hatred from those who were the nearest and dearest to her. Fits of sullen, stubborn silence, alternating with fierce outbursts of vituperation, are the most common characteristics of the mania. Hideous, startling as it is to see the change wrought in the sufferer, the malady is by no means of such an alarming nature as it seems. In fact the majority of cases are treated with perfect success.

But all this is professional talk. Again I say that the discovery of Philippa's state of mind was an immense relief to me. My conscience was cleared of a weight which was pressing upon it. I felt braced up to use every effort, and thoroughly justified in following whatever course I thought best. Moreover, a new relationship was now established between Philippa and myself. For awhile every feeling save one must be banished. We were now doctor and patient.

After much persuasion I induced her to let me feel her pulse. As I expected, I found it up nearly to one hundred and twenty. This did not alarm me much, as in the course of my practice I had seen several of these cases. The preliminary treatment was simple as A B C; at all cost sleep must be obtained.

Fortunately, I had a well stocked medicine chest. In a few minutes I had prepared the strongest dose of opium which I dared to administer. In such a case as the present I knew that no driblets would avail; so I measured out no less than sixty drops of laudanum. Sleep the girl must have. That poor seething, boiling brain must by artificial means be forced to rest for hours. After that rest I should be able to say what chance there was of saving life and reason.

But preparing a dose of medicine and making a patient like this to take it, are two different things. I tried every art, every persuasion. I implored and commanded. I threatened and insisted. Philippa was obdurate. Poor soul! she knew I meant to poison her. On my part, I knew that unless she swallowed that narcotic to-night her case was all but hopeless.

I rested for awhile; then I sent for lukewarm water. After some resistance she suffered me to bathe her throbbing temples. The refreshing coolness which followed the operation was so grateful to her that she let me repeat the action again and again. A soft and more contented look settled on her beautiful face.

I seized the moment. Once more I pressed the potion upon her. This time successfully. My heart trembled with joy as I saw her swallow the drug. Now she might be saved!

I still continued the comforting laving of her temples, and waited until the drug took its due effect. By and by that moment came. The large dark eyes closed, the weary head sunk heavily on my shoulder, and I knew that Philippa had entered upon a term of merciful oblivion.

I waited until her sleep was sound as the sleep of death; then I summoned my man. I had already told him that my sister was very ill. Between us we bore her to her room and laid her on her bed. I loosened her dress, cut the wet boots from her cold feet, did all I could to promote warmth and such comfort as was possible under the circumstances. Then I left her, sleeping that heavy sleep which I prayed might last unbroken for hours, and hours, and hours.

CHAPTER V.

A WHITE TOMB.

From the moment when the true state of Philippa's mind flashed upon me, to the moment when I left her sleeping that heavy sleep, I had little time to think of anything else than the best means of saving her life, and, if possible, her reason. True, throughout the whole of my operations to effect this end, a dim sort of horror pervaded me—a recollection of the ghastly object which lay on the roadside, some three miles from us; but it was not until I turned from my patient [illegible] Mervyn Ferrand was her husband; that he had ill-used her. She would most certainly know to whom Philippa had fled. It did not follow that because I was ignorant as to who were my neighbors they knew nothing about me. At any rate, William, my man, would know the truth. So far as I could see, to-morrow, or by the latest, the next day Philippa would be arrested for the crime. Most probably I should also be included in the arrest. For that I seemed to care nothing; except that it might hinder me from helping my poor girl.

Any hope of removing Philippa—there, put it in plain words—any hope of flight, for days, even weeks, was vain. Let everything go as well as can be in such cases, the girl must be kept in seclusion and quiet for at least a fortnight or three weeks. I groaned as I thought of what would happen if Philippa was arrested and carried before the magistrates, accused of the awful crime. From that moment until the day of her death she would be insane.

Yet, what help was there for it? The moment the deed is known—the moment Mrs. Wilson learns that Sir Mervyn Ferrand has been found shot through the heart, she will let it be known that Lady Ferrand is at hand; and Lady Ferrand, who has been passing under the name of Mrs. Farmer, will be sought and found. And then—and then!

Even if she did not die at once—even if she recovered—oh, the shame of the trial! No jury could or would convict her; but for Philippa, my queen, to stand in the dock, to plead for her life. To know that, whether convicted or acquitted, the deed was done by her. To know that all England is talking of her wrongs and her vengeance. Horrible! Horrible! It shall never be. Rather will I give her a draught of opium heavy enough to close her eyes forever. There will be plenty more of the drug left for me!

Fool that I was! Why did I do things by halves? Why, for her sake, did I not hide the dead man where none would find him? Why did I not rifle his pockets, so that suspicion should have pointed to a vulgar murderer—some one who had killed him for mere plunder? Why did I not, at least, destroy any letters or papers which were about him? Identification might then have been rendered difficult, and perhaps been delayed for weeks. In that time I might have saved her.

Why do I not do this now? I started to my feet; then sank back into my chair. No; not even for Philippa's sake could I go again to that spot. If I did so, I should return as mad as she is now.

Not being able to bring myself to adopt the gruesome alternative, I could do nothing save wait events—nothing, at least, to avert the consequences of her delirious act.

But for her something must be done. How could she, in her frenzied state, be left here—her only companions two men? Nurses must at once be procured. I summoned William and told him he must go to London by the first train in the morning.

William would have received my instructions to go to the Antipodes with imperturbability. He merely expressed a doubt as to whether any one would be able to get to London to-morrow on account of the snow. I walked to the window and looked out.

The night was still one mad whirl of snow flakes. The window-panes were half covered by such as managed to find a resting place there. As I watched what I could see of the wild white dance, I found myself thinking that by now that dead man on the road must be covered an inch—must have lost shape and outline. I shivered as I turned away.

"They are sure to keep the line to town open," I said. "If you can get to Roding, you can get to London."

"Oh, I can get to Roding right enough!" said William.

Then I told him what he was to do. He was to take a letter to one of the Nursing Institutions, and bring back two nurses with him. No matter what the weather was when they reached Roding, they were to come to my house at once, even if they had to hire twenty horses to drag them there. He was also to get me a few drugs that I might want.

William said no more. He nodded, to show that he understood me; and I knew if it were possible to do my bidding it would be done.

Of his own accord he then brought me food. I ate, for I knew that I should want all my strength to support the anxiety of the next day or two.

The poor creature, to whose side I crept every half-hour—

I stayed up the whole night. Oh, that awful night! shall I ever forget it? The solitude—the raging snow storm outside—the poor creature, to whose side I crept noiselessly every half an hour. She lay there with a face like marble, calm and beautiful. The long, dark lashes swept her pale cheek. The only movement was the regular rise and fall of the bosom. Oh, happy oblivion! Oh, dreaded wakening! As I looked at her, in spite of the love I bore her, I believe that, had I thought such a prayer would be answered, I should for her sake have prayed that those lashes might never again be lifted.

Morning at last broke on my dreary vigil. Philippa still slept. I returned to the sitting room and drew back the curtains from the window. Yes; it was morning—such a morning as leaden, wintry skies can give. It was still snowing as heavily, if not more heavily, than it had snowed last night. For twelve hours the flakes had fallen without intermission.

There was little wind now; it had dropped, I knew, about an hour ago. The world, so far as I could see, was clad in white: but the snow lay unevenly. The wind had blown it into drifts. On my garden path its depth might be counted by inches; against my garden wall by feet.

William now made his appearance. He prepared some breakfast for himself, and then, having done justice to it, started for Roding. It occurred to me that he might be the first to find the object which lay on the roadside.

Except that so doing might delay him and cause him to miss the train, this mattered little. I was now calmly awaiting the inevitable. Some one must make the discovery. However, as I wanted the nurses, I said to him:

"Remember this is life and death. Nothing must stop you." He touched his hat in a reassuring manner, and tramped off through the snow.

I returned to my patient's bedside and sat watching her, and waiting for her to awake. She had now slept for nearly eleven hours, and I knew that return to life might take place at any moment. I longed for, and yet I dreaded, her awakening. When the effects of the opiate were gone, how should I find her? Alas! I knew that the chances were a thousand to one that her brain would still be full of strange delusions; that she would turn from me, as she turned last night, with loathing and anger. But my greatest fear was that she would, upon coming to herself, or rather to her poor insane self, be conscious of the act she had accomplished. It was the fear of this which made me wish that the opium would hold her in its drowsy grasp for hours longer.

This wish was granted. Hour after hour I sat by her motionless form. Now and again I glanced from the beautiful, senseless face, and looking out of the window saw the snow still falling. Would my messenger ever be able to reach town; if he did so, would he be able to return? I was bound to have a woman's aid. The presence of the roughest daughter of the plow would be welcome to me when Philippa awoke. And it was now time she did so.

Although I felt her pulse almost every other minute, and could find no reason for alarm, I am bound to say that her long sleep, protracted far beyond any I had in my experience seen produced by the exhibition of narcotics, rendered me very uneasy. I shall, I am sure, scarcely be credited when I say that Philippa's unconsciousness lasted for 16 hours—from 9.30 at night to 1.30 on the following afternoon. I began then to think the duration abnormal, and determined to take some steps towards arousing her.

But I was spared the responsibility. She stirred on the couch. Her head turned languidly on the pillow. Her dark eyes opened, closed, and opened again. She looked at me in a dazed manner, not at first seeming to know me, or to understand why I was near her, or where she was. A prey to the wildest anxiety, I leaned over her and waited until she spoke.

Little by little her bewilderment seemed to leave her. Her eyes rested with curious inquiry upon mine. "Basil," she said faintly, but in a tone of surprise, "you here! Where am I?"

"Under my roof—your brother's roof," I said.

"Ah! I remember," she said, with a deep sigh. Then she closed her eyes, and once more seemed to sleep.

What did she remember? It seemed to me too great a mercy to expect that those hours of oblivion had effected a cure, but my hope was that she did not remember what had happened when she met Sir Mervyn Ferrand on the road. I was almost trembling with excitement. I was longing to really know in what state her mind was. Besides, I thought she had slept as long as was good for her. I took her hands and called her by name.

Once more she opened her eyes. They [illegible]

"Have I been ill long, Basil?" she asked.

"Not very long. You are going to get better soon."

"I came to your house, did I not?"

"Yes; and here I mean to keep you. Do you feel weak?"

"Very weak. Basil, I have dreamed such horrible things."

"You have been feverish and delirious. People like that always fancy strange things."

She was, indeed, as weak as a child; but for the time, at least, she was perfectly sane. I could have cried for joy as I heard her faint but collected words. I ventured to hope that I had before me one of those very rare cases—such as I had seen described, but had not as yet met with—where the patient awakes from a long, artificially-produced sleep perfectly free from all maniacal symptoms. If this were so with Philippa, if the return of reason were to be permanent, I knew that a few weeks' careful nursing and judicious treatment might quite restore her to health. Even as this comforting thought came to me, I remembered the peril in which she stood. To-morrow—aye, even to-day—the thing which I dreaded might happen, and sweep away all the good the narcotic had done her.

She was now fully awake, and perfectly quiet. I gave her some refreshment; then seeing she was lying in peaceful silence, I thought it better to leave her. As I quitted her room I drew down the blind, fearing that the whirling snow might bring recollections which it was my one wish to keep from invading her mind.

The long, dreary day wore away. The light faded, and another night began. Philippa still lay calm, silent, and almost apathetic. I did nothing to rouse her. I went to her side as seldom as possible. I feared that her seeing me might recall the events of the last night, and that recollections so awakened might destroy all the good which I felt sure had been accomplished by the long hours of oblivion and quiet. Could I have deputed my task to another, I would not have even shown myself to my patient. Most anxiously, as evening came, I awaited the appearance of my faithful William and the nurses.

Would they be able to reach us in such weather? It was still snowing fiercely. For more than twenty-four hours the mad white revel had continued without intermission. Indeed, that storm which burst upon the world as I turned from Philippa's house on the preceding night is now historical; it was the beginning of the heaviest and longest fall which the record of fifty years can show. For two nights and a day the snow came down in what may almost be called drifting masses. During that dismal day I saw from the window the heaps against the wall grow deeper and deeper, and even in my preoccupied state of mind found myself marvelling at the sustained fury of the storm.

At 11 o'clock at night I sadly gave up all hope of the much needed assistance arriving. After all, it seemed that William had found it impossible to fight against the weather; so I made my preparations for another night of solitary watchfulness. I was all but worn out with fatigue; yet I dared not sleep. If the mania returned, what might happen were I not at hand to restrain Philippa's actions! My hope that the madness had really left my patient, not, if she were properly treated, to return, was a growing one, but not yet strong enough to allow me to leave her for any length of time.

My delight then may be imagined when, looking for the hundredth time up the road, I saw close at hand two flashing lights, and knew that William, the faithful, had done my bidding. In a few minutes two respectable women from one of the best of the London nursing institutions were within my walls.

The train had, of course, been late, very late. At one or two places on the line it had almost given up the battle, and settled down quietly until dug out; but steam and iron had conquered, and at last it did get to Roding. There William, knowing my dire necessity, offered such a magnificent bribe that he soon found an enterprising carriage proprietor who was willing to make the attempt to force two horses and a carriage over six miles of road between Roding and my house. The attempt was successful, although the rate of progression was slow; and William triumphantly ushered his charges into my presence.

After giving them time for rest and refreshment, I explained the nature of the case, set out the treatment I wished to be adopted, and then led them to Philippa. I left the poor girl in their charge for the night, then went to take the sleep of which I stood so much in need.

But before going to bed I saw William. I dreaded to hear him say what gruesome sight he had seen that morning; yet I was bound to learn if the deed had yet been made public.

"Did you manage to get to Roding all right this morning?" I asked with assumed carelessness.

"I managed all right, sir," said William, cheerfully.

"Snow deep on the road?"

"Not so deep as I fancied 'twould be. All drifted and blown up to one side, like. I never seen such a thing. Drift must have been feet deep this morning. What must it be now, I wonder? Something like the Arctic regions, I should think, sir?"

For the first time for hours and hours a ray of hope flashed across me. William had walked that lonely road this morning, and noticed nothing except the drifted snow! I remembered how I placed the dead man in the little hollow at the bottom of the bank. Could it be that the kindly, merciful snow, which I have already described as beginning to form in a winding-sheet, had hidden and buried him? That a pure white, shapeless heap, which told no tales, concealed for a while the dark deed from the world? Oh that Philippa were well enough to leave this place to-morrow! We might fly and leave no trace behind us. She might never know what she had done in her madness. The fearful secret would be mine alone. A burden it would be, but one which I might easily find strength enough to bear. Bear it! I could bear it, and be happy, for something told me that, could I but save her from the peril which menaced her, Philippa and I would part no more in this world until death, the only conqueror of such love as mine, swept us asunder.

Once more I looked out into the night. Still the snow-flakes whirled down. Oh, brave, kind snow! Fall, fall, fall! Pile the masses on the dead wretch. Hide him deep in your bosom. Fall for weeks, for months, forever! Save my love and me!

[To be Continued.]

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