Braddon Mary Elizabeth

Mount Royal: A Novel. Volume 3 of 3

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
"WITH SUCH REMORSELESS SPEED STILL COME NEW WOES."

The next morning was damp, and grey, and mild, no autumn wind stirring the long sweeping branches of the cedars on the lawn, the dead leaves falling silently, the world all sad and solemn, clad in universal greyness. Christabel was up early, with her boy, in the nursery – watching him as he splashed about his bath, and emerged rosy and joyous, like an infant river-god sporting among the rushes; early at family prayers in the dining room, a ceremony at which Mr. Tregonell rarely assisted, and to which Dopsy and Mopsy came flushed and breathless with hurry, anxious to pay all due respect to a hostess whom they hoped to visit again, but inwardly revolting against the unreasonableness of eight-o'clock prayers.

Angus, who was generally about the gardens before eight, did not appear at all this morning. The other men were habitually late – breakfasting together in a free-and-easy manner when the ladies had left the dining-room – so Christabel, Miss Bridgeman, and the Miss Vandeleurs sat down to breakfast alone, Dopsy giving little furtive glances at the door every now and then, expectant of Mr. Hamleigh's entrance.

That expectancy became too painful for the damsel's patience, by-and-by, as the meal advanced.

"I wonder what has become of Mr. Hamleigh," she said. "This is the first time he has been late at breakfast."

"Perhaps he is seeing to the packing of his portmanteau," said Miss Bridgeman. "Some valets are bad packers, and want superintendence."

"Packing!" cried Dopsy, aghast. "Packing! What for?"

"He is going to London this afternoon. Didn't you know?"

Dopsy grew pale as ashes. The shock was evidently terrible, and even Jessie pitied her.

"Poor silly Dop," she thought. "Could she actually suppose that she stood the faintest chance of bringing down her bird?"

"Going away? For good?" murmured Miss Vandeleur faintly – all the flavour gone out of the dried salmon, the Cornish butter, the sweet home-baked bread.

"I hope so. He is going to the South of France for the winter. Of course, you know that he is consumptive, and has not many years to live," answered Miss Bridgeman.

"Poor fellow!" sighed Dopsy, with tears glittering upon her lowered eyelids.

She had begun the chase moved chiefly by sordid instincts; her tenderest emotions had been hacked and vulgarized by long experience in flirtation – but at this moment she believed that never in her life had she loved before, and that never in her life could she love again.

"And if he dies unmarried what will become of his property?" inquired Mopsy, whose feelings were not engaged.

"I haven't the faintest idea," answered Miss Bridgeman. "He has no near relations. I hope he will leave his money to some charitable institution."

"What time does he go?" faltered Dopsy, swallowing her tears.

"Mr. Hamleigh left an hour ago, Madam," said the butler, who had been carving at the side-board during this conversation. "He has gone shooting. The dog-cart is to pick him up at the gate leading to St. Nectan's Kieve at eleven o'clock."

"Gone shooting on his last morning at Mount Royal!" exclaimed Jessie. "That's a new development of Mr. Hamleigh's character. I never knew he had a passion for sport."

"I believe there is a note for you, ma'am," said the butler to his mistress.

He went out into the hall, and returned in a minute or two carrying a letter upon his official salver, and handing it with official solemnity to Mrs. Tregonell.

The letter-was brief and commonplace enough —

"Dear Mrs. Tregonell, —

"After all I am deprived of the opportunity of wishing you good-by this morning, by the temptation of two or three hours' woodcock shooting about St. Nectan's Kieve. I shall drive straight from there to Launceston in Mr. Tregonell's dog-cart, for the use of which I beg to thank him in advance. I have already thanked you and Miss Bridgeman for your goodness to me during my late visit to Mount Royal, and can only say that my gratitude lies much deeper, and means a great deal more, than such expressions of thankfulness are generally intended to convey.

"Ever sincerely yours,

"Angus Hamleigh."

"Then this was what Leonard and he were settling last night," thought Christabel. "Your master went out with Mr. Hamleigh, I suppose," she said to the servant.

"No, ma'am, my master is in his study. I took him his breakfast an hour ago. He is writing letters, I believe."

"And the other two gentlemen?"

"Started for Bodmin in the wagonette at six o'clock this morning."

"They are going to see that unhappy man hanged," said Miss Bridgeman. "Congenial occupation. Mr. Montagu told me all about it at dinner yesterday, and asked me if I wasn't sorry that my sex prevented my joining the party. 'It would be a new sensation,' he said, 'and to a woman of your intelligence that must be an immense attraction.' I told him I had no hankering after

new sensations of that kind."

"And he is really gone – without saying good-by to any of us," said Dopsy, still harping on the departed guest.

"Yes, he is really gone," echoed Jessie, with a sigh.

Christabel had been silent and absent-minded throughout the meal. Her mind was troubled – she scarcely knew why; disturbed by the memory of her husband's manner as he parted with Angus in the corridor; disturbed by the strangeness of this lonely expedition after woodcock, in a man who had always shown himself indifferent to sport. As usual with her when she was out of spirits, she went straight to the nursery for comfort, and tried to forget everything in life except that Heaven had given her a son whom she adored.

Her boy upon this particular morning was a little more fascinating and a shade more exacting than usual; the rain, soft and gentle as it was – rather an all-pervading moisture than a positive rainfall – forbade any open-air exercise for this tenderly reared young person – so he had to be amused indoors. He was just of an age to be played with, and to understand certain games which called upon the exercise of a dawning imagination; so it was his mother's delight to ramble with him in an imaginary wood, and to fly from imaginary wolves, lurking in dark caverns, represented by the obscure regions underneath a table-cover – or to repose with him on imaginary mountain-tops on the sofa – or be engulfed with him in sofa pillows, which stood for whelming waves. Then there were pictures to be looked at, and

little Leo had to be lovingly instructed in the art of turning over a leaf without tearing it from end to end – and the necessity for restraining an inclination to thrust all his fingers into his mouth between whiles, and sprawl them admiringly on the page afterwards.

Time so beguiled, even on the dullest morning, and with a lurking, indefinite sense of trouble in her mind all the while, went rapidly with Christabel. She looked up with surprise when the stable clock struck eleven.

"So late? Do you know if the dog-cart has started yet, Carson?"

"Yes, ma'am, I heard it drive out of the yard half an hour ago," answered the nurse, looking up from her needlework.

"Well, I must go. Good-by, Baby. I think, if you are very good, you might have your dinner with mamma. Din-din – with – mum – mum – mum" – a kiss between every nonsense syllable. "You can bring him down, nurse. I shall have only the ladies with me at luncheon." There were still further leave-takings, and then Christabel went downstairs. On her way past her husband's study she saw the door standing ajar.

"Are you there, Leonard, and alone?"

"Yes."

She went in. He was sitting at his desk – his cheque-book open, tradesmen's accounts spread out before him – all the signs and tokens of business-like occupation. It was not often that Mr. Tregonell spent a morning in his study. When he did, it meant

a general settlement of accounts, and usually resulted in a surly frame of mind, which lasted, more or less, for the rest of the day.

"Did you know that Mr. Hamleigh had gone woodcock shooting?"

"Naturally, since it was I who suggested that he should have a shy at the birds before he left," answered Leonard, without looking up.

He was filling in a cheque, with his head bent over the table.

"How strange for him to go alone, in his weak health, and with a fatiguing journey before him."

"What's the fatigue of lolling in a railway carriage? Confound it, you've made me spoil the cheque!" muttered Leonard, tearing the oblong slip of coloured paper across and across, impatiently.

"How your hand shakes! Have you been writing all the morning?"

"Yes – all the morning," absently, turning over the leaves of his cheque-book.

"But you have been out – your boots are all over mud."

"Yes, I meant to have an hour or so at the birds. I got as far as Willapark, and then remembered that Clayton wanted the money for the tradesmen to-day. One must stick to one's pay-day, don't you know, when one has made a rule."

"Of course. Oh, there are the new Quarterlies!" said Christabel, seeing a package on the table. "Do you mind my opening them here?"

"No; as long as you hold your tongue, and don't disturb me

when I'm at figures."

This was not a very gracious permission to remain, but Christabel seated herself quietly by the fire, and began to explore the two treasuries of wisdom which the day's post had brought. Leonard's study looked into the stable-yard, a spacious quadrangle, with long ranges of doors and windows, saddle rooms, harness rooms, loose boxes, coachmen's and groom's quarters – a little colony complete in itself. From his open window the Squire could give his orders, interrogate his coachman as to his consumption of forage, have an ailing horse paraded before him, bully an underling, and bestow praise or blame all round, as it suited his humour. Here, too, were the kennels of the dogs, whose company Mr. Tregonell liked a little better than that of his fellow-men.

Leonard sat with his head bent over the table, writing, Christabel in her chair by the fire turning the leaves of her book in the rapture of a first skimming. They sat thus for about an hour, and then both looked up with a startled air, at the sound of wheels.

It was the dog-cart that was being driven into the yard, Mr. Hamleigh's servant sitting behind, walled in by a portmanteau and a Gladstone bag. Leonard opened the window, and looked out.

"What's up?" he asked "Has your master changed his mind?"

The valet alighted, and came across the yard to the window.

"We haven't seen Mr. Hamleigh, Sir. There must have been

some mistake, I think. We waited at the gate for nearly an hour, and then Baker said we'd better come back, as we must have missed Mr. Hamleigh, somehow, and he might be here waiting for us to take him to Launceston."

"Baker's a fool. How could you miss him if he went to the Kieve? There's only one way out of that place – or only one way that Mr. Hamleigh could find. Did you inquire if he went to the Kieve?"

"Yes, Sir. Baker went into the farmhouse, and they told him that a gentleman had come with his gun and a dog, and had asked for the key, and had gone to the Kieve alone. They were not certain as to whether he'd come back or not, but he hadn't taken the key back to the house. He might have put it into his pocket, and forgotten all about it, don't you see, Sir, after he'd let himself out of the gate. That's what Baker said; and he might have come back here."

"Perhaps he has come back," answered Leonard, carelessly. "You'd better inquire."

"I don't think he can have returned," said Christabel, standing near the window, very pale.

"How do you know?" asked Leonard, savagely. "You've been sitting here for the last hour poring over that book."

"I think I should have heard – I think I should have known," faltered Christabel, with her heart beating strangely.

There was a mystery in the return of the carriage which seemed like the beginning of woe and horror – like the ripening

of that strange vague sense of trouble which had oppressed her for the last few hours.

"You would have heard – you would have known," echoed her husband, with brutal mockery – "by instinct, by second sight, by animal magnetism, I suppose. You are just the sort of woman to believe in that kind of rot."

The valet had gone across the yard on his way round to the offices of the house. Christabel made no reply to her husband's sneering speech, but went straight to the hall, and rang for the butler.

"Have you – has any one seen Mr. Hamleigh come back to the house?" she asked.

"No, ma'am."

"Inquire, if you please, of every one. Make quite sure that he has not returned, and then let three or four men, with Nicholls at their head, go down to St. Nectan's Kieve and look for him. I'm afraid there has been an accident."

"I hope not, ma'am," answered the butler, who had known Christabel from her babyhood, who had looked on, a pleased spectator, at Mr. Hamleigh's wooing, and whose heart was melted with tenderest compassion to-day at the sight of her pallid face, and eyes made large with terror. "It's a dangerous kind of place for a stranger to go clambering about with a gun, but not for one that knows every stone of it, as Mr. Hamleigh do."

"Send, and at once, please. I do not think Mr. Hamleigh, having arranged for the dog-cart to meet him, would forget his

appointment."

"There's no knowing, ma'am. Some gentlemen are so wrapt up in their sport."

Christabel sat down in the hall, and waited while Daniel, the butler, made his inquiries. No one had seen Mr. Hamleigh come in, and everybody was ready to aver on oath if necessary that he had not returned. So Nicholls, the chief coachman, a man of gumption and of much renown in the household, as a person whose natural sharpness had been improved by the large responsibilities involved in a well-filled stable, was brought to receive his orders from Mrs. Tregonell. Daniel admired the calm gravity with which she gave the man his instructions, despite her colourless cheek and the look of pain in every feature of her face.

"You will take two or three of the stablemen with you, and go as fast as you can to the Kieve. You had better go in the light cart, and it would be as well to take a mattress, and some pillows. If – if there should have been an accident those might be useful. Mr. Hamleigh left the house early this morning with his gun to go to the Kieve, and he was to have met the dog-cart at eleven. Baker waited at the gate till twelve – but perhaps you have heard."

"Yes, ma'am, Baker told me. It's strange – but Mr. Hamleigh may have overlooked the time if he had good sport. Do you know which of the dogs he took with him?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Because I rather thought it was Sambo. Sambo was always a favourite of Mr. Hamleigh's, though he's getting rather too old

for his work now. If it was Sambo the dog must have run away and left him, for he was back about the yard before ten o'clock. He'd been hurt somehow, for there was blood upon one of his feet. Master had the red setter with him this morning, when he went for his stroll, but I believe it must have been Sambo that Mr. Hamleigh took. There was only one of the lads about the yard when he left, for it was breakfast time, and the little guffin didn't notice."

"But if all the other dogs are in their kennels – "

"They aren't, ma'am, don't you see. The two gentlemen took a couple of 'em to Bodmin in the break – and I don't know which. Sambo may have been with them – and may have got tired of it and come home. He's not a dog to appreciate that kind of thing."

"Go at once, if you please, Nicholls. You know what to do."

"Yes, ma'am."

Nicholls went his way, and the gong began to sound for luncheon. Mr. Tregonell, who rarely honoured the family with his presence at the mid-day meal, came out of his den to-day in answer to the summons, and found his wife in the hall.

"I suppose you are coming in to luncheon," he said to her, in an angry aside. "You need not look so scared. Your old lover is safe enough, I daresay."

"I am not coming to luncheon," she answered, looking at him with pale contempt. "If you are not a little more careful of your words I may never break bread with you again."

The gong went on with its discordant clamour, and Jessie

Bridgeman came out of the drawing-room with the younger Miss Vandeleur. Poor Dopsy was shut in her own room, with a headache. She had been indulging herself with the feminine luxury of a good cry. Disappointment, wounded vanity, humiliation, and a very real *penchant* for the man who had despised her attractions were the mingled elements in her cup of woe.

The nurse came down the broad oak staircase, baby Leonard toddling by her side, and making two laborious jumps at each shallow step – one on – one off. Christabel met him, picked him up in her arms, and carried him back to the nursery, where she ordered his dinner to be brought. He was a little inclined to resist this change of plan at the first, but was soon kissed into pleasantness, and then the nurse was despatched to the servants' hall, and Christabel had her boy to herself, and ministered to him and amused him for the space of an hour despite an aching heart. Then, when the nurse came back, Mrs. Tregonell went to her own room, and sat at the window watching the avenue by which the men must drive back to the house.

They did not come back till just when the gloom of the sunless day was deepening into starless night. Christabel ran down to the lobby that opened into the stable yard, and stood in the doorway waiting for Nicholls to come to her; but if he saw her, he pretended not to see her, and went straight to the house by another way, and asked to speak to Mr. Tregonell.

Christabel saw him hurry across the yard to that other door,

and knew that her fears were realized. Evil of some kind had befallen. She went straight to her husband's study, certain that she would meet Nicholls there.

Leonard was standing by the fireplace, listening, while Nicholls stood a little way from the door, relating the result of his search, in a low agitated voice.

"Was he quite dead when you found him?" asked Leonard, when the man paused in his narration.

Christabel stood just within the doorway, half hidden in the obscurity of the room, where there was no light but that of the low fire. The door had been left ajar by Nicholls, and neither he nor his master was aware of her presence.

"Yes, Sir. Dr. Blake said he must have been dead some hours."

"Had the gun burst?"

"No, Sir. It must have gone off somehow. Perhaps the trigger caught in the hand-rail when he was crossing the wooden bridge – and yet that seemed hardly possible – for he was lying on the big stone at the other side of the bridge, with his face downwards close to the water."

"A horrible accident," said Leonard. "There'll be an inquest, of course. Will Blake give the coroner notice – or must I?"

"Dr. Blake said he'd see to that, Sir."

"And he is lying at the farm – "

"Yes, Sir. We thought it was best to take the body there – rather than to bring it home. It would have been such a shock for my mistress – and the other ladies. Dr. Blake said the inquest

would be held at the inn at Trevena."

"Well," said Leonard, with a shrug and a sigh, "it's an awful business, that's all that can be said about it. Lucky he has no wife or children – no near relations to feel the blow. All we can do is to show our respect for him, now he is gone. The body had better be brought home here, after the inquest. It will look more respectful for him to be buried from this house. Mrs. Tregonell's mind can be prepared by that time."

"It is prepared already," said a low voice out of the shadow. "I have heard all."

"Very sad, isn't it?" replied Leonard; "one of those unlucky accidents which occur every shooting season. He was always a little awkward with a gun – never handled one like a thoroughbred sportsman."

"Why did he go out shooting on the last morning of his visit?" asked Christabel. "It was you who urged him to do it – you who planned the whole thing."

"I! What nonsense you are talking. I told him there were plenty of birds about the Kieve – just as I told the other fellows. That will do, Nicholls. You did all that could be done. Go and get your dinner, but first send a mounted groom to Trevena to ask Blake to come over here."

Nicholls bowed and retired, shutting the door behind him.

"He is dead, then," said Christabel, coming over to the hearth where her husband was standing. "He has been killed."

"He has had the bad luck to kill himself, as many a better

sportsman than he has done before now," answered Leonard, roughly.

"If I could be sure of that, Leonard, if I could be sure that his death was the work of accident – I should hardly grieve for him – knowing that he was reconciled to the idea of death – and that if God had spared him this sudden end, the close of his life must have been full of pain and weariness."

Tears were streaming down her cheeks – tears which she made no effort to restrain – such tears as friendship and affection give to the dead – tears that had no taint of guilt. But Leonard's jealous soul was stung to fury by those innocent tears.

"Why do you stand there snivelling about him," he exclaimed; "do you want to remind me how fond you were of him – and how little you ever cared for me. Do you suppose I am stone blind – do you suppose I don't know you to the core of your heart?"

"If you know my heart you must know that it is as guiltless of sin against you, and as true to my duty as a wife, as you, my husband, can desire. But you must know that, or you would not have brought Angus Hamleigh to this house."

"Perhaps I wanted to try you – to watch you and him together – to see if the old fire was quite burnt out."

"You could not be so base – so contemptible."

"There is no knowing what a man may be when he is used as I have been by you – looked down upon from the height of a superior intellect, a loftier nature – told to keep his distance, as a piece of vulgar clay – hardly fit to exist beside that fine porcelain

vase, his wife. Do you think it was a pleasant spectacle for me to see you and Angus Hamleigh sympathizing and twaddling about Browning's last poem – or sighing over a sonata of Beethoven's – I who was outside all that kind of thing? – a boor – a dolt – to whom your fine sentiments and your flummery were an unknown language. But I was only putting a case, just now. I liked Hamleigh well enough – in his way – and I asked him here because I thought it was giving a chance to the Vandeleur girls. That was my motive – and my only motive."

"And he came – and he is dead," answered Christabel, in icy tones. "He went to that lonely place this morning – at your instigation – and he met his death there – no one knows how – no one ever will know."

"At my instigation? – confound it, Christabel – you have no right to say such things. I told him it was a good place for woodcock – and it pleased his fancy to try his luck there before he left. Lonely place, be hanged. It is a place to which every tourist goes – it is as well known as the road to this house."

"Yet he was lying there for hours and no one knew. If Nicholls had not gone he might be lying there still. He may have lain there wounded – his life-blood ebbing away – dying by inches – without help – without a creature to succour or comfort him. It was a cruel place – a place where no help could come."

"Fortune of war," answered Leonard, with a careless shrug. "A sportsman must die where his shot finds him. There's many a day I might have fallen in the Rockies, and lain there for the lynxes

and the polecats to pick my bones; and I have walked shoulder to shoulder with death on mountain passes, when every step on the crumbling track might send me sliding down to the bottomless pit below. As for poor Hamleigh; well, as you say yourself, he was a doomed man – a little sooner or later could not make much difference."

"Perhaps not," said Christabel, gloomily, going slowly to the door; "but I want to know how he died."

"Let us hope the coroner's inquest will make your mind easy on that point," retorted her husband as she left the room.

CHAPTER II
"YOURS ON MONDAY, GOD'S TO-DAY."

The warning gong sounded at half-past seven as usual, and at eight the butler announced dinner. Captain Vandeleur and Mr. Montagu had returned from Bodmin, and they were grouped in front of the fire talking in undertones with Mr. Tregonell, while Christabel and the younger Miss Vandeleur sat on a sofa, silent, after a few murmured expressions of grief on the part of the latter lady.

"It is like a dream," sighed Mopsy, this being the one remark which a young person of her calibre inevitably makes upon such an occasion. "It is like a dreadful dream – playing billiards last night, and now – dead! It is too awful."

"Yes, it is awful; Death is always awful," answered Christabel, mechanically.

She had told herself that it was her duty to appear at the dinner-table – to fulfil all her responsibilities as wife and hostess – not to give any one the right to say that she was bemoaning him who had once been her lover; and she was here to do her duty. She wanted all the inhabitants of her little world to see that she mourned for him only as a friend grieves for the loss of a friend – soberly, with pious submission to the Divine Will that had taken

him away. For two hours she had remained on her knees beside her bed, drowned in tears, numbed by despair, feeling as if life could not go on without him, as if this heavily-beating heart of hers must be slowly throbbing to extinction: and then the light of reason had begun to glimmer through the thick gloom of grief, and her lips had moved in prayer, and, as if in answer to her prayers, came the image of her child, to comfort and sustain her.

"Let me not dishonour my darling," she prayed. "Let me remember that I am a mother as well as a wife. If I owe my husband very little, I owe my son everything."

Inspired by that sweet thought of her boy, unwilling, for his sake, to give occasion for even the feeblest scandal, she had washed the tears from her pale cheeks, and put on a dinner gown, and had gone down to the drawing-room just ten minutes before the announcement of dinner.

She remembered how David, when his beloved was dead, had risen and washed and gone back to the business of life. "What use are my tears to him, now he is gone?" she said to herself, as she went downstairs.

Miss Bridgeman was not in the drawing-room; but Mopsy was there, dressed in black, and looking very miserable.

"I could not get poor Dop to come down," she said, apologetically. "She has been lying on her bed crying ever since she heard the dreadful news. She is so sensitive, poor girl; and she liked him so much; and he had been so attentive to her. I hope you'll excuse her?"

"Please don't apologize. I can quite imagine that this shock has been dreadful for her – for every one in the house. Perhaps you would rather dine upstairs, so as to be with your sister?"

"No!" answered Mopsy, taking Christabel's hand, with a touch of real feeling. "I had rather be with you. You must feel his loss more than we can – you had known him so much longer."

"Yes, it is just five years since he came to Mount Royal. Five years is not much in the lives of some people; but it seems the greater part of my life."

"We will go away to-morrow," said Mopsy. "I am sure you will be glad to get rid of us: it will be a relief, I mean. Perhaps at some future time you will let us come again for a little while. We have been so intensely happy here."

"Then I shall be happy for you to come again – next summer, if we are here," answered Christabel, kindly, moved by Mopsy's *naïveté*: "one can never tell. Next year seems so far off in the hour of trouble."

Dinner was announced, and they all went in, and made believe to dine, in a gloomy silence, broken now and then by dismal attempts at general conversation on the part of the men. Once Mopsy took heart of grace and addressed her brother:

"Did you like the hanging, Jack?" she asked, as if it were a play.

"No, it was hideous, detestable. I will never put myself in the way of being so tortured again. The guillotine is swifter and more merciful. I saw a man blown from a gun in India – there were

bits of him on my boots when I got home – but it was not so bad as the hanging to-day: the limp, helpless, figure, swaying and trembling in the hangman's grip while they put the noose on, the cap dragged roughly over the ghastly face, the monotonous croak of the parson reading on like a machine, while the poor wretch was being made ready for his doom. It was all horrible to the last degree. Why can't we poison our criminals: let them die comfortably, as Socrates died, of a dose of some strong narcotic. The parson might have some chance – sitting by the dying man's bed, in the quiet of his cell."

"It would be much nicer," said Mopsy.

"Where's Miss Bridgeman?" Leonard asked suddenly, looking round the table, as if only that moment perceiving her absence.

"She is not in her room, Sir. Mary thinks she has gone out," answered the butler.

"Gone out – after dark. What can have been her motive for going out at such an hour?" asked Leonard of his wife, angrily.

"I have no idea. She may have been sent for by some sick person. You know how good she is."

"I know what a humbug she is," retorted Leonard. "Daniel, go and find out if any messenger came for Miss Bridgeman – or if she left any message for your mistress."

Daniel went out, and came back again in five minutes. No one had seen any messenger – no one had seen Miss Bridgeman go out.

"That's always the case here when I want to ascertain a fact,"

growled Leonard: "no one sees or knows anything. There are twice too many servants for one to be decently served. Well, it doesn't matter much. Miss Bridgeman is old enough to take care of herself – and if she walks off a cliff – it will be her loss and nobody else's."

"I don't think you ought to speak like that of a person whom your mother loved – and who is my most intimate friend," said Christabel, with grave reproach.

Leonard had drunk a good deal at dinner; and indeed there had been an inclination on the part of all three men to drown their gloomy ideas in wine, while even Mopsy, who generally took her fair share of champagne, allowed the butler to fill her glass rather oftener than usual – sighing as she sipped the sparkling bright-coloured wine, and remembering, even in the midst of her regret for the newly dead, that she would very soon have returned to a domicile where Moët was not the daily beverage, nay, where, at times, the very beer-barrel ran dry.

After dinner Christabel went to the nursery. It flashed upon her with acutest pain as she entered the room, that when last she had been there she had not known of Angus Hamleigh's death. He had been lying yonder by the waterfall, dead, and she had not known. And now the fact of his death was an old thing – part of the history of her life.

The time when he was alive and with her, full of bright thoughts and poetic fancies, seemed ever so long ago. Yet it was only yesterday – yesterday, and gone from her life as utterly as

if it were an episode in the records of dead and gone ages – as old as the story of Tristan and Iseult. She sat with her boy till he fell asleep, and sat beside him as he slept, in the dim light of the night-lamp, thinking of him who lay dead in the lonely farmhouse among those green hills they two had loved so well – hushed by the voice of the distant sea, sounding far inland in the silence of night.

She remembered how he had talked last night of the undiscovered country, and how, as he talked, with flushed cheeks, and too brilliant eyes, she had seen the stamp of death on his face. They had talked of "The Gates Ajar," a book which they had read together in the days gone by, and which Christabel had often returned to since that time – a book in which the secrets of the future are touched lightly by a daring but a delicate hand – a book which accepts every promise of the Gospel in its most literal sense, and overflows with an exultant belief in just such a Heaven as poor humanity wants. In this author's creed transition from death to life is instant – death is the Lucina of life. There is no long lethargy of the grave, there is no time of darkness. Straight from the bed of death the spirit rushes to the arms of the beloved ones who have gone before. Death, so glorified, becomes only the reunion of love.

He had talked of Socrates, and the faithful few who waited at the prison doors in the early morning, when the sacred ship had returned, and the end was near; and of that farewell discourse in the upper chamber of the house at Jerusalem which seems dimly

foreshadowed by the philosopher's converse with his disciples – at Athens, the struggle towards light – at Jerusalem the light itself in fullest glory.

Christabel felt herself bound by no social duty to return to the drawing-room, more especially as Miss Vandeleur had gone upstairs to sit with the afflicted Dopsy – who was bewailing the dead very sincerely in her own fashion, with little bursts of hysterical tears and fragmentary remarks.

"I know he didn't care a straw for me" – she gasped, dabbing her temples with a handkerchief soaked in eau-de-Cologne – "yet it seemed sometimes almost as if he did: he was so attentive – but then he had such lovely manners – no doubt he was just as attentive to all girls. Oh, Mop, if he had cared for me, and if I had married him – what a paradise this earth would have been. Mr. Tregonell told me that he had quite four thousand a year."

And thus – and thus, with numerous variations on the same theme – poor Dopsy mourned for the dead man; while the low murmur of the distant sea, beating for ever and for ever against the horned cliffs, and dashing silvery white about the base of that Mechard Rock which looks like a couchant lion keeping guard over the shore, sounded like a funeral chorus in the pauses of her talk.

It was half-past ten when Christabel left her boy's bedside, and, on her way to her own room, suddenly remembered Jessie's unexplained absence.

She knocked at Miss Bridgeman's door twice, but there was

no answer, and then she opened the door and looked in, expecting to find the room empty.

Jessie was sitting in front of the fire in her hat and jacket, staring at the burning coals. There was no light in the room, except the glow and flame of the fire, but even in that cheerful light Jessie looked deadly pale. "Jessie," exclaimed Christabel, going up to her and putting a gentle hand upon her shoulder, for she took no notice of the opening of the door, "where in heaven's name have you been?"

"Where should I have been? Surely you can guess! I have been to see him."

"To the farm – alone – at night?"

"Alone – at night – yes! I would have walked through storm and fire – I would have walked through – " she set her lips like iron, and muttered through her clenched teeth, "Hell."

"Jessie, Jessie, how foolish! What good could it do?"

"None to him, I know, but perhaps a little to me. I think if I had stayed here I should have gone stark, staring mad. I felt my brain reeling as I sat and thought of him in the twilight, and then it seemed to me as if the only comfort possible was in looking at his dead face – holding his dead hand – and I have done it, and am comforted – a little," she said, with a laugh, which ended in a convulsive sob.

"My good warm-hearted Jessie!" murmured Christabel, bending over her lovingly, tears raining down her cheeks; "I know you always liked him."

"Always liked him!" echoed the other, staring at the fire, in blank tearless grief; "liked him? yes, always."

"But you must not take his death so despairingly, dear. You know that, under the fairest circumstances, he had not very long to live. We both knew that."

"Yes! we knew it. I knew – thought that I had realized the fact – told myself every day that in a few months he would be hidden from us under ground – gone to a life where we cannot follow him even with our thoughts, though we pretend to be so sure about it, as those women do in 'The Gates Ajar.' I told myself this every day. And yet, now that he is snatched away suddenly – cruelly – mysteriously – it is as hard to bear as if I had believed that he would live a hundred years. I am not like you, a piece of statuesque perfection. I cannot say 'Thy will be done,' when my dearest – the only man I ever loved upon this wide earth is snatched from me. Does that shock your chilly propriety, you who only half loved him, and who broke his heart at another woman's bidding? Yes! I loved him from the first – loved him all the while he was your lover, and found it enough for happiness to be in his company – to see and hear him, and answer every thought of his with sympathetic thoughts of mine – understanding him quicker and better than you could, bright as you are – happy to go about with you two – to be the shadow in the sunshine of your glad young lives, just as a dog who loved him would have been happy following at his heels. Yes, Belle, I loved him – I think almost from the hour he came here, in the

sweet autumn twilight, when I saw that poetic face, half in fire-glow and half in darkness – loved him always, always, always, and admired him as the most perfect among men!"

"Jessie, my dearest, my bravest! And you were so true and loyal. You never by word or look betrayed – "

"What do you think of me?" cried Jessie, indignantly. "Do you suppose that I would not rather have cut out my tongue – thrown myself off the nearest cliff – than give him one lightest occasion to suspect what a paltry-souled creature I was – so weak that I could not cure myself of loving another woman's lover. While he lived I hated myself for my folly; now he is dead, I glory in the thought of how I loved him – how I gave him the most precious treasures of my soul – my reverence – my regard – my tears and hopes and prayers. Those are the only gold and frankincense and myrrh which the poor of this earth can offer, and I gave them freely to my divinity!"

Christabel laid her hand upon the passionate lips; and, kneeling by her friend's side, comforted her with gentle caresses.

"Do you suppose I am not sorry for him, Jessie?" she said reproachfully, after a long pause.

"Yes, no doubt you are, in your way; but it is such an icy way."

"Would you have me go raving about the house – I, Leonard's wife, Leo's mother? I try to resign myself to God's will: but I shall remember him till the end of my days, with unspeakable sorrow. He was like sunshine in my life; so that life without him seemed all one dull gray, till the baby came, and brought me back to the

sunlight, and gave me new duties, new cares!"

"Yes! you can find comfort in a baby's arms – that is a blessing. My comfort was to see my beloved in his bloody shroud – shot through the heart – shot through the heart! Well, the inquest will find out something to-morrow, I hope; but I want you to go with me to-morrow morning, as soon as it is light, to the Kieve."

"What for?"

"To see the spot where he died."

"What will be the good, Jessie? I know the place too well; it has been in my mind all this evening."

"There will be some good, perhaps. At any rate, I want you to go with me; and if there ever was any reality in your love, if you are not merely a beautiful piece of mechanism, with a heart that beats by clockwork, you will go."

"If you wish it I will go."

"As soon as it is light – say at seven o'clock."

"I will not go till after breakfast. I want the business of the house to go on just as calmly as if this calamity had never happened. I don't want any one to be able to say, 'Mrs. Tregonell is in despair at the loss of her old lover.'"

"In fact you want people to suppose that you never cared for him!"

"They cannot suppose that, when I was once so proud of my love. All I want is that no one should think I loved him too well after I was a wife and mother. I will give no occasion for scandal."

"Didn't I say that you were a handsome automaton?"

"I do not want any one to say hard things of me when I am dead – hard things that my son may hear."

"When you are dead! You talk as if you thought you were to die soon. You are of the stuff that wears to threescore-and-ten, and even beyond the Psalmist's limit. There is no friction for natures of your calibre. When Werther had shot himself, Charlotte went on cutting bread and butter, don't you know? It was her nature to be proper, and good, and useful, and never to give offence – her nature to cut bread and butter," concluded Jessie, laughing bitterly.

Christabel stayed with her for an hour, talking to her, consoling her, speaking hopefully of that unknown world, so fondly longed for, so piously believed in by the woman who had learnt her creed at Mrs. Tregonell's knees. Many tears were shed by Christabel during that hour of mournful talk; but not one by Jessie Bridgeman. Hers was a dry-eyed grief.

"After breakfast then we will walk to the Kieve," said Jessie, as Christabel left her. "Would it be too much to ask you to make it as early as you can?"

"I will go the moment I am free. Good-night, dear."

CHAPTER III
DUEL OR MURDER?

All the household appeared at breakfast next morning; even poor Dopsy, who felt that she could not nurse her grief in solitude any longer. "It's behaving too much as if you were his widow," Mopsy had told her, somewhat harshly; and then there was the task of packing, since they were to leave Mount Royal at eleven, in order to be at Launceston in time for the one o'clock train. This morning's breakfast was less silent than the dinner of yesterday. Everybody felt as if Mr. Hamleigh had been dead at least a week.

Captain Vandeleur and Mr. Montagu discussed the sad event openly, as if the time for reticence were past; speculated and argued as to how the accident could have happened; talked learnedly about guns; wondered whether the country surgeon was equal to the difficulties of the case.

"I can't understand," said Mr. Montagu, "if he was found lying in the hollow by the waterfall, how his gun came to go off. If he had been going through a hedge, or among the brushwood on the slope of the hill, it would be easy enough to see how the thing might have happened; but as it is, I'm all in the dark."

"You had better go and watch the inquest, and make yourself useful to the coroner," sneered Leonard, who had been drinking his coffee in moody silence until now. "You seem to think

yourself so uncommonly clever and far seeing."

"Well, I flatter myself I know as much about sport as most men; and I've handled a gun before to-day, and know that the worst gun that was ever made won't go off and shoot a fellow through the heart without provocation of some kind."

"Who said he was shot through the heart?"

"Somebody did – one of your people, I think."

Mrs. Tregonell sat at the other end of the table, half hidden by the large old-fashioned silver urn, and next her sat Jessie Bridgeman, a spare small figure in a close-fitting black gown, a pale drawn face with a look of burnt-out fires – pale as the crater when the volcanic forces have exhausted themselves. At a look from Christabel she rose, and they two left the room together. Five minutes later they had left the house, and were walking towards the cliff, by following which they could reach the Kieve without going down into Boscastle. It was a wild walk for a windy autumn day; but these two loved its wildness – had walked here in many a happy hour, with souls full of careless glee. Now they walked silently, swiftly, looking neither to the sea nor the land, though both were at their loveliest in the shifting lights and shadows of an exquisite October morning – sunshine enough to make one believe it was summer – breezes enough to blow about the fleecy clouds in the blue clear sky, to ripple the soft dun-coloured heather on the hillocky common, and to give life and variety to the sea.

It was a long walk; but the length of the way seemed of little

account to these two. Christabel had only the sense of a dreary monotony of grief. Time and space had lost their meaning. This dull aching sorrow was to last for ever – till the grave – broken only by brief intervals of gladness and forgetfulness with her boy.

To-day she could hardly keep this one source of consolation in her mind. All her thoughts were centred upon him who lay yonder dead.

"Jessie," she said, suddenly laying her hand on her companion's wrist, as they crossed the common above the slate-quarry, seaward of Trevalga village, with its little old church and low square tower. "Jessie, I am not going to see him."

"What weak stuff you are made of," muttered Jessie, contemptuously, turning to look into the white frightened face. "No, you are not going to look upon the dead. You would be afraid, and it might cause scandal. No, you are only going to see the place where he died; and then perhaps you, or I, will see a little further into the darkness that hides his fate. You heard how those men were puzzling their dull brains about it at breakfast. Even they can see that there is a mystery."

"What do you mean?"

"Only as much as I say. I know nothing – yet."

"But you suspect – ?"

"Yes. My mind is full of suspicion; but it is all guess-work – no shred of evidence to go upon."

They came out of a meadow into the high road presently – the pleasant rustic road which so many happy holiday-making people

tread in the sweet summer time – the way to that wild spot where England's first hero was born; the Englishman's Troy, cradle of that fair tradition out of which grew the Englishman's Iliad.

Beside the gate through which they came lay that mighty slab of spar which has been christened King Arthur's Quoit, but which the Rector of Trevalga declared to be the covering stone of a Cromlech. Christabel remembered how facetious they had all been about Arthur and his game of quoits, five years ago, in the bright autumn weather, when the leaves were blown about so lightly in the warm west wind. And now the leaves fell with a mournful heaviness, and every falling leaf seemed an emblem of death.

They went to the door of the farmhouse to get the key of the gate which leads to the Kieve. Christabel stood in the little quadrangular garden, looking up at the house, while Jessie rang and asked for what she wanted.

"Did no one except Mr. Hamleigh go to the Kieve yesterday until the men went to look for him?" she asked of the young woman who brought her the key.

"No one else, Miss. No one but him had the key. They found it in the pocket of his shooting jacket when he was brought here."

Involuntarily, Jessie put the key to her lips. His hand was almost the last that had touched it.

Just as they were leaving the garden, where the last of the yellow dahlias were fading, Christabel took Jessie by the arm, and stopped her.

"In which room is he lying?" she asked. "Can we see the window from here?"

"Yes, it is that one."

Jessie pointed to a low, latticed window in the old gray house – a casement round which myrtle and honeysuckle clung lovingly. The lattice stood open. The soft sweet air was blowing into the room, just faintly stirring the white dimity curtain. And *he* was lying there in that last ineffable repose.

They went up the steep lane, between tall tangled hedges, where the ragged robin still showed his pinky blossoms, and many a pale yellow hawksweed enlivened the faded foliage, while the ferns upon the banks, wet from yesterday's rain, still grew rankly green.

On the crest of the hill the breeze grew keener, and the dead leaves were being ripped from the hedgerows, and whirled down into the hollow, where the autumn wind seemed to follow Christabel and Jessie as they descended, with a long plaintive minor cry, like the lament at an Irish funeral. All was dark and desolate in the green valley, as Jessie unlocked the gate, and they went slowly down the steep slippery path, among moss-grown rock and drooping fern – down and down, by sharply winding ways, so narrow that they could only go one by one, till they came within the sound of the rushing water, and then down into the narrow cleft, where the waterfall tumbles into a broad shallow bed, and dribbles away among green slimy rocks.

Here there is a tiny bridge – a mere plank – that spans the

water, with a hand-rail on one side. They crossed this, and stood on the broad flat stone on the other side. This is the very heart of St. Nectan's mystery. Here, high in air, the water pierces the rock, and falls, a slender silvery column, into the rocky bed below.

"Look!" said Jessie Bridgeman, pointing down at the stone.

There were marks of blood upon it – the traces of stains which had been roughly wiped away by the men who found the body.

"This is where he stood," said Jessie, looking round, and then she ran suddenly across to the narrow path on the other side. "And some one else stood here – here – just at the end of the bridge. There are marks of other feet here."

"Those of the men who came to look for him," said Christabel.

"Yes; that makes it difficult to tell. There are the traces of many feet. Yet I know," she muttered, with clenched teeth, "that some one stood here – just here – and shot him. They were standing face to face. See!" – she stepped the bridge with light swift feet – "so! at ten paces. Don't you see?"

Christabel looked at her with a white scared face, remembering her husband's strange manner the night before last, and those parting words at Mr. Hamleigh's bedroom door. "You understand my plan?" "Perfectly." "It saves all trouble, don't you see." Those few words had impressed themselves upon her memory – insignificant as they were – because of something in the tone in which they were spoken – something in the manner of the two men.

"You mean," she said slowly, with her hand clenching the rail

of the bridge, seeking unconsciously for support; "you mean that Angus and my husband met here by appointment, and fought a duel?"

"That is my reading of the mystery."

"Here in this lonely place – without witnesses – my husband murdered him!"

"They would not count it murder. Fate might have been the other way. Your husband might have been killed."

"No!" cried Christabel, passionately; "Angus would not have killed him. That would have been too deep a dishonour!"

She stood silent for a few moments, white as death, looking round her with wide, despairing eyes.

"He has been murdered!" she said, in hoarse, faint tones. "That suspicion has been in my mind – dark – shapeless – horrible – from the first. He has been murdered! And I am to spend the rest of my life with his murderer!" Then, with a sudden hysterical cry, she turned angrily upon Jessie.

"How dare you tell lies about my husband?" she exclaimed. "Don't you know that nobody came here yesterday except Angus; no one else had the key. The girl at the farm told us so."

"The key!" echoed Jessie, contemptuously. "Do you think a gate, breast high, would keep out an athlete like your husband? Besides, there is another way of getting here, without going near the gate, where he might be seen, perhaps, by some farm labourer in the field. The men were ploughing there yesterday, and heard a shot. They told me that last night at the farm. Wait! wait!" cried

Jessie, excitedly.

She rushed away, light as a lapwing, flying across the narrow bridge – bounding from stone to stone – vanishing amidst dark autumn foliage. Christabel heard her steps dying away in the distance. Then there was an interval, of some minutes, during which Christabel, hardly caring to wonder what had become of her companion, stood clinging to the hand-rail, and staring down at stones and shingle, feathery ferns, soddened logs, the water rippling and lapping round all things, crystal clear.

Then, startled by a voice above her head, she looked up, and saw Jessie's light figure just as she dropped herself over the sharp arch of rock, and scrambled through the cleft, hanging on by her hands, finding a foothold in the most perilous places – in danger of instant death.

"My God!" murmured Christabel, with clasped hands, not daring to cry aloud lest she should increase Jessie's peril. "She will be killed."

With a nervous grip, and a muscular strength which no one could have supposed possible in so slender a frame, Jessie Bridgeman made good her descent, and stood on the shelf of slippery rock, below the waterfall, unhurt save for a good many scratches and cuts upon the hands that had clung so fiercely to root and bramble, crag and boulder.

"What I could do your husband could do," she said. "He did it often when he was a boy – you must remember his boasting of it. He did it yesterday. Look at this."

"This" was a ragged narrow shred of heather cloth, with a brick-dust red tinge in its dark warp, which Leonard had much affected this year – "Mr. Tregonell's colour, is it not?" asked Jessie.

"Yes – it is like his coat."

"Like? It is a part of his coat. I found it hanging on a bramble, at the top of the cleft. Try if you can find the coat when you get home, and see if it is not torn. But most likely he will have hidden the clothes he wore yesterday. Murderers generally do."

"How dare you call him a murderer?" said Christabel, trembling, and cold to the heart. It seemed to her as if the mild autumnal air – here in this sheltered nook which was always warmer than the rest of the world – had suddenly become an icy blast that blew straight from far away arctic seas. "How dare you call my husband a murderer?"

"Oh, I forgot. It was a duel, I suppose: a fair fight, planned so skilfully that the result should seem like an accident, and the survivor should run no risk. Still, to my mind, it was murder all the same – for I know who provoked the quarrel – yes – and you know – you, who are his wife – and who, for respectability's sake, will try to shield him – you know – for you must have seen hatred and murder in his face that night when he came into the drawing-room – and asked Mr. Hamleigh for a few words in private. It was then he planned this work," pointing to the broad level stone against which the clear water was rippling with such a pretty playful sound, while those two women stood looking at

each other with pale intent faces, fixed eyes, and tremulous lips; "and Angus Hamleigh, who valued his brief remnant of earthly life so lightly, consented – reluctantly perhaps – but too proud to refuse. And he fired in the air – yes, I know he would not have injured your husband by so much as a hair of his head – I know him well enough to be sure of that. He came here like the victim to the altar. Leonard Tregonell must have known that. And I say that though he, with his Mexican freebooter's morality, may have called it a fair fight, it was murder, deliberate, diabolical murder."

"If this is true," said Christabel in a low voice, "I will have no mercy upon him."

"Oh, yes, you will. You will sacrifice feeling to propriety, you will put a good face upon things, for the sake of your son. You were born and swaddled in the purple of respectability. You will not stir a finger to avenge the dead."

"I will have no mercy upon him," repeated Christabel, with a strange look in her eyes.

CHAPTER IV
"DUST TO DUST."

The inquest at the Wharncliffe Arms was conducted in a thoroughly respectable, unsuspicious manner. No searching questions were asked, no inferences drawn. To the farmers and tradespeople who constituted that rustic jury, the case seemed too simple to need any severe interrogation. A gentleman staying in a country house goes out shooting, and is so unlucky as to shoot himself instead of the birds whereof he went in search. He is found with an empty bag, and a charge of swan-shot through his heart.

"Hard lines," as Jack Vandeleur observed, *sotto voce*, to a neighbouring squire, while the inquest was pursuing its sleepy course, "and about the queerest fluke I ever saw on any table."

"Was it a fluke?" muttered little Montagu, lifting himself on tiptoe to watch the proceedings. He and his companions were standing among a little crowd at the door of the justice-room. "It looks to me uncommonly as if Mr. Hamleigh had shot himself. We all know he was deadly sweet on Mrs. T., although both of them behaved beautifully."

"Men have died – and worms have eaten them – but not for love," quoted Captain Vandeleur, who had a hearsay knowledge of Shakspeare, though he had never read a Shakspearian play in

his life. "If Hamleigh was so dead tired of life that he wanted to kill himself he could have done it comfortably in his own room."

"He might wish to avoid the imputation of suicide."

"Pshaw, how can any man care what comes afterwards? Bury me where four roads meet, with a stake through my body, or in Westminster Abbey under a marble monument, and the result is just the same to me."

"That's because you are an out-and-out Bohemian. But Hamleigh was a dandy in all things. He would be nice about the details of his death."

Mr. Hamleigh's valet was now being questioned as to his master's conduct and manner on the morning he left Mount Royal. The man replied that his master's manner had been exactly the same as usual. He was always very quiet – said no more than was necessary to be said. He was a kind master but never familiar. "He never made a companion of me," said the man, "though I'd been with him at home and abroad twelve years; but a better master never lived. He was always an early riser – there was nothing out of the way in his getting up at six, and going out at seven. There was only one thing at all out of the common, and that was his attending to his gun himself, instead of telling me to get it ready for him."

"Had he many guns with him?"

"Only two. The one he took was an old gun – a favourite."

"Do you know why he took swan-shot to shoot woodcocks?"

"No – unless he made a mistake in the charge. He took the

cartridges out of the case himself, and put them into his pocket. He was an experienced sportsman, though he was never as fond of sport as the generality of gentlemen."

"Do you know if he had been troubled in mind of late?"

"No; I don't think he had any trouble on his mind. He was in very bad health, and knew that he had not long to live; but he seemed quite happy and contented. Indeed, judging by what I saw of him, I should say that he was in a more easy, contented frame of mind during the last few months than he had ever been for the last four years."

This closed the examination. There had been very few witnesses called – only the medical man, the men who had found the body, the girl at the farm, who declared that she had given the key to Mr. Hamleigh a little before eight that morning, that no one else had asked for the key till the men came from Mount Royal – that, to her knowledge, no one but the men at work on the farm had gone up the lane that morning. A couple of farm labourers gave the same testimony – they had been at work in the topmost field all the morning, and no one had gone to the Kieve that way except the gentleman that was killed. They had heard a shot – or two shots – they were not certain which, fired between eight and nine. They were not very clear as to the hour, and they could not say for certain whether they heard one or two shots; but they knew that the report was a very loud one – unusually loud for a sportsman's shot.

Mr. Tregonell, although he was in the room ready to answer

any questions, was not interrogated. The jury went in a wagonette to see the body, which was still lying at the farm, and returned after a brief inspection of that peaceful clay – the countenance wearing that beautiful calm which is said to be characteristic of death from a gun-shot wound – to give their verdict.

"Death by misadventure."

The body was carried to Mount Royal after dark, and three days later there was a stately funeral, to which first cousins and second cousins of the dead came as from the four corners of the earth; for Angus Hamleigh, dying a bachelor, and leaving a handsome estate behind him, was a person to be treated with all those last honours which affectionate kindred can offer to poor humanity.

He was buried in the little churchyard in the hollow, where Christabel and he had heard the robin singing and the dull thud of the earth thrown out of an open grave in the calm autumn sunlight. Now in the autumn his own grave was dug in the same peaceful spot – in accordance with a note which his valet, who knew his habits, found in a diary.

"Oct. 11. – If I should die in Cornwall – and there are times when I feel as if death were nearer than my doctor told me at our last interview – I should like to be buried in Minster Churchyard. I have outlived all family associations, and I should like to lie in a spot which is dear to me for its own sake."

A will had been found in Mr. Hamleigh's despatch box, which receptacle was opened by his lawyer, who came from London on

purpose to take charge of any papers which his client might have in his possession at the time of his death. The bulk of his papers were no doubt in his chambers in the Albany; chambers which he had taken on coming of age; and which he had occupied at intervals ever since.

Mr. Tregonell showed himself keenly anxious that everything should be done in a strictly legal manner, and it was by his own hand that the lawyer was informed of his client's death, and invited to Mount Royal. Mr. Bryanstone, the solicitor, a thorough man of the world, and an altogether agreeable person, appeared at the Manor House two days before the funeral, and, being empowered by Mr. Tregonell to act as he pleased, sent telegrams far and wide to the dead man's kindred, who came trooping like carrion crows to the funeral feast.

Angus Hamleigh was buried in the afternoon; a mild, peaceful afternoon at the end of October, with a yellow light in the western sky, which deepened and brightened as the funeral train wound across the valley, climbed the steep street of Boscastle, and then wound slowly downwards into the green heart of the hill, to the little rustic burial place. That orb of molten gold was sinking behind the edge of the moor just when the Vicar read the last words of the funeral service. Golden and crimson gleams touched the landscape here and there, golden lights still lingered on the sea, as the mourners, so thoroughly formal and conventional for the most part – Jack Vandeleur and little Monty amidst the train with carefully-composed features – went back to their carriages.

And then the shades of evening came slowly down, and spread a dark pall over hill-side, and hedgerow, and churchyard, where there was no sound but the monotonous fall of the earth, which the gravedigger was shovelling into that new grave.

There had been no women at the funeral. Those two who, each after her own peculiar fashion, had loved the dead man, were shut in their own rooms, thinking of him, picturing, with too vivid imagery, the lowering of the coffin in the new-made grave – hearing the solemn monotony of the clergyman's voice, sounding clear in the clear air – the first shovelful of earth falling on the coffin-lid – dust to dust; dust to dust.

Lamps were lighted in the drawing-room, where the will was to be read. A large wood fire burned brightly – pleasant after the lowered atmosphere of evening. Wines and other refreshments stood on a table near the hearth; another table stood ready for the lawyer. So far as there could be, or ought to be, comfort and cheeriness on so sad an occasion, comfort and cheeriness were here. The cousins – first and second – warmed themselves before the fire, and discoursed in low murmurs of the time and the trouble it had cost them to reach this out of the way hole, and discussed the means of getting away from it. Mr. Tregonell stood on one side of the hearth, leaning his broad back heavily against the sculptured chimney piece, and listening moodily to Captain Vandeleur's muttered discourse. He had insisted upon keeping his henchman with him during this gloomy period; sending an old servant as far as Plymouth to see the Miss Vandeleurs into the

London train, rather than part with his familiar friend. Even Mr. Montagu, who had delicately hinted at departure, was roughly bidden to remain.

"I shall be going away myself in a week or so," said Mr. Tregonell. "I don't mean to spend the winter at this fag-end of creation. It will be time enough for you to go when I go."

The friends, enjoying free quarters which were excellent in their way, and having no better berths in view, freely forgave the bluntness of the invitation, and stayed. But they commented between themselves in the seclusion of the smoking room upon the Squire's disinclination to be left without cheerful company.

"He's infernally nervous, that's what it all means," said little Monty, who had all that cock-sparrowish pluck which small men are wont to possess – the calm security of insignificance. "You wouldn't suppose a great burly fellow like Tregonell, who has travelled all over the world, would be scared by a death in his house, would you?"

"Death is awful, let it come when it will," answered Jack Vandeleur, dubiously. "I've seen plenty of hard-hitting in the hill-country, but I'd go a long way to avoid seeing a strange dog die, let alone a dog I was fond of."

"Tregonell couldn't have been very fond of Hamleigh, that's certain," said Monty.

"They seemed good friends."

"Seemed; yes. But do you suppose Tregonell ever forgot that Mr. Hamleigh and his wife had once been engaged to be

married? It isn't in human nature to forget that kind of thing. And he made believe that he asked Hamleigh here to give one of your sisters a chance of getting a rich husband," said Monty, rolling up a cigarette, as he sat adroitly balanced on the arm of a large chair, and shaking his head gently, with lowered eyelids, and a cynical smile curling his thin lips. "That was a little *too* thin. He asked Hamleigh here because he was savagely jealous, and suspected his motive for turning up in this part of the country, and wanted to see how he and Mrs. Tregonell would carry on."

"Whatever he wanted, I'm sure he saw no harm in either of them," said Captain Vandeleur. "I'm as quick as any man at twigging that kind of thing, and I'll swear that it was all fair and above board with those two; they behaved beautifully."

"So they did, poor things," answered Monty, in his little purring way. "And yet Tregonell wasn't happy."

"He'd have been better pleased if Hamleigh had proposed to my sister, as he ought to have done," said Vandeleur, trying to look indignant at the memory of Dopsy's wrongs.

"Now drop that, old Van," said Monty, laughing softly and pleasantly, as he lit his cigarette, and began to smoke, dreamily, daintily, like a man for whom smoking is a fine art. "Sink your sister. As I said before, that's too thin. Dopsy is a dear little girl – one of the five or six and twenty nice girls whom I passionately adore; but she was never anywhere within range of Hamleigh. First and foremost she isn't his style, and secondly he has never got over the loss of Mrs. Tregonell. He behaved beautifully while

he was here; but he was just as much in love with her as he was four years ago, when I used to meet them at dances – a regular pair of Arcadian lovers; Daphne and Chloe, and that kind of thing. She only wanted a crook to make the picture perfect."

And now Mr. Bryanstone had hummed and hawed a little, and had put on a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, and cousins near and distant ceased their conversational undertones, and seated themselves conveniently to listen.

The will was brief. "To Percy Ritherdon, Commander in Her Majesty's Navy, my first cousin and old schoolfellow, in memory of his dear mother's kindness to one who had no mother, I bequeath ten thousand pounds, and my sapphire ring, which has been an heirloom, and which I hope he will leave to any son of his whom he may call after me.

"To my servant, John Danby, five hundred pounds in consols.

"To my housekeeper in the Albany, two hundred and fifty.

"To James Bryanstone, my very kind friend and solicitor of Lincoln's Inn, my collection of gold and silver snuff-boxes, and Roman intaglios.

"All the rest of my estate, real and personal, to be vested in trustees, of whom the above-mentioned James Bryanstone shall be one, and the Rev. John Carlyon, of Trevena, Cornwall, the other, for the sole use and benefit of Leonard George Tregonell, now an infant, who shall, with his father and mother's consent, assume the name of Hamleigh after that of Tregonell upon coming of age, and I hope that his father and mother will accept

this legacy for their son in the spirit of pure friendship for them, and attachment to the boy by which it is dictated, and that they will suffer their son so to perpetuate the name of one who will die childless."

There was an awful silence – perfect collapse on the part of the cousins, the one kinsman selected for benefaction being now with his ship in the Mediterranean.

And then Leonard Tregonell rose from his seat by the fire, and came close up to the table at which Mr. Bryanstone was sitting.

"Am I at liberty to reject that legacy on my son's part?" he asked.

"Certainly not. The money is left in trust. Your son can do what he likes when he comes of age. But why should you wish to decline such a legacy – left in such friendly terms? Mr. Hamleigh was your friend."

"He was my mother's friend – for me only a recent acquaintance. It seems to me that there is a sort of indirect insult in such a bequest, as if I were unable to provide for my boy – as if I were likely to run through everything, and make him a pauper before he comes of age."

"Believe me there is no such implication," said the lawyer, smiling blandly at the look of trouble and anger in the other man's face. "Did you never hear before of money being left to a man who already has plenty? That is the general bent of all legacies. In this world it is the poor who are sent empty away," murmured Mr. Bryanstone, with a sly glance under his spectacles

at the seven blank faces of the seven cousins. "I consider that Mr. Hamleigh – who was my very dear friend – has paid you the highest compliment in his power, and that you have every reason to honour his memory."

"And legally I have no power to refuse his property?"

"Certainly not. The estate is not left to you – you have no power to touch a sixpence of it."

"And the will is dated?"

"Just three weeks ago."

"Within the first week of this visit here. He must have taken an inordinate fancy to my boy."

Mr. Bryanstone smiled to himself softly with lowered eyelids, as he folded up the will – a holograph will upon a single sheet of Bath post – witnessed by two of the Mount Royal servants. The family solicitor knew all about Angus Hamleigh's engagement to Miss Courtenay – had even received instructions for drawing the marriage settlement – but he was too much a man of the world to refer to that fact.

"Was not Mr. Hamleigh's father engaged to your mother?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then don't you think that respect for your mother may have had some influence with Mr. Hamleigh when he made your son his heir?"

"I am not going to speculate about his motives. I only wish he had left his money to an asylum for idiots – or to his cousins"

– with a glance at the somewhat vacuous countenances of the dead man's kindred, "or that I were at liberty to decline his gift – which I should do, flatly."

"This sounds as if you were prejudiced against my lamented friend. I thought you liked him."

"So I did," stammered Leonard, "but not well enough to give him the right to patronise me with his d – d legacy."

"Mr. Tregonell," said the lawyer, frowning, "I have to remind you that my late client has left you, individually, nothing – and I must add, that your language and manner are most unbefitting this melancholy occasion."

Leonard grumbled an inaudible reply, and walked back to the fireplace. The whole of this conversation had been carried on in undertones – so that the cousins who had gathered in a group upon the hearthrug, and who were for the most part absorbed in pensive reflections upon the futility of earthly hopes, heard very little of it. They belonged to that species of well-dressed nonentities, more or less impecunious, which sometimes constitute the outer fringe upon a good old family. To each of them it seemed a hard thing that Angus Hamleigh had not remembered him individually, choosing him out of the ruck of cousinship as a meet object for bounty.

"He ought to have left me an odd thousand," murmured a beardless subaltern; "he knew how badly I wanted it, for I borrowed a pony of him the last time he asked me to breakfast; and a man of good family must be very hard up when he comes

to borrowing ponies."

"I dare say you would have not demurred to making it a monkey, if Mr. Hamleigh had proposed it," said his interlocutor.

"Of course not: and if he had been generous he would have given me something handsome, instead of being so confoundedly literal as to write his cheque for exactly the amount I asked for. A man of his means and age ought to have had more feeling for a young fellow in his first season. And now I am out of pocket for my expenses to this infernal hole."

Thus, and with other wailings of an approximate character, did Angus Hamleigh's kindred make their lamentation: and then they all began to arrange among themselves for getting away as early as possible next morning – and for travelling together, with a distant idea of a little "Nap" to beguile the weariness of the way between Plymouth and Paddington. There was room enough for them all at Mount Royal, and Mr. Tregonell was not a man to permit any guests, howsoever assembled, to leave his house for the shelter of an inn; so the cousins stayed, dined heavily, smoked as furiously as those furnace chimneys which are supposed not to smoke, all the evening, and thought they were passing virtuous for refraining from the relaxation of pool, or shell-out – opining that the click of the balls might have an unholy sound so soon after a funeral. Debarred from this amusement, they discussed the career and character of the dead man, and were all agreed, in the friendliest spirit, that there had been very little in him, and that he had made a poor thing of his life, and obtained a most

inadequate amount of pleasure out of his money.

Mount Royal was clear of them all by eleven o'clock next morning. Mr. Montagu went away with them, and only Captain Vandeleur remained to bear Leonard company in a house which now seemed given over to gloom. Christabel kept her room, with Jessie Bridgeman in constant attendance upon her. She had not seen her husband since her return from the Kieve, and Jessie had told him in a few resolute words that it would not be well for them to meet.

"She is very ill," said Jessie, standing on the threshold of the room, while Leonard remained in the corridor outside. "Dr. Hayle has seen her, and he says she must have perfect quiet – no one is to worry her – no one is to talk to her – the shock she has suffered in this dreadful business has shattered her nerves."

"Why can't you say in plain words that she is grieving for the only man she ever loved," asked Leonard.

"I am not going to say that which is not true; and which you, better than any one else, know is not true. It is not Angus Hamleigh's death, but the manner of his death, which she feels. Take that to your heart, Mr. Tregonell."

"You are a viper!" said Leonard, "and you always were a viper. Tell my wife – when she is well enough to hear reason – that I am not going to be sat upon by her, or her toady; and that as she is going to spend her winter dissolved in tears for Mr. Hamleigh's death, I shall spend mine in South America, with Jack Vandeleur."

Three days later his arrangements were all made for leaving Cornwall. Captain Vandeleur was very glad to go with him, upon what he, Jack, pleasantly called "reciprocal terms," Mr. Tregonell paying all expenses as a set-off against his friend's cheerful society. There was no false pride about Poker Vandeleur; no narrow-minded dislike to being paid for. He was so thoroughly assured as to the perfect equitableness of the transaction.

On the morning he left Mount Royal, Mr. Tregonell went into the nursery to bid his son good-bye. He contrived, by some mild artifice, to send the nurse on an errand; and while she was away, strained the child to his breast, and hugged and kissed him with a rough fervour which he had never before shown. The boy quavered a little, and his lip drooped under that rough caress – and then the clear blue eyes looked up and saw that this vehemence meant love, and the chubby arms clung closely round the father's neck.

"Poor little beggar!" muttered Leonard, his eyes clouded with tears. "I wonder whether I shall ever see him again. He might die – or I – there is no telling. Hard lines to leave him for six months on end – but" – with a suppressed shudder – "I should go mad if I stayed here."

The nurse came back, and Leonard put the child on his rocking-horse, which he had left reluctantly at the father's entrance, and left the nursery without another word. In the corridor he lingered for some minutes – now staring absently at

the family portraits – now looking at the door of his wife's room. He had been occupying a bachelor room at the other end of the house since her illness.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.