Farjeon Benjamin Leopold

The Last Tenant

Benjamin Farjeon

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Farjeon B.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
MY WIFE MAKES UP HER MIND TO MOVE

From a peculiar restlessness in my wife's movements, I gathered that she was considering some scheme which threatened to disturb the peaceful surroundings of my life. Upon two or three occasions lately she had reproached me for not being sufficiently lofty in my social views, and although the tone in which she addressed me was free from acerbity, her words conveyed the impression that in some dark way I was inflicting an injury upon her. Familiar with her moods, and understanding the best way in which to treat them, I made no inquiries as to the precise nature of this injury, but waited for her to disclose it-which I was aware she would not do until she was quite prepared.

I am not, in any sense of the term, an ambitious man, being happily blessed with a peaceful and contented mind which renders me unwilling to make any departure from my usual habits. As regards old-fashioned ways I am somewhat of a conservative; I do not care for new things and new sensations, and I am not forever looking up at persons above me, and sighing for their possessions and enjoyments. Indeed, I am convinced that the happiest lot is that of the mortal who is neither too high nor too low, and who is in possession of a competence which will serve for modest pleasures, without exciting the envy of friends and acquaintances. Such a competence was mine; such pleasures were mine. Secure from storms and unnecessary worries-by which I mean worries self-inflicted by fidgety persons, or persons discontented with their lot-I should have been quite satisfied to remain all my life in our cozy ten-roomed house, which we had inhabited for twenty years, and in which we had been as comfortable as reasonable beings can expect to be in life. Not so my wife, the best of creatures in her way, but lately (as I subsequently discovered) tormented with jealousy of certain old friends who, favored by fortune, had moved a step or two up the social ladder. It was natural, when these friends visited us, that they should dilate with pride upon their social rise, and should rather loftily, and with an air of superiority, seize the opportunity of describing the elegances of their new houses and furniture. Their fine talk amused me, and I listened to it undisturbed; but it rendered my wife restless and uneasy, and the upshot of it was that one morning, during breakfast, she said:

"You have nothing particular to do to-day, my dear?"

"No, nothing particular," I replied.

"Then you won't mind coming with me to see some new houses."

I gasped. The murder was out.

"Some new houses!" I cried.

"You can't expect me to go alone," she said calmly. "It would hardly be safe-to say nothing of its impropriety-for a lady, unaccompanied, to wander through a number of empty houses with the street door shut. We read of such dreadful things in the papers."

"Quite true; they are enough to make one's hair stand on end. It would not be prudent. But what necessity is there for you to go into a number of empty houses?"

"How stupid you are!" she exclaimed. "You know we must move; you know that it is impossible for us to remain in this house any longer."

"Why not?"

"Such a question! And the house in the state it is!"

"A very comfortable state, Maria. There is nothing whatever the matter with it."

"There is everything the matter with it."

"Oh, if you say so-"

"I do say so."

A man who has been long married learns from experience, and profits by what he learns, if he has any sense in him. I am a fairly sensible man, and experience has taught me some useful lessons. Therefore I went on with my breakfast in silence, knowing that my wife would soon speak again.

"The house is full of inconveniences," she said.

"You have been a long time finding them out, Maria."

"I found them out years ago, but I have borne with them for your sake."

I laughed slyly, took the top off an egg, and requested her to name the inconveniences of which she complained.

She commenced. "We want a spare room."

"We have one," I said, "and it is never used."

"It isn't fit to use."

"Oh! I had an idea that there was no demand for it."

"If it was a comfortable room there would be, Edward, I wish you would recognize that things cannot always remain as they are."

"More's the pity."

"Nonsense. You talk as if we were shellfish."

"It did not occur to me. Proceed with your wants, Maria."

"*Our* wants, my dear."

"Well, *our* wants."

"You want a nice, cozy study, where you can sit and smoke."

"I want nothing of the kind. I can sit and smoke anywhere. Don't forget that I am fifty years of age, and that my habits are fixed."

"My dear, it is never too late to learn."

"Keep to the point," I said.

"As if I am not keeping to it! I have no morning room."

"So you are to sit in your morning room, and I am to sit in my study, instead of sitting and chatting together, as we have always done. A cheerful prospect! What next?"

"We have very good servants," she said pensively.

"Has that anything to do with the inconveniences you speak of?"

"I shouldn't like to lose the girls, especially cook. They sleep in the attic, you know, and the roof is shockingly out of repair."

"It is the chronic condition of roofs. Go where you will, you hear the same story. Have the girls complained?"

"No, but I can see what is coming."

"Ah!"

"The kitchen is not what it should be; the range causes us the greatest anxiety. The next dinner party we give we must have the dinner cooked out. Think what a trouble it will be, and how awkward it will look. Everything brought to the table lukewarm, if not quite cold."

"The thought is heartrending."

"And you so particular as you are. I am not blaming you for these things, my dear."

"You are very considerate. Is your catalogue of ills finished?"

"By no means. Look at the wine cellar-it positively reeks. As for the store cupboard, not a thing can I keep in it for the damp. Then there's the bath. Every time I turn the hot water tap I am frightened out of my life. It splutters, and chokes, and gurgles-we shall have an explosion one day. Then there's-"

"No more!" I cried, in a tragic tone. "Give me two minutes to compose myself. My nerves are shattered."

I finished my eggs and toast, I emptied my breakfast cup, I shifted my chair.

"You wish to move," I then said.

"Do you not see the impossibility of our remaining where we are?" was her reply.

"Frankly, I do not, but we will not argue; I bend my head to the storm."

"Edward, Edward!" she expostulated. "Must not a woman have a mind? Must it always be the man?"

"I meant nothing ill-natured, Maria. Have you any particular house in view?"

"Several, and I have made out a list of them. I have been to the house agents and have got the keys. I did not wish you to have the bother of it, so I took it all on myself. And here are the orders to view the houses where there are care-takers. Of course we don't want the keys of those houses; all we have to do is to ring."

"How many empty houses are there on your list?"

"Twenty-three."

I repressed a shudder. "And you have the keys of-"

"Eleven. I can get plenty more. We must be careful they don't get mixed up. Perhaps you had better keep them."

"Not for worlds. Do you propose to go over the whole twenty-three to-day?"

"Oh, no, my dear, but we will continue till we are tired. With what I have and what I am promised I dare say it will be a long job before we are suited. Days and days."

"Perhaps weeks and weeks," I suggested faintly.

"Perhaps. Do you remember how we hunted and hunted till we found this house?"

"Can I ever forget it? I grew so sick of tramping about that I thought seriously of buying a traveling caravan, and living in it. Well, Maria, I confess I don't like the prospect, but as your mind is made up I will put a good face on it."

"I was sure you would, my dear. You are the best man in the world." And she gave me a hearty kiss.

"All right, my dear. When do we start?"

"I shall be ready in half an hour."

In less than that time we were off, I resigned to my fate, and my wife as brisk as a young maid about to enter into housekeeping for the first time. I could not but admire her courage. Her bag was stuffed with keys, and in her hand she carried a book in which were set down the particulars of the houses we were to look over.

CHAPTER II.
HOUSE-HUNTING À LA MODE

It was a satisfaction to me that my wife did not entertain the idea of deserting the northwestern part of London, in which I have lived from my boyhood, and which I regard as the pleasantest district in our modern Babylon. In no other part of London can you see in such perfection the tender green of spring, and enjoy air so pure and bracing, and there are summers when my wife agrees with me that it is a mistake to give up these advantages for the doubtful enjoyment and the distinct discomforts of a few weeks in the country. So, with my mind somewhat relieved, I started upon the expedition which was to lead me to the deserted house in Lamb's Terrace, and thence to the strange and thrilling incidents I am about to narrate. And I may premise here that I do not intend to attempt any explanation of them; I shall simply describe them as they occurred, and I shall leave the solution to students more deeply versed than myself in the mysteries of the visible and invisible life by which we are surrounded. I must, however, make one observation. There is in my mind no doubt that I was the chosen instrument in bringing to light the particulars of a foul and monstrous crime, which might otherwise have remained unrevealed till the Day of Judgment, when all things shall be made clear. Why I was thus inscrutably chosen, and was haunted by the Skeleton Cat until the moment arrived when I was to lay my hand upon the shoulder of the criminal and say, "Thou art the man!" is to me the most awful and inexplicable mystery in my life.

In our search for a new house the story of one day is (with the single exception to which I have incidentally referred) the story of all the days so employed. We set out every morning, my wife fresh and cheerful, and I trotting patiently by her side; we returned home every evening worn out, disheartened, bedraggled, and generally demoralized. My condition was, of course, worse than that of my wife, whom a night's rest happily restored to strength and hope. I used to look at her across the breakfast table in wonder and admiration, for truly her vigor and powers of recuperation were surprising.

"Are you quite well this morning?" I would ask.

"Quite well," she would reply, smiling amiably at me. "I had a lovely night."

Wonderful woman! A lovely night! While I was tossing about feverishly, going up and down innumerable flights of stairs with thousands upon thousands of steps, opening thousands upon thousands of doors, and pacing thousands upon thousands of rooms, measuring their length, breadth, and height with a demon three-foot rule which mocked my most earnest and conscientious efforts to take correct measurements! The impression these expeditions produced upon me was that, of all the trials to which human beings are subject, house-hunting is incomparably the most exasperating and afflicting. Were I a judge with the power to legislate, I would make it a punishment for criminal offenses: "Prisoner at the bar, a jury of your countrymen have very properly found you guilty of the crime for which you have been tried, and it is my duty now to pass sentence upon you. I have no wish to aggravate your sufferings in the painful position in which you have placed yourself, but for the protection of society the sentence must be one of extreme severity. You will be condemned to go house-hunting, and never getting suited, from eight o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock at night, for a term of three years, and I trust that the punishment inflicted upon you will deter you from crime for the rest of your natural life." I should almost be tempted to add, "And the Lord have mercy upon your soul!"

I could not have wished for a better leader than my wife, who continued to take charge of the keys and to keep a record of the premises we had looked over and were still to look over; and in the little book in which this record is made were set down in admirable English-occasionally, perhaps, somewhat too forcible-the reasons why there was not a single house to let which answered her

requirements. Many of the houses had been tenantless for years, and reminded me in a depressingly odd way of unfortunate men who had fallen too soon into "the sere and yellow," and were sinking slowly and surely into damp and weedy graves. The discolored ceilings, the moldy walls, the moist basements, the woe-begone back yards, and the equally dismal gardens, the twisted taps, the rusty locks and keys, the dark closets which the agents had the effrontery to call bedrooms, supplied ample evidence that their fate was deserved. There were some in a better condition, having been newly patched and painted; but even to these more likely tenements there was always, I was ever thankful to hear, an objection, from one cause or another, raised by my wife. In one the dining room was too small; in another it was too large; in another the bath was on an unsuitable floor-down in the basement or up on the roof; in another the range was old-fashioned; in another there was no getting into the garden unless you passed through the kitchen or flung yourself out of the drawing-room window; in another there were no cupboards, and so on, and so on, without end. Again and again did I indulge in the hope that she was thoroughly exhausted and would give up the hunt, and again and again did the wonderful woman, a few hours afterward, impart to me the disheartening news-smiling cheerfully as she spoke-that she had been to a fresh house agent and was provided with another batch of keys and "orders to view." After every knock-down blow she "came up smiling," as the sporting reporters say. Meekly I continued to accompany her, knowing that the least resistance on my part would only strengthen her determination to prolong the battle. At the end of a more than usually weary day she observed:

"My dear, if we were rich we would build."

"We would," I said, and, with a cunning of which I felt secretly proud, I encouraged her to describe the house she would like to possess. I am a bit of a draughtsman, and from the descriptions she gave me of the house that would complete her happiness I drew out the plans of an Ideal Residence which I was convinced could not be found anywhere on the face of the earth. This, however, was not my wife's opinion.

"It is the exact thing, Edward," she said, and she took my plans to the agents, who said they were very nice, and that they had on their books just the place she was looking for-with one trifling exception scarcely worth mentioning. But this trifling exception proved ever to be of alarming proportions, was often hydra-headed, and was always insurmountable. Then would she glow with indignation at the duplicity of the agents, and would call them names which, had they been publicly uttered, would have laid us open to a great number of actions for libel and slander. Thus a month passed by, and, except for prostration of spirits, we were precisely where we had been when we commenced. The Ideal Residence was still a castle in Spain.

One evening, when we were so tired out that we could hardly crawl along, my indomitable wife, after slamming the last street door behind her, informed me that she intended to call upon another house agent whom she had not yet patronized.

"That will be the ninth, I think," I said, in a mild tone.

"Yes, the ninth," she said. "They are a dreadful lot. You can't place the slightest dependence upon them."

Gascoigne was the name of the agent we now visited, and he entertained us in the old familiar way. As a matter of course, he had the very house to suit us; in fact, he had a dozen, and he went through them *seriatim*. But my wife, who during the past month had learned something, managed, by dint of skillful questioning, to lay her hand on the one weak spot which presented itself in all.

"I am afraid they will not do," she said, "but we will look at them all the same."

I sighed; I was in for it once more. A dozen fresh keys, a dozen fresh orders to view-in a word, a wasted, weary week. Mr. Gascoigne drummed with his fingers on his office table, and, after a pause, said:

"I have left the best one to the last."

"Indeed!" said my wife, brightening up.

"The house that cannot fail," said he; "a chance seldom met with-perhaps once in a lifetime. I shall not have it long on my books; it will be snapped up in no time. It possesses singular advantages."

"Where is it?" asked my wife eagerly.

"In Lamb's Terrace, No. 79. Detached and charmingly situated. Ten bedrooms, three reception rooms, two bath rooms, hot and cold water to top floor, commodious kitchen and domestic offices, conservatory, stabling, coach house, coachman's rooms over, two stalls and loose box, large garden well stocked with fruit trees, and two greenhouses."

My wife's eyes sparkled. I also was somewhat carried away, but I soon cooled down. Such an establishment would be far beyond my means.

"To be let on lease?" I inquired.

"To be let on lease," Mr. Gascoigne replied.

"The rent would be too high," I observed.

"I don't think so. Ninety pounds a year."

"What?" I cried.

"Ninety pounds a year," he repeated.

I looked at my wife; her face fairly beamed. She whispered to me, "A prize! Why did we not come here before? It would have saved us a world of trouble."

For my part, I could not understand it. Ninety pounds a year! It was a ridiculous rent for such a mansion.

I turned to the agent. "Is there a care-taker in the house?"

"No," he replied, "it is quite empty."

"Has it been long unlet?"

"Scarcely any time."

"The tenant has only just left it, I suppose?"

"The tenant has not been living in it."

"He has been abroad?"

"I really cannot say. I know nothing of his movements. You see, we are not generally acquainted with personal particulars. A gentleman has a house which he wishes to let, and he places it in our hands. All that we have to do is to ascertain that the particulars with which he furnishes us are correct. We let the house, and there is an end of the matter so far as we are concerned."

I recognized the common sense of this explanation, and yet there appeared to me something exceedingly strange in such a house being to let at so low a rent, and which had just lost a tenant who had not occupied it.

"Is it in good repair?" I asked.

"Frankly, it is not; but that is to your advantage."

"How do you make that out?"

"Because the landlord is inclined to be unusually liberal in the matter. He will allow the incoming tenant a handsome sum in order that he may effect the repairs in the manner that suits him best. There is a little dilapidation, I believe, in one or two of the rooms, a bit of the flooring loose here and there, some plaster has dropped from the ceilings, and a few other such trifling details to be seen to; and the garden, I think, will want attention."

"The house seems to be completely out of repair?"

"Oh, no, not at all; I am making the worst of it, so that you shall not be disappointed. But there is the money provided to set things in order."

"Roughly speaking, what sum does the landlord propose to allow?"

"Roughly speaking, a hundred pounds or so."

"About one-third," I remarked, "of what I should judge to be necessary."

"Not at all; a great deal can be done with a hundred pounds; and my client might feel disposed to increase the amount. You can examine the house and see if it suits you, which I feel certain it will."

Here my wife broke in. She had listened impatiently to my questions, and had nodded her head in approval of every answer given by the agent to the objections I had raised.

"I am sure it will suit us," she said. "The next best thing to building a house for one's self is to have a sufficient sum of money allowed to spend on one already built; to repair it, and paint and paper it after our own taste."

"I agree with you, madam," said the agent, "and you will find the landlord not at all a hard man to deal with. He makes only one stipulation-that whoever takes the house shall live in it."

"Why, of course we should live in it," said my wife. "What on earth should we take it for if we didn't?"

"Quite so," said the agent.

"I should like to ask two more questions," I said. "Are the drains in good order?"

"The drains," replied the agent, "are perfection."

"And is it damp?"

"It is as dry," replied the agent, "as a bone."

Some further conversation ensued, in which, however, I took no part, leaving the management to my wife, who had evidently set her heart upon moving to No. 79 Lamb's Terrace. The agent handed her the keys with a bow and a smile, and we left his office.

CHAPTER III.
AN OLD FRIEND UNEXPECTEDLY PRESENTS HIMSELF

During the interview my attention had been attracted several times to a peculiar incident. At the extreme end of Mr. Gascoigne's office, close against the wall, was a high desk, with an old-fashioned railing around it, the back of the desk being toward me. When we entered the office no person was visible behind the desk, and no sounds of it being occupied reached my ears; but, happening once to look undesignedly in that direction, I saw a gray head raised above the railings, the owner of which was regarding me, I thought, with a certain eagerness and curiosity. The moment I looked at the head, which I inferred was attached to the body of a clerk in the service of Mr. Gascoigne, it disappeared, and I paid no attention to it. But presently, turning again, I saw it bob up and as quickly bob down; and as this was repeated five or six times during the interview, it made me, in turn, curious to learn the reason of the proceedings. Finally, upon my leaving the office, the head bobbed up and remained above the desk, seemingly following my departure with increasing eagerness.

"My dear," said my wife, as we walked along the street-very slowly, because of the weary day we had had-"at last we have found what we have been searching for so long."

It did not strike me so, but I did not express my opinion. All I said was, "I am tired out, and I am sure you must be."

"I do feel tired, but I'm repaid for it. Yes, this is the very house we have been hunting for; just the number of rooms we want, just the kind of garden we want, and so many things we thought we couldn't afford. Then the stable and coach-house-not that we have much use for them, but it looks well to have them, and to speak of them to our friends in an off-hand way. Then the fruit trees-what money it will save us, gathering the fruit quite fresh as we want it! I have in my eye the paper for the drawing and dining rooms; and your study, my dear, shall be as cozy as money can make it. I have something to tell you-a secret. I have put away-never mind where-a long stocking, and in it there is a nice little sum saved up out of housekeeping pennies. That money shall be spent in decorating No. 79 Lamb's Terrace."

Thus rattled on this wonderful wife of mine, working herself into such a state of rapture at the prospect of obtaining the Ideal Residence I had drawn out for her, and which she believed she had obtained, that I could not help admiring more and more her sanguine temperament and her indomitable resolution. Her pluck, her endurance, her persistence, were beyond praise; such women are cut out for pioneers in difficult undertakings; they never give in, they never know when they are beaten. In the midst of her glowing utterances I heard the sound of rapid steps behind us, and, turning, saw the elderly man, whose head, bobbing up and down in Mr. Gascoigne's office, had so engaged my attention. He had been running after us very quickly, and his breath was almost gone.

"I beg your pardon, I beg your pardon," he said, speaking with difficulty, "but-excuse me, I must get my breath."

We waited till he had recovered, my wife with the expectation that he was charged with a message from Mr. Gascoigne, I with no such expectation. I felt that he had come after us on a purely personal matter, and as I gazed at him I had an odd impression that, at some period of my life, I had been familiar with a face like his. I could not, however, bring to my mind any person resembling him.

"The agent has given us the keys of the wrong house," whispered my wife. "I hope it is no worse than that; I hope he hasn't made a mistake in the rent."

She was in great fear lest the splendid chance was gone and the house in Lamb's Terrace was lost to us.

"I am all right now," said the stranger, "and I must beg you to excuse me if I am mistaken. I think not, for I seem to recognize your features; and yet it is so long ago-so long ago!"

The impression that I had known him in earlier years grew stronger.

"I heard your name," he continued, "while I was working at my desk. When you handed your card to Mr. Gascoigne he spoke it aloud, and I recognized it as that of an old school friend. It so stirred me that I fear you must have thought me rude for staring at you as I did. My name is Millet, Bob Millet-don't you remember?"

Good Heavens! My old schoolmate, Bob Millet, dear old Bob, almost my brother, whom I had not seen for nearly forty years, stood before me. What reminiscences did the sight of him inspire! He and I were chums in those early days, stood up for each other, defended each other, played truant together, took long walks, went into the country together during holiday time-did everything, in short, that could bind schoolboys in firm links of comradeship. Once, when my parents took me to the seaside, they invited Bob at my urgent request to spend a week with us, and he spent two, three-all the time, indeed, that we were away from home. There at the seaside he taught me to swim, and we had days of enjoyment so vivid that the memory of them came back to me fresh and bright even after this lapse of years. How changed he was! He was a plump, rosy-cheeked boy, and he had grown into a thin, spare, elderly man, with all the plumpness and all the rosiness squeezed clean out of him. It was a bit of a shock. He was younger than I, and he looked twenty years older; his clothes were shabby, his face worn and lined with care, as though life's battle had been too much for him; while here was I, a fairly prosperous man, full of vigor and capacity for enjoyment, and blessed with means for the indulgence of pleasures which it was evident he could not afford. There was on my part more of sadness than of joy in this meeting. I held out my hand to him, and we greeted each other cordially.

"My dear," I said to my wife, "this is my old school chum, Mr. Millet."

"Bob Millet, please," he said reproachfully; "don't drop me because I am shabby."

"I am not the sort of man to do that, Bob," I rejoined. "You have had a tussle with fortune, old friend, and got the worst of it?"

"Considerably," he replied, with a little laugh in which there was no bitterness; it reminded me that when he was at school he always took a cheerful view of any misfortune that happened to him; "but a meeting like this makes up for a lot. What does the old song say? 'Bad luck can't be prevented.' Well, I *am* glad to see you! I ran after you with a double purpose-first to shake hands with you, then to talk to you about that house you are looking after."

"All in good time. Have you done work for the day?"

"Yes."

"Come home with us and have a tea-dinner, unless," I added, "there is someone else expecting you."

"No one is expecting me," he said rather mournfully. "I am all alone."

"Not married?"

"I was, but I lost her."

I pressed his hand sympathetically.

"You can come along with us, then," said my good wife; "it will be better than passing the evening with yourself for company; and I am burning to hear what you have to tell us about the house in Lamb's Terrace. I am fairly enchanted with it, even before I see it. There is our 'bus; I hope there is room for us."

There was room, and we got in, and alighted within thirty yards of our house-our dear old house, which my wife was bent upon giving up.

I took Bob to my dressing room, and we had a wash and a brush up.

"Any children?" he asked.

"No," I replied; "it caused us sorrow at first, but we get resigned to things."

"Yes, indeed."

Downstairs my wife was waiting for us, and there was our tea-dinner already prepared, with one or two additional small luxuries in honor of our visitor.

"Sit down, Bob," I said, "and make yourself at home. To you this is Liberty Hall; we haven't a bit of pride in us, although my dear wife here has an ambition for a larger house; that is why we are going to move."

"We can afford to move, Mr. Millet," said my wife with dignity.

"I am very glad to hear it," said Bob; "it is always pleasant to hear of a friend's good fortune."

My wife smiled kindly, and we all made a good meal; and then she bustled away to see to some domestic matters, while the maid cleared the table. Before she left the room she said to Bob:

"Mr. Millet, not a word about that delightful house until I join you."

CHAPTER IV.
BOB MILLET GIVES US SOME CURIOUS INFORMATION ABOUT THE HOUSE IN LAMB'S TERRACE

"Now, Bob," said I, "here's a clean pipe and some bird's eye. Do you remember our first cigar in your little bedroom in your father's house? How we suffered, and vowed never to smoke again! We have time for a pipe and a chat before my wife comes in. She has many virtues, Bob, and a special one for which she deserves a medal-she does not object to my smoking in any room in the house. Heaven knows what rules she will lay down, and what changes for the worse there will be when we move! I am not going to anticipate evils, however. Without pretending that I am a philosopher, I take things as they come, and try to make the best of them; it is the pleasantest way. Tell me what you have been doing all these years."

He told me all about himself-of his leaving school with fair expectations; of his entering into his father's business; of his marrying for love, and, after three years of happy married life, of the death of his wife, and the ruin of his prospects; of his subsequent struggles and disappointments; and of his sinking lower and lower until he found himself fixed upon that depressing platform which is crowded with poor clerks struggling with all their might and main for bread and butter. Except when he spoke of his wife there was no sadness in his voice; and I saw that the cheerful temperament which had distinguished him when we were at school together had not deserted him.

"It has been a tussle," he said, "but I have managed to rub along, and it might have been worse than it is. You don't mind my calling you Ned, do you?"

"If I did," I replied, "I should have good reason to be ashamed of myself. It was Ned and Bob when we were boys; it is Ned and Bob now that we are elderly men. A few pounds more in my purse than in yours can make no difference; and as far as that goes, I can spare a little check if you need it."

"No, Ned," he responded quickly, "that is the last thing in the world I hope I shall have to do. Though I don't sit down to a banquet every day for dinner, I have never borrowed, and I never will if I can possibly help it. Don't judge me by my sad looks-I have a disagreeable impression that I am not a cheerful fellow to contemplate; but if the truth were known there are much harder lots than mine. I have a comical trick of twisting things to my own advantage, and of rather pitying men who could sell me up over and over again. Ned, as there is no station in life, however high, without its miseries, so there is no station in life, however low, without its compensations."

"You're the philosopher, Bob," quoth I.

"I don't know about that. I have grown into the belief that the poor have as much enjoyment as the rich, and when I take a shilling's worth in the gallery of a theater, I am positive that I don't get less pleasure out of it than the people who sit in the stalls do out of their half-guineas. If I am a philosopher that is the use I make of my philosophy. Then, Ned, I have the past to think of; for three years there was no happier man than I, and my sad memories are sweetened with gratitude. And life is short after all; time flies; tomorrow we shall all be on a level, rich and poor alike."

Thus spoke my old schoolfellow, Bob Millet, in his shabby coat, and the regard I used to have for him grew stronger every minute that passed.

When my wife came in, bustling and cheerful as usual, she nodded brightly at us, sat down with a piece of needlework in her hand-she is never idle, this wife of mine-and said:

"Now, Mr. Millet, let us hear about the house in Lamb's Terrace."

"I will tell you all I know. Have you the keys, Ned?"

"My wife has," I replied.

She opened her bag and took them out, remarking, as she wiped her fingers, that they were very dusty.

"As you see," observed Bob, "they are covered with rust."

"They could have been used very little lately," I said.

"Hardly at all," said Bob; "and this is one of the singular features in connection with the house with which you should be made acquainted. Did not the information Mr. Gascoigne gave you of the last tenant strike you as rather extraordinary?" He turned to my wife for an answer, but she did not reply.

"It struck me as very extraordinary," I said. "I could not understand it at all, nor can I now understand why a house, with so many rooms, with stabling, a large garden, and so many other advantages, should be offered at so low a rent."

Bob looked at me, looked at my wife, hesitated, coughed, cleared his throat, and spoke.

"As a matter of fact, the house has been empty for four or five years."

"Really a matter of fact?" inquired my wife. "Within your own knowledge?"

"Not exactly that; I can speak only of what I have gathered."

"So that your matter of fact," observed my wife shrewdly, "is merely hearsay."

"I must admit as much, I am afraid," he said a little awkwardly.

"Why should you be afraid to admit it?"

I detected in these questions one of my wife's favorite maneuvers. When she met with opposition to a project which she had resolved to carry out, she was in the habit of seizing upon any chance words which she could construe in such a way as to confuse and confound the enemy. Often had she driven me so hard that I have been compelled to beat a retreat in despair, and to give up arguing with her.

"Upon my word I don't know why," said Bob. "It was only a form of speech. I seem to be getting into a tangle."

"I will assist you to get out of it," said my wife, with playful severity. "Go on, Mr. Millet."

"It was originally taken on lease," continued Bob, "and the term having expired, the tenant-I suppose we must call him so-wished to renew. The landlord says, 'I will renew on one condition, that you live in the house.' The tenant objects. 'What does it matter,' he says, 'whether I live in the house or not, so long as the rent is paid?' The landlord replies that it matters a great deal, that a house cannot be kept in a satisfactory condition unless it is occupied, and that he does not like to see his property fall into decay, as this house has been allowed to do."

"Did you hear these words pass, Mr. Millet?" asked my wife.

"No; I am only throwing into shape what I have gathered."

Here we were interrupted by a knock at the door, and my wife was called from the room to see a tradesman whom she had sent for to put some locks in order. As she left us she gave Bob rather a queer look. I took advantage of her absence by asking Bob why he hesitated when he began to speak about the house.

"Well," he answered, "this is the first time I have had the pleasure of seeing your wife, and I don't know if she is a nervous woman."

"She is not easily frightened," I said, "but what has that to do with it?"

"Everything. I have heard that the house is haunted."

I clapped my hand on the table. "And that is the reason of the low rent?"

"It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"And that is why the last tenant did not live in it?"

"Ah," said Bob, "now you strike another key. There is a mystery here which I cannot fathom. Having a house on lease and being responsible for the rent, he is bound to pay till his term has expired. Very well-but here's the point, Ned: The lease having run out, and he having all these years presumably paid a large sum of money every quarter-day for value not received, why should he wish to renew? The house is haunted, he will not live in it, he never even opens the door to say how do

you do to the property which is costing him so dear, and now that his responsibility is at an end he wants to take it upon his shoulders again, and to be allowed the privilege of continuing to pay his rent without receiving any return for it. Men don't usually throw their money away without some special reason, and this eccentric proceeding on the part of the last tenant makes one rather curious."

"It is certainly very mysterious," I observed. "What was the rent he paid for it?"

"I heard Mr. Gascoigne say a hundred and fifty pounds."

"And it is offered to us for ninety. Have you seen the house, Bob?"

"No."

"Mr. Gascoigne has, I suppose."

"I don't believe he has."

"Then how have you learnt all you have told me?"

"In this way. I was at my desk when the landlord-who is himself only a leaseholder, having to pay ground rent to a wealthy institution-called upon Mr. Gascoigne, and put the house into his hands. Mr. Gascoigne, when he wrote down the particulars, expressed, as you did, surprise at the low rent, and little by little all the particulars came out. There appeared to me to be some feeling between the landlord and the last tenant, but nothing transpired as to its nature while I was present, and it is my belief that Mr. Gascoigne is as much in the dark as I am. There had been trouble in obtaining the keys, I understood. A house agent, you know, never refuses business, and Mr. Gascoigne put the place on his books, but has not pushed it in any way. He did not mention it to you till he had exhausted the list of other available houses. It was only this morning that the rent was reduced in the books to ninety pounds, in accordance with instructions received from the landlord, and it was probably in accordance with those instructions that Mr. Gascoigne made a strong effort to prepossess you in favor of it. Your wife may be in any moment. Is she to know that the house is haunted?"

I rubbed my forehead; I pondered; I laughed aloud.

"Tell her, Bob," I said; and then, at the idea of all her fond hopes being once more dashed to the ground, I fairly held my sides, while Bob gazed at me in wonder. I did not explain to him the cause of my hilarity; I had no time, indeed, for my wife re-entered the room, and resumed her seat and her needlework. I composed my features the moment I heard her footstep; she would certainly have asked why I was so merry, and any explanation I might have ventured to offer would have been twisted by her to my shame and confusion, and would, moreover, have made her more determined than ever to take the house.

"Where did we leave off, Mr. Millet?" she said, in a suspicious tone. "Let me see-I think it was about the house falling into decay."

"Never mind that just now, Maria," I said. "Bob has something of the utmost importance to impart to you. Brace your nerves-prepare for a shock."

There was a note of triumph in my voice, and she turned her eyes upon me, with an idea, I think, that I was going out of my mind.

"Well, Mr. Millet," she said, with a shrewd glance at him, "what is this something of the highest importance that you have to impart to me?"

"I was reluctant to mention it," said Bob, "before I spoke of it to Ned, because I was doubtful how it would affect you. If you should happen to hear of it when it was too late to retract you might say with very good reason, 'But why did not Mr. Millet tell us before we went over the house? Why did he leave us to find it out for ourselves after we signed the lease?'"

"Find what out, Mr. Millet?"

"As a matter of fact," said Bob, and quickly withdrew the unfortunate phrase, "I mean that I have heard the house has a bad name."

She frowned.

"A bad name!"

"Bad, in a certain way, They say it is haunted."

"Oh," said my wife, smiling, "is that all? They say? Who say?"

"I can't give you names," replied Bob, conspicuously nonplused, "because I don't know them. I can only tell you what I have heard."

"I thought as much," she said, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "Merely hearsay. You might be more explicit, Mr. Millet. Haunted? By what?"

"I don't know."

"When does *It* appear?"

"I can't say."

"How tantalizing! Don't you think, Edward, that the news Mr. Millet has given us makes the house all the more interesting?"

Thus effectually did she sweep away all my fond expectations. She made no more of a haunted house than she would have done of a loose handle to a door.

"If that is the view you take of it," I said, "perhaps it does. I am always ready to please you, Maria, but till this moment I had no idea that your taste lay in the direction of haunted houses. At all events, you will not be able to say that you were not warned."

"You will not hear me say it. There is a proverb about giving a dog a bad name and hanging him at once, and it seems to me to apply to the house in Lamb's Terrace. If Mr. Millet could give us something to lay hold of I might express myself differently."

"You can't lay hold of a ghost, Maria, unless those gentry have undergone a radical change. For my part, I am much obliged to Bob. It was out of consideration for you that he did not mention it at first."

"Mr. Millet was very kind, I am sure," she said stiffly; and then, addressing him as though she would give him another chance, "Are you acquainted with the last tenant?"

"No, I have never seen him."

"What is his name?"

"I do not know."

"Where does he live?"

"I do not know."

"Now, *do* you think," she said, quizzing him, "that it is quite fair to take away the character of an empty house upon such slender grounds? It is like hitting a man when he's down, which I have heard is not considered manly."

"I assure you," replied Bob gravely, "that what I have said has been said with the best intentions."

"No doubt," said my wife composedly, meaning quite the other thing. "Edward, our best plan will be to go and look over the house the first thing in the morning."

"That settles it, Bob," I said, "for the present, at all events. What do you say to coming here tomorrow evening and hearing our report of the house?"

He looked at my wife, as if doubtful whether a second visit would be agreeable to her; but she nodded pleasantly, and said:

"Yes, come, Mr. Millet; perhaps we shall be able to surprise you."

"Thank you," said Bob, and we talked of old times with rather eager readiness, and for the rest of the evening carefully avoided the subject which had so nearly brought him to grief. At ten o'clock he took his departure, and a few minutes afterward Maria and I retired to our bedroom.

"Good-night, dear," she said, in her most amiable tone, as I put out the light.

"Good-night, dear," I replied, and disposed myself for sleep.

We are both healthy sleepers, and generally go off like a top, as the saying is, a very short time after our heads touch the pillows. But this night proved to be an exception, for we must have lain quite a quarter of an hour in darkness when my wife began to speak.

"Are you asleep, Edward?"

"No, Maria."

"Do you know," she said drowsily, "I have a funny idea in my head."

"Have you?"

"Yes. It is that you and Mr. Millet laid a little plot for me."

"It isn't a funny idea, Maria; it is a perfectly absurd idea."

"That is what *you* say, dear; it is never agreeable to be found out. I dare say you thought yourselves very clever. It hasn't raised my opinion of Mr. Millet. I should have liked to believe him a different kind of person."

"Whatever are you driving at, Maria?" I said. "Bob Millet is the simplest fellow in the world, and is incapable of laying a plot."

"Oh, there's no telling. You were old playmates, and he is anxious to please you; he will find out by and by, perhaps, that I am not quite the simpleton he takes me for."

"Poor old Bob!" I thought. "His ill-luck sticks to him."

Aloud I said, "You are a conundrum, Maria; I shall give you up."

"Better give up the plot," she said pleasantly.

"I will, when I know what it is."

"It was this-that you would invent a ridiculous story about the house I have set my heart upon taking being haunted, so that I should be frightened to go near it. You ought to have known me better, Edward, and I must say you did it very clumsily; my consolation is that you did not succeed. I am so sorry for you! Good-night, dear; I hope you will sleep well."

I did sleep fairly well, though I was kept awake longer than usual by my annoyance at the prejudice Maria entertained against my old friend Bob.

CHAPTER V.
WE LOOK OVER THE HOUSE IN LAMB'S TERRACE, AND RECEIVE A SHOCK

We rose earlier than usual the next morning, and my wife bustled about in lively expectation of a successful and pleasant day. She made no allusion to Bob Millet, and I, well acquainted with her moods, was aware that her silence was no indication that she was not thinking of him. My meeting with him had recalled agreeable memories, and I was sincerely sorry that he had not been successful in life's battle. I resolved to assist him if I could, though I could not exactly see a way to it, because of his aversion to borrowing money, and because, living retired as I was, with no business to attend to, it was out of my power to offer him a better situation than the one he occupied in Mr. Gascoigne's office. Anxious that my wife should have as high an opinion of him as I had myself, I made an effort to reinstate him in her good graces.

"I think, Maria," I said, during breakfast, "that you were inclined to do Bob an injustice last night. He had no desire whatever to set you against the house in Lamb's Terrace, but only to give us some information which he considered it his duty not to withhold from us. He was perfectly sincere in all he said, and perfectly truthful, and you must admit that he did give us some strange news."

"Yes, he did," she replied, "and it remains to be proved whether it is true; we should not be too ready to believe all the idle gossip we hear."

"Undoubtedly we should not; but if there is anything against the place, it is better that we should hear it before we decide upon living in it. When I was a boy an aunt of mine took a house, and afterward discovered that a murder had been committed in her bedroom. She didn't have a moment's peace in her life; she used to wake up in the middle of the night, and fancy all sorts of things. I remember her spending an evening with us at home, and starting at the least sound; her nerves were shattered, and my poor dear mother said she couldn't live long. She told us stories of horrid sights she saw in the house, and horrid sounds she heard, and my hair rose on my head. I didn't sleep a wink myself that night. Now, if she had known all this before she took the house, she would have been spared a great deal of suffering."

"Did she die soon after?" asked my practical wife.

"No," I replied; and I could not help laughing at my defeat, the moral of the story being absolutely destructive of the theory I wished to establish; "as a matter of fact, she lived to a good old age."

"I don't quite see the application, Edward," said my wife dryly; and I deemed it prudent to change the subject. Maria is not an unreasonable or an unjust woman, and I gathered from her manner that she intended to hold over her final verdict upon Bob's character until she had ascertained what dependence could be placed upon the information he had given us.

Upon looking through the local directory, the only reference I could find to Lamb's Terrace was the name under the initial L, "Lamb's Terrace."

"It is singular," I said. "The number of the house we are going to is 79, and the presumption is that there are other houses in the terrace, with people living in them, yet there is no list of them in this directory."

My wife turned over the pages, but could find no further reference to the place.

"It *is* rather singular," she said, and handed me back the book.

A few minutes afterward we were on our way, having been informed by Mr. Gascoigne on the previous day that a North Star 'bus would take us to the neighborhood in which it was situated.

"How many houses are we going to look over?" I inquired.

"Only one," replied my wife, "and if that doesn't suit us I really don't know what we shall do."

With all my heart I wished that it would not suit us. Reluctant as I had been, when we first commenced these wearisome journeys, to remove from our old home, I felt now, after the experiences I had gone through, that it would be a positive misfortune.

Lamb's Terrace was not easy to find. The conductor of the North Star 'bus knew nothing of it, and said he had best take us as far as his conveyance went, and set us down. This was done, no other course suggesting itself to us; he took us as far as he went, and then cast us adrift upon the world. We made inquiries of many persons, and the replies we received added to our confusion. Women especially set their tongues wagging with astonishing recklessness, for they were totally ignorant of the subject upon which they were offering an opinion. But they gave instructions and advice, which we followed, for the reason that we did not know what else we could do. Some said they thought Lamb's Terrace must lie in this direction; we went in this direction, and did not find it. Others said it must lie in that direction; and we went in that direction, with the same result. We requested sundry cabmen to drive us to 79 Lamb's Terrace, and they nodded their heads cheerfully and asked where Lamb's Terrace was. We could not inform them. "Do *you* know Lamb's Terrace?" they asked their comrades, who scratched their heads and passed the question along the rank, and eventually said they were blarmed (or something worse) if they did. The consequence was that they lost a fare, and that we were cast adrift again.

At length, after tramping about for nearly two hours, we found ourselves in what I can only describe as a locality which had lost its place in civilized society. It was deplorably desolate and forlorn, and its dismal aspect suggested the thought that it had been abandoned in despair. Fields had been dug up, but not leveled; roads had been marked out, but not formed; buildings had been commenced, but not proceeded with. Rubbish had been shot there freely. Empty cans, battered out of shape, broken bottles, dead branches, musty rags, useless pieces of iron and wood, and the worst refuse of the dustbin, lay all around. If there had ever been a time in its history-and it seemed as if there had been, and not so very long ago-when it deserved to be regarded as a region of good intentions, its character was gone entirely, and it could now only be regarded as a region of desolation. Wandering about this mournful region, my wife suddenly exclaimed:

"Why, here it is!"

And there it was. A narrow thoroughfare, not wide enough for two vehicles to pass each other, with the words "Lamb's Terrace" faintly discernible on the crumbling stones.

"Shall we go on?" I asked.

"Of course we will go on," replied my wife. "What did we come out for? And after the trouble we have had to get here!"

We turned at once into the narrow lane. On the right-hand side was a gloomy house, untenanted. Beyond this was a long wall, very much out of repair. On the opposite side there were no houses at all, but another long wall, also very much out of repair. I searched for the number of the gloomy untenanted house, but could not see one, and my wife suggested that the house we wanted was lower down. We went lower down, and passed the gloomy house a distance of fifty or sixty yards, between the said walls. So still and deathlike was everything around, and so secluded did Lamb's Terrace appear to be that I regarded it as being not only lost to society, but almost out of the world.

I glanced at my wife, and saw on her face no traces of disappointment. Her spirits were not so easily dashed as mine.

Having traversed these fifty or sixty yards we came to the end of the right-hand wall. Adjoining it was a large building, in rueful harmony with all the depressing characteristics of the neighborhood. The house was approached by a front garden choked up with weeds and rank grass, and inclosed by rusty and broken railings; at the end of this garden was a flight of stone steps. The gate creaked on its hinges as I pushed it open, and a prolonged wheeze issued from the joints; the sound was ludicrously and painfully human, and resembled that which might have been uttered by a rheumatic old woman in pain. My wife pushed past me, and I followed her up the flight of stone steps.

"There is a number on the door," she said, tiptoeing. "Yes, here it is, 79, almost rubbed out."

"Numbers 1 to 78," I grimly remarked, "must be somewhere round the corner, if there is any round the corner in the neighborhood; they are perhaps two or three miles off."

"My dear," said my wife bravely, "don't be prejudiced. Here is the house; what we have to do is to see whether it will suit us."

"You would not care to go into it alone," I said.

"I should not," she admitted, with praiseworthy candor; "but that is not to the point."

I thought it was; but I did not argue the matter. She had removed from the keys as much rust as she could, and had had the foresight to bring with her a small bottle of oil, without the aid of which I doubt if we should have been able to turn the key in the lock. After a deal of trouble this was accomplished, and the mysterious tenement was open to us; as the door creaked upon its hinges, the sound that tortured my ears was infinitely more lugubrious than that which had issued from the gate, and it produced upon me the same impression of human resemblance. When we entered the hall I asked my wife whether I should close the street door.

"Certainly," she said. "Why not?"

I did not answer her. Have her way she would, and it was useless to argue with her. I closed the door, and felt as if I had entered a tomb.

The entrance hall was spacious, and shaped like an alcove; there was a door on the right, and another on the left; in the center was a wide staircase, leading to the rooms above; farther along the passage was a masked door, leading to the rooms below.

"Upstairs or downstairs first?" I inquired.

"Downstairs," my wife replied.

The stairs to the basement were very dark, and my wife, prepared for all such emergencies, produced a candle and matches. Lighting the candle we descended to the stone passage. There was a dreary and gloomy kitchen; there was a large scullery, a larder and all necessary offices, cobwebbed and musty; also two rooms which could be used as living rooms. The glass-paneled doors of both these rooms opened out into the back garden, which was in worse condition and more choked up with weeds, and rank grass, and monstrous creepers than the ground in front of the house; two greenhouses were at the extreme end, and there were some trees dotted about, but whether they were fruit trees it was impossible to say without a closer examination.

"I don't think," said my wife, "we will go over the garden just now. It looks as if it was full of creeping things."

"The rooms we have seen are not much better, Maria."

"They are not, indeed; I never saw a place in such a dreadful state."

I was more than ordinarily depressed. As a rule these expeditions invariably had a dispiriting effect upon me, but I had never felt so melancholy as I did on this occasion. I made no inquiry into my wife's feelings; I considered it best that she should work out the matter for herself; the chances of my emerging a victor from the contest in which we were engaged would be all the more promising.

We ascended to the hall, and then I observed to my wife that we had forgotten to examine the stabling and the wine cellar; we had even neglected the coal cellars.

"We won't bother about them to-day," she said, and despite my despondency I inwardly rejoiced.

I had also learned to prepare myself for the trials of this house-hunting. In my side pocket were two flasks, one containing water, the other brandy. I had often grown faint during our wanderings, and a sup of brandy now and then had kept up my strength. I saw that my wife was lower spirited than usual, and I mixed some spirits and water in the tin cup attached to one of the flasks. She accepted the refreshment eagerly, and I took a larger draught myself, and was much cheered by it.

"It always," said my wife, in a brighter tone, "makes one feel rather faint to look over a house which has been empty a long time, especially a house which is so far away from-from any others."

"It is almost as if we were in a grave," I observed.

"How *can* you say such dreadful things!" she retorted. "If I were a man I should have more courage."

There were three rooms on the ground floor, each of considerable dimensions, and all in shocking dilapidation. The paper had peeled off the walls, and was hanging in tattered strips to the ground; quantities of plaster had dropped from the ceilings, and here and there the bare rafters were exposed; there were holes in the flooring; the grates were cracked, the hearths broken up.

"A hundred pounds," I observed, "would not go far toward making this house habitable."

"It wouldn't be half enough," said my wife.

Upon quitting the dining room I inquired whether she wished to go any further.

"I am going," she said stoutly, "all over the house."

Upstairs we went to the first floor, where we found the rooms in a similar condition to those below.

"Disgraceful!" exclaimed my wife. "No wonder the landlord was indignant with the last tenant."

In due course we found ourselves on the second floor, and we stood in a large room, the windows of which faced the garden in the rear. I had opened the door of this room with difficulty, and the moment we entered it slammed to, which I ascribed to the wind blowing through some broken panes. By this time I perceived plainly that my wife's spirits were down to zero, and I was comforted by the reflection that looking over a house so wretched, so forlorn, so woe-begone, would, after all we had gone through, be the last straw that would break the back of her determination to move. We had been in the house about half an hour, and nothing but her indomitable spirit had sustained her in the trying ordeal.

In the room in which we were now standing there were two bell-pulls; one was broken, the other appeared to be in workable condition. It was not to prove this, but out of an idle humor as I thought at the time-though I was afterward inclined to change my opinion, and to ascribe the action to a spiritual impulse-that I stepped to the unbroken bell-pull, and gave it a jerk. It is not easy to describe what followed. Bells jangled and tolled and clanged as though I had set in motion a host in of infernal and discordant tongues of metal, and had raised the dead from their graves to take part in the harsh concert, for indeed there seemed to be something horribly fiendish, in the discord, which was at once hoarse, strident, shrill, and sepulchral, and finally resolved itself into a low, muffled wail which ran through the house like a funereal peal. With the exception of our own voices and footsteps and the slamming of the doors we had opened and shut, these were the only sounds we had heard, and they brought a chill to our hearts.

"How awful!" whispered my wife.

I nodded, and held up my hand. The last echo of the bells had died away, and now there came another sound, so startling and appalling that my wife clutched me in terror.

"My God!" she cried; "someone is coming upstairs!"

CHAPTER VI.
THE ANSWER TO THE BELL

We stood transfixed with fear.

As I have said, we were on the second floor, and the sound which now filled us with apprehension proceeded from the lower part of the house. It was very faint, and I judged-though in such circumstances but small reliance could be placed upon any judgment I may have formed-that if human feet produced it they must have been encased in soft shoes or slippers. It has ever since been to me a matter for wonder how a sound so fine could have reached our ears from that distance. It must have been that our senses, refined instead of dulled by the despair which held us spellbound, were preternaturally sharpened to catch the note of warning which at any other time would have been inaudible.

At the moment, therefore, of my wife's frenzied exclamation I inferred that the feet had left the kitchen and were on the stairs leading from the basement to the hall. If my surmise was correct there were still two flights of stairs to ascend before the full horror of the incident would be revealed to us.

I have described the impression produced upon me when we first turned into Lamb's Terrace, of being, as it were, cut off from the world. There was not an inhabited house near us. We had not seen a human being in the thoroughfare, and, as the prospect, from the windows of the room in which we now stood, stretched across a bare and desolate waste of ground, there was absolutely no hope of any helpful response being made to our appeals for assistance.

The possibilities of the peril in which we had placed ourselves presented themselves vividly to my agitated mind. The house, having been for so many years deserted by its proper tenant, might have become the haunt of desperate characters who would shrink from no deed, however ruthless, to secure their safety; who might even hail with satisfaction the intrusion of respectable persons who had unconsciously put themselves in their power. Supposing that these evil-doers were concealed in the lower rooms when we entered, they could rob and murder us with little fear of discovery. But there was also the consoling reflection that they might be in the house with no sinister designs, and that their only anxiety now was to escape from a building into which they had made an unlawful entrance. This would soon be put to the proof. If, when they were on the landing of the ground floor, we heard the street door open and shut, the fears which oppressed us would be dispelled, and we should be able to breathe freely.

I perceived that my wife was animated by a similar hope, and we both strained our ears in the endeavor to follow with our terrified senses the progress of the sound.

It ceased awhile on the ground floor, and we listened in agonized suspense for the click of a latch and the harsh creak of rusty hinges, but no such comforting sounds reached our ears, and presently the dead silence was broken by the soft pit-pat of footsteps on the stairs leading to the first floor. My wife's hold upon me tightened.

"We are lost!" she moaned. "What shall we do-oh, what shall we do?"

I had no weapon about me with the exception of a small penknife, which was practically useless in such an encounter as that in which I expected soon to be engaged. A peaceful citizen like myself had no need to carry weapons. I looked around the room for one. There was not an article of furniture in it-not a stick. I would have given the world for an ax or a piece of iron with which I could have made some kind of defense. We were absolutely helpless and powerless, and it was my terror that made me certain that we were threatened by more than one enemy. To go from the room and meet the persons who were advancing toward us would be an act of madness, and would in all probability but hasten our fate. We must remain where we were, and wait for events; no reasonable alternative was open to us.

Pat, pat, pat, came the sound to our ears; nearer, nearer, nearer; not boldly, as if those from whom it proceeded were engaged upon an open and honest mission, but stealthily and covertly, as though they desired all knowledge of their movements to be concealed from their victims.

The footsteps had now reached the landing of the first floor and, after another deathlike pause, commenced to ascend the stairs which led directly to us.

"Can't you do something, Edward?" whispered my agonized wife, wringing her hands. "Can't you lock the door?"

It is strange that the fact of the door being unlocked had not occurred to me before. I rushed to it instantly, and a sigh of intense relief escaped me at finding the key in the lock. I turned it like lightning, and we were so far safe. Then my wife flew to the window, and, throwing it open, began to scream for help-that is to say, she would have screamed if she had had the power, but her voice was almost frozen in her throat, and the sounds that issued from her were of a ravenlike hoarseness, and could have traveled but a few yards; too short a distance in our lonely situation to be of any practical value. Soon I added my shouts to her hoarse scream. They were sent forth to a dead world; to our frantic appeals no answer was made.

Meanwhile, occupied as I was, I could still pay some attention to what was passing on the stairs that led to the room. I had indulged in a faint hope that our cries would alarm those without, and would induce them to forego their murderous attack upon us, but the stealthy pat, pat, pat of the footsteps continued, and were now in the middle of the staircase; there could be but a few more stairs to ascend. Still another hope remained-that when the footsteps reached the second landing they would proceed onward to the top of the house. This last hope, like those which had preceded it, was not fulfilled. Nearer, nearer, nearer they approached, until they were close to the door; then there was another pause; no further sounds were heard.

My impression now was that the villains who had a design against us-for by this time I entertained no doubt of their diabolical purpose, and that we were in the direst peril-were making preparations to carry it into effect. Presently they would try the handle of the door, and, discovering that it was locked, would burst it open and spring upon us.

A long and awful silence ensued, during which the agonizing question occupied my mind, what was being done outside the door? The torture of the suspense was maddening; the silence was more harrowing than the footsteps themselves had been. I was soon to receive an appalling answer to the question.

The door-notwithstanding my firm belief that I had securely locked it-slowly and noiselessly opened. My heart beat wildly, but I held myself ready, so far as lay in my poor power, to meet the attack with which we were threatened. And now the door stood wide open, and I saw no form of man or woman. But gradually there shaped itself in the air the outline of a female shape, a shadow, which as I gazed grew more distinct, and yet was never quite vivid to my sight. It was the figure of a young girl, poorly dressed, with carpet slippers on her feet. Her hair was hanging loose, and the tattered remnants of a cap attached to it was an indication that her station in life was-or more properly speaking, had been-that of a domestic servant. Her face was white and wan, and her large gray eyes were fixed mournfully upon me. There was a dead beauty in their depths which seemed to speak of glowing hopes of youth prematurely blasted and destroyed, and, though the features of the apparition were but airy outlines, I could not fail to perceive that in a bygone time they had been comely and prepossessing.

More terrible than any form of living man or woman was this appalling spectacle as it stood, silent and still, upon the threshold. Had the bell I rang summoned it from the grave? For what purpose had it come? What did it require of me? It is probable that I should have mustered courage to ask some such questions as these, and indeed I was aware that my lips were moving, but no sound issued from them-my voice was gone; I could not utter an audible sound.

For several minutes, as it seemed to me, though it could not have been so long, did I continue to gaze upon the figure. I had directed a brief glance at its feet, but when my eyes traveled up to its face they became magnetized, as it were. The spell was broken by a movement on the ground, not proceeding from the apparition of the girl. I looked down, and there, gliding past the upright spectral figure, I saw creeping toward me a skeleton cat.

It was veritably a skeleton, and was to my sight as impalpable as the young girl. Through its skin, almost bare of hair, its bones were sharply outlined. It was black; its ears were pointed, its eyes were yellow, its mouth was open, showing its sharp teeth.

This second apparition added to my horror, which grew deeper and deeper as the cat, with gliding motion, approached me. Had its paws left upon the ground a bloody imprint I could not have been more awestricken. It paused a few inches from me, where it crouched motionless so long as I remained so. When I moved it accompanied me, and when I stopped it stopped, waiting for a mandate from me to set it in motion.

Raising my eyes to the door I discovered to my amazement that the figure of the girl had vanished. Nerving myself to the effort, I stepped softly into the passage and gazed along and at the staircases above and below me, but saw no movement of substance or shadow. Returning to the room I was irresistibly impelled by a desire to convince myself whether the cat which had accompanied me to and fro was as palpable to touch as to sight. Kneeling to put this to the test I found myself kneeling on my wife's dress. So engrossed had I been in the astounding apparitions that I had paid no attention to her, and now I saw that she had fainted. Before devoting myself to her I passed my hand over the cat and came in contact with nothing in the shape of substance. It was truly a specter, and I beheld it as clearly as I beheld the body of my wife lying at my side.

I took my flask from my pocket and bathed my wife's forehead, and poured a few drops of brandy and water down her throat, and I was presently relieved by seeing her eyes open. She closed them again immediately, and said, in a whisper:

"Is it gone?"

Anxious to learn what she had seen-for I inwardly argued that I might myself be the victim of a strange delusion-I met her inquiry by asking:

"Is what gone, Maria?"

"The girl," she murmured; "that dreadful figure that came into the room?"

"Look for yourself," I said.

It was not without apprehension that I made the request, and I nervously followed the direction of her eyes.

"It is not in the room," she sighed. "But, Edward, who opened the door?"

"The wind blew it open, most likely."

"You locked it, Edward! I heard you turn the key in the lock."

"I thought I did, but I must have been mistaken. Terrified as we were, how could we trust the evidence of our senses? And do you suppose there's a lock in the house in proper order?"

"It must have been my fancy. Did *you* see nothing?"

How should I answer her? Revive her terror by telling her that she was under no delusion, but that the spectral figure of the young girl had really presented itself; or, out of kindness to her, strive to banish her fears by a pardonable falsehood?

Before I decided how to act I felt it necessary to ascertain whether the cat lying in full view to me was visible to her.

"Maria," I said, "take the evidence of your senses. Look round the room-at the door, at the walls, at the ceiling, on the floor-and tell me what you see."

With timid eyes she obeyed, and glanced in every direction, not omitting the spot upon which the skeleton cat was lying.

"I don't see anything, Edward."

"Does not that prove that the figure you spoke of was a trick of the imagination?"

"You actually saw nothing?"

"Nothing."

All this time she had been sitting on the floor, keeping tight hold of me. I assisted her to her feet; she was so weak that she could hardly stand.

"For Heaven's sake!" she said "do not let us remain in the house another minute."

I was as anxious to leave as she was, and had I been alone I should have rushed downstairs in blind haste, but I had to attend to my wife. The power of rapid motion had deserted her, and when we were about to pass through the passage she shrunk back, fearing that the apparition of the young girl was lurking there. She experienced the same fear as we descended the stairs, and clung to me in terror when we approached an open door. I was grateful that the apparition of the cat-which followed us faithfully down to the hall-was invisible to her; if it had not been she would have lost her senses again, and it would have been hard work for me to carry her out, as she is by no means of a light weight.

The question which now agitated me was whether the cat would come into the streets with us, or would return to the resting place which should have been its last. It was soon and plainly answered.

I opened the street door, and stood upon the threshold. The cat stood there also. I paused to give it the opportunity of returning, but it evinced no desire to do so. I went down the stone steps to the front garden; the cat accompanied me. I walked through the front garden out of the gate, straight into Lamb's Terrace, and thence across the wretched wastes of ground into more cheerful thoroughfares; and the skeleton cat was by my side the whole of the time.

The evidence of civilized life by which we were now surrounded restored Maria's spirits; she found her tongue.

"Why did you stop on the doorstep, Edward?" she asked.

"I had to lock the street door," I answered.

"We will not take that house, my dear," she said.

"No, we will not take it."

Some unaccustomed note in my voice struck her as strange.

"Is anything the matter with you?" she asked.

"No," I replied, glancing at the cat, "nothing."

"What are you looking at? Why are your eyes wandering so?"

"My dear," I said, with an attempt to speak in a lively tone, and failing dismally, "I must be a bit unstrung, that is all."

She accepted my explanation as satisfactory.

"No wonder," she said; "I would not go through such another trial for all the money in the world."

CHAPTER VII.
I MAKE SOME SINGULAR EXPERIMENTS

For a little while we walked along in silence, and then I asked my wife whether she would ride or walk home.

"I should prefer to walk," she said; "it is early, and the air is fresh and reviving. Things look all the brighter now we are out of that horrible place. A walk will do us good."

I made no demur, though I was curious to see what the skeleton cat would do when we entered an omnibus full of people. It would experience a difficulty in finding a place on the floor of the 'bus, and there would be no room for it to stretch itself comfortably on the seats. I wished to ascertain, also, whether among a number of strangers there would be one to whom it would make itself visible. I peered into the faces of the passers-by with this thought in my mind, but I saw no expression of surprise in them, notwithstanding that the cat seemed to touch their legs in brushing past. Again and again did I turn my eyes away from the apparition; and again and again, looking down at my feet, I beheld it as clearly as if it were an actual living example of its species. Once we got into a crowd and I hoped that I had lost it. No such luck; it evinced no disposition to leave me.

"Edward," said my wife, "I am sure you are not well. I have tired you out with this eternal looking over houses to let. You have been very patient with me" – she pressed my arm affectionately-"and I will try and make it up to you. I know you never really wished to move."

"I never wished it, Maria."

"And you have gone through all this for my sake. I don't like to give up a thing once I have set my mind on it, – you know that of old, my dear, – but the experiences of this morning will last me a lifetime; so I will give this up."

"The idea of moving?" I asked in a dull voice. "You give it up altogether?"

"Yes, altogether. We will remain in our old house."

It is a singular confession to make, but this proclamation of the victory I had gained afforded me no satisfaction. I had no wish to move; my earnest desire was to remain where we were; but with the infernal cat gliding by my side, I could think of nothing but the haunted house in Lamb's Terrace which we had just quitted. In that house was the spectral figure of the girl who, by spiritual means, had opened a door I had locked, and presented herself to me. She was now alone. I had deprived her of a companion who, for aught I knew, might have been a solace to her. It was as if I had been guilty of a crime; as if I had condemned her to solitude. But it was folly to torment myself with such reflections. What had I to do with the incidents of this eventful day? I was a passive instrument, and was being led by unseen hands. More pertinent to ask what was the portent of the apparitions, and why the supernatural visitation was inflicted upon me, although to these questions I could expect no answer. Involuntarily I stooped to assure myself once more that the cat was but a shadow.

"What are you stooping for?" inquired my wife.

"I thought I had dropped my handkerchief."

"It is here, in your pocket." She took it out and handed it to me.

"I was mistaken," I muttered.

She held up her sunshade and hailed a passing hansom, saying energetically, and with a troubled look at me, "We will ride home."

I did not object. I think if she had said "We will fly home," I should have made an attempt to fly, so absolutely was I, for the time, deprived of the power of deciding my own movements. I did not see the cat spring into the cab, but directly we were seated, there it lay crouched in front of us; and when the driver pulled up at our house there it was waiting for the street door to be opened.

"Lie down and rest yourself for an hour," said my wife, with deep concern in her voice.

"No," I replied, "I will smoke a pipe in the garden."

With wifely solicitude she filled my pipe for me, and held a lighted match to the tobacco. I puffed up, thanked her with a look, and went into the garden accompanied by the cat.

In the part of London in which we live there are pleasant gardens attached to many of the houses, and our little plot of ground is by no means to be despised. It is some ninety feet in length, is divided in the center by a broad graveled space, and has a graveled walk all around it; and here when the weather permits, my wife and I frequently sit and enjoy ourselves. I am also the proud possessor of a greenhouse, which, as well as the borders and beds I have laid out, is in summer and autumn generally bright with flowers, of which I am very fond; and into this greenhouse I walked to smoke the green fly, which was doing its worst for my pelargoniums. There are a couple of trees in my garden, and birds' nests in them. The birds were flitting among the branches, and I looked at the cat, wondering whether it would spring after its feathered victims.

It took no notice of them, nor they of it. I remained in the greenhouse ten or twelve minutes, and then it occurred to me to make an experiment. With a swift and sudden motion I left the greenhouse and pulled the door behind me, shutting the cat inside. I walked toward the center of the garden, and the animal I thought I had cunningly imprisoned glided on at my side. Doors shut and locked, and doubtless stone walls, presented no greater obstacle to the creature than the air I breathed.

I sat down on the garden seat and smoked and pondered, and was aroused by a soft purring at my feet, and the contact of a furry body against my legs. I uttered an exclamation, and, looking down, saw our own household cat-a tortoise-shell tabby-rubbing against me. Now, thought I, there will be a fight. But there was nothing of the kind. I felt convinced that the skeleton cat saw our tortoise-shell cat, and presently I was quite as convinced that the flesh and blood reality was unconscious of the presence of the disembodied spirit.

I made another experiment. I went stealthily into the kitchen, and filled a saucer with milk. This saucer I took into the garden and put upon the gravel before the two cats.

"You must be hungry," I said aloud to the spectral figure, with a feeble attempt at jocularity. "Lap up."

It made no movement. With a look of gratitude at me our tabby lapped up the whole of the milk, and licked the saucer dry.

My wife came out and, seeing what I had done, smiled.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked solicitously.

"There is nothing whatever the matter with me," I said, with an unreasonable show of irritation.

She wisely made no reply, and I was once more left alone with my supernatural companion.

Thus passed the day, and I was glad when the hour arrived for Bob Millet to make his appearance. He came punctually and was cordially received by my wife.

"You are in time for tea, Mr. Millet," she said, shaking hands with him. "I want you to feel that you are really welcome here."

"Indeed I do feel so," said Bob, gratified by this reception, which I fancy he hardly expected.

They made a good meal, but though my wife had thoughtfully prepared a dish of which I was very fond-a tongue stewed with raisins-I ate very little.

"No appetite, Ned?" said Bob.

I shook my head gloomily.

"He is out of sorts, Mr. Millet," said my wife, "and I am delighted you are here to cheer him up. He has me to thank for his low spirits; it is all because of my stupid wish to leave the house in which we are as comfortable as we could reasonably hope to be. I have worried him to death, almost, dragging him about against his will-though he has never complained-from morning till night for I don't know how long past. He is not half the man he was; he doesn't eat well and he doesn't sleep well, and I am to blame for it."

She was ready to cry with remorse, and I felt ashamed of myself for not having the strength to battle with the delusion which surely would not torture me forever.

I patted her on the shoulder, and put on a more cheerful countenance. She brightened up instantly, and then Bob asked whether we had been to 79 Lamb's Terrace.

"Yes, we have," said my wife, "and I am truly thankful that we got out of it safely."

"Ah!" said Bob, lifting his eyes.

"You were right, Mr. Millet," said my wife, "the house is haunted."

"Oh," said Bob, "I only told you what I had heard. For my part, I don't even know where Lamb's Terrace is."

"Take my advice, Mr. Millet, and don't try to know. The less you see of the place the better it will be for you."

"Why?"

"Because it *is* haunted," she replied with emphatic shakes of her head, "and I am much obliged to you for putting us on our guard."

"Then you saw something?"

My wife looked at me.

"Tell him what you fancy you saw," I said.

"It was not fancy," she rejoined; "I have been thinking over it during the day, and the more I think, the more I am convinced that I did see-what I saw."

"I should like to hear about it," said Bob.

"You shall."

And she told him all; of our going over the house till we got to the room on the second floor, of my pulling the bell, of the sounds we had heard proceeding from the basement and approaching nearer and nearer till they were outside in the passage, of my locking the door, of the door opening of its own accord, and of the appearance on the threshold of the specter of a young girl, and, finally, of her fainting away.

"It was only my obstinacy," she said, "that took us up to the top of the house. Edward was quite ready to leave it before we had been in the place two minutes, but I insisted upon going into all the rooms, and I was properly punished for it. I was frightened enough, goodness knows, before I fainted, for I was chilled all over by what I had already seen, and I ought to have been satisfied; but you know what women are, Mr. Millet, when they take a fancy into their heads."

"There, Bob," said I, "there's a confession to make; not many women would say as much."

Bob smiled, and said, "You are too hard on yourself. We are much of a muchness-men and women alike; there is nothing to choose between us."

"You are very good to say so, Mr. Millet."

"When you recovered from your faint," said Bob, "was the figure still there?"

"No, it was gone."

"And you did not see it again?"

"No, thank God!"

"Did you see it?" asked Bob, turning to me. "He says he didn't," said my wife, quickly replying for me, "but-"

"But," I added, "she does not believe me."

"How can I believe you," said my wife reproachfully, "when the very moment before I swooned away I saw your eyes almost starting out of your head with fright."

"Oh, well," I said, "I suppose I have as much right to fancy things as you."

"Of course you have, and it was very considerate of you to deny that you saw anything. He is the best husband in the world, Mr. Millet, and if he thinks I don't appreciate him he is mistaken."

"Now, my dear," I said soothingly, "you know I don't think anything of the sort; if I am the best husband in the world, so are you the best wife in the world. What do you say to our going in for the flitch of bacon?"

"It is all very well to make a laughing matter of it," said my wife seriously. "I will ask Mr. Millet this plain question. He may say, like you, that it is all fancy; but pray how does he account for the opening of a locked door?"

"I told you," I interposed before Bob could speak, "that I must have been mistaken in supposing I had locked it."

"Very good. But the door was shut if it was not locked."

"I don't deny that it was."

"How did it come open, then?"

"I told you that, too," I replied. "The wind."

"What wind?"

"The wind from the window through the broken panes."

She turned to Bob triumphantly. "What do you think of that, Mr. Millet? When we go into the room the door slams, and my husband says it slams because of the wind through the window. I accept that as reasonable, but is it reasonable to suppose that the same wind that blows a door shut from the inside of a room should blow it open from the outside?"

"Well, no," said Bob, with a sly look at me; "I should say it was not reasonable."

I was fairly caught. My wife's logic was too much for me.

"And now," said she, "as I know it will worry him if I go on talking about it, I will leave you two gentlemen together while I go and look after some affairs. You will spend the evening with us, Mr. Millet?"

"With much pleasure," he said.

"And I beg your pardon," she said, "for having misjudged you. I did think that you and my husband were in a plot together to set me against the house, and I did not think it was nice behavior in a gentleman who was paying me his first visit. I told my husband as much last night before we went to sleep, and he stood up for you like the true friend he is; and now I am glad to say I have found out my mistake. I hope you will forgive me.

"There is nothing to forgive," said Bob, in the kindest and gentlest tone imaginable. "All that you have said and thought and done was most fair and reasonable, and I ought to be thankful for the little misunderstanding, if it has given you a better opinion of me."

CHAPTER VIII.
I TAKE BOB INTO MY CONFIDENCE

"A sensible woman," said Bob, gazing after my wife; and then, in a more serious tone, "Ned, is it all true?"

"Every word of it."

"About the phantom of the girl?"

"Yes, about the phantom of the girl. Frightfully, horribly true!"

"You saw it?"

"I did; and I would swear it was no trick of imagination."

"And the door opened, as your wife has described?"

"It did, and I will swear that *that* was no trick of the imagination."

We had moved our chairs and were sitting by the open window, from which stretched the bright prospect of the flowers in my garden; there was a space of some three feet between our chairs as we sat facing each other, and on this space lay the skeleton cat.

"There is something more," I said. "Look down here." I pointed to the cat.

"Well? I am looking."

"What do you see?"

"Nothing."

"Absolutely nothing?"

"Nothing, except the carpet."

"Bob, would you judge me to be a man possessed of a fair amount of common sense?"

"Certainly."

"Not likely to give way to fads and fancies?"

"Certainly."

"Caring, as a rule, more for the prosaic than the romantic side of things?"

"I should say that, without doubt."

"And you would say what is true of me, up to the present moment. I prefer the plain bread-and-butter side of life, and though I hope I have a proper sympathy for my fellow-creatures, I am not given to extravagant sentiment. I am putting this description of myself in very plain words, because I really want you to understand me as I am."

"I think I do understand you, Ned."

"I have never had a nightmare," I continued, "and, as a rule, my sleep is dreamless. It is true that my rest has been a little disturbed lately by my wife's wish to move, but the few restless nights I have passed from this reason are quite an exception. To sum myself up briefly and concisely, I claim to be considered a healthy human being in mind and body."

"It is not I, Ned, who would dispute that claim."

"I have told you that the spectral figure of the girl appeared to me. A doctor would at once declare it to be a delusion of the senses. If my wife informed the doctor that she also saw it, he would reply that she also was suffering under a delusion, and he would attempt to explain it away on the ground of sympathy between us. But the opening of the door could be no delusion; it was tight shut, and the key was incontestibly turned in the lock; and yet it opened to admit the specter. The doctor would smile at this, and ask incredulously, 'Is it necessary for the entrance of an apparition, that a door should be open, when it possesses the power of passing through material obstacles?' It *does* possess such a power, Bob; I have tested and proved it. Now, what I have been coming to is this. My wife saw one apparition; I saw two."

"Two?" exclaimed Bob, regarding me more intently.

"Yes, two. One, the girl, vanished; the other, the cat, remained."

"In Heaven's name what are you talking about?"

"I am relating an absolute fact. By the side of the girl appeared the apparition of a skeleton cat, which accompanied me from the house, which glided along the streets at my side, which entered my own house with me, and which now lies here, on this little space of carpet between us, on which you see-nothing. Now, Bob, tell me at once that I am mad."

"I shall tell you nothing of the kind; I must have a little time to consider. What kind of reading do you indulge in? Sensation stories?"

"I chiefly read the newspapers."

"Digestion good, Ned?"

"In perfect condition; for the last ten years I have not had a day's bad health."

"All that is in your favor."

"Thank you. I see that you are taking a medical view of my case."

"Indeed, I am not; I only want to think it out for myself. You can actually see the cat?"

"There it lies, its yellow eyes fixed on my face."

"Touch it."

I stretched forth my hand and passed it over and through the apparition.

"Does it reply by any sign?"

"By none."

"And yet it moves?"

"When I move. Otherwise it remains motionless, in a state of expectation, as it appears to me.

"I don't quite understand, Ned."

"It is difficult to understand, but it seems to be waiting for something in the near or distant future. It relieves me to unburden my mind to you, Bob. I do not intend to confide in my wife; it would frighten her out of her life, and in the kindness of her heart she would try to make me disbelieve the evidence of my own senses. Therefore not a word about this to her. I hear her singing; she is coming back to us, and she is singing to make me cheerful. Why, Maria," I said, as she entered the room, "what have you got your hat on for? Are you going out for a walk?"

"I am," she replied briskly, "and you two gentlemen are coming with me. It is now half-past seven, and if you will be so good as not to raise any objection I propose to treat you to the theater."

"A good idea," said Bob Millet, in a tone as lively as her own.

"No tragedies," she continued, "a play that we can have a good laugh over; we have had enough of tragedies to-day, and I don't intend they shall get the best of me. We will go to the Criterion, where you always get a proper return for your money, and I hope you won't object to the pit, Mr. Millet?"

"I assure you," said Bob, with grave humor, "that when I sit in the pit I shall consider myself one of the aristocracy. Your wife is a capital doctor, Ned."

Very willingly I fell in with the thoughtful proposition, and as Maria insisted upon paying all the expenses out of her private purse I allowed her to do so, knowing that it would give her pleasure.

We arrived at the Criterion before the raising of the curtain and we saw a laughable comedy most admirably acted, which afforded us great enjoyment. I may say that the circumstance of the skeleton cat not accompanying us was the mainspring of my enjoyment. Could it have been, after all, an illusion? Was it really possible that the apparitions I had seen were the creations of my fancy? Bob whispered to me once:

"Has it accompanied us?"

"No," I whispered back, "I see nothing of it."

When we were outside the theater, and were ready to depart our separate ways, Bob said:

"Will you come and spend an hour with me to-morrow evening, Ned?"

"Yes, he will," said my wife; "it will do him good. It does not do, Mr. Millet, for a man to mope too much at home."

So I consented, and we shook hands, and wished each other good-night.

CHAPTER IX.
I PAY BOB MILLET A VISIT

I was naturally curious when I arrived home to see if the cat was there. It was. It did not meet me at the street door, but it lay on the spot on which I had left it a few hours previously. Of course this distressed me, but I did not betray my uneasiness to my wife. I had at least cause for thankfulness in the silent announcement made by the apparition that it was not its intention to accompany me to every place I visited.

We had our supper and went to bed; and it was an additional comfort to me when I found that it did not follow us to our bedroom.

It was not likely, after such an exciting day, that I should pass a good night. My rest was greatly disturbed; and at about three o'clock I was wide awake. My wife was sleeping soundly. I rose quietly, thrust my feet in my slippers, and went downstairs to the dining-room. There lay the cat with its eyes wide open.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.