

feel as her husband. What man in his senses would have gone off as he went?

Mrs Graham smiled a grim smile. 'He did not go without letting you first feel the weight of his arm—the strength of his anger,' she said.

Again the strange chinking of the armour sounded through the great room; once more they started, and looked round frightened.

'We're nervous,' Mrs Graham said to her host, forcing a smile; 'it can't be anything, but I never heard the sounds before.'

Just then a serving-maid brought in the supper tray, and, after a long drink from tumblers of foaming champagne, their spirits began to rise.

'We're as timid as a couple of children,' she said. 'I'm ashamed of myself, and I'm ashamed of you, Mr Sefton. As for ghosts walking, I don't believe in them; it's some trick. Let me catch any ghost walking—I'll show them. Have you any fresh instructions for me to-night?'

'No—no fresh ones,' he answered. 'If Miss Carthew writes any more foreign letters, though I fancy she will not, continue to keep them back. It was a great idea of mine getting you into the post office, Martha.'

'A great idea,' she agreed; 'though I fancy you would have worked your end better if you had written a letter from her lover breaking off the engagement.'

'Perhaps,' he answered; 'but I feared detection; if once a forgery was traced home to me, the genuineness of my uncle's will would be doubted, and that would mean simple ruin.'

'And you have made up your mind to marry Miss Carthew?'

'If I can,' he answered; 'but as yet I am not very hopeful. Her mother is upon my side, but the girl will have nothing to do with me. There is a new girl who has come into the place, too, who has taken my fancy—a Miss Kepple; I could love her, only she is the living image of Muriel. I half feared that she might be her daughter, and that Jack might have come back from abroad.'

'Surely he would never come back. What is there for him to come back for?'

'Revenge!'

'Revenge! Surely he had that before he went.'

'I hope he thinks so,' Ralph said, with a shudder. 'I most devoutly hope he thinks so; I never wish to see his face again.'

He pushed back his plate as he spoke—they had been waiting upon themselves.

'And you have no more instructions to give me?' Mrs Graham said, looking up at the great old clock.

'None,' Ralph answered. 'I only have to give you the usual amount, and to thank you for all you have done.'

As he spoke again the armour seemed to clank. Ralph and the woman looked wildly round, and distinctly at the far end of the armoury, where the lights burnt most dimly and the shadows fell with most ghostly dimness, they saw two of the suite move, the arms moved themselves, the steel-cased fingers pushed the visors up, and where there had been nothing, there were faces, firmly set mouths, and flashing eyes. For a moment they looked at the frightened man and woman, then, while their hearts froze with horror, while their eyes glared from their heads, and their limbs became paralyzed, the armour-cased men stepped down from their pedestals, and advanced up the room.

It was enough to frighten any one with the strongest nerves, that empty cases of armour should suddenly be endowed with the power of walking, that human faces should look out of the steel setting; but, as they drew backward, a new horror met their gaze. Rising from the floor was the same figure Ralph had seen many times before—the ghastly figure of a woman with a beautiful, pale, sad face. Slowly she rose till she stood at her full height, then glided forward. The men in armour paused and looked; Ralph and Mrs Graham, growing whiter and whiter, shrank further backward.

Onward the figure went, with a slow, gliding motion, until within a few feet of Ralph; then it paused.

'Scoundrel, and you, the tool of a scoundrel,' she said, turning to the frightened woman, 'forbear—pause before you try to work more mischief; for, as there is a Heaven above me, I will unmask you. All your wickedness, all you misdeeds, are known to me. Thief, liar, murderer, forger judgment is upon you. This heart, which you have broken, shall have its revenge.'

She moved a step nearer; the woman threw up her arms, and fell fainting to the ground. Nearer still—Ralph kept his eyes upon her as though fascinated.

The armed man took a step forward; then one stood still, and the other, with a swift movement, came onward, threw his arms around the ghostly woman, drew her close to his heart, and cried, as he kissed her:

'Muriel—Muriel, my wife!'

A shrill scream rang out through the armoury. For a moment Ralph gazed upon the picture; then something in his heart seemed to give way, an idiotic laugh broke

from his lips, and he ran a madman from the armoury.

CHAPTER XVI.

'MURIEL—Muriel, my wife! Strange words to address to a spirit—a ghost; but it was no supernatural being that Jack held in his armour-cased arms—

but a creature of flesh and blood—his love, his long-lost wife.

She looked up at him; her face grew paler than ever; she trembled like one struck with an ague.

'Jack—Jack!' she whispered in an awed voice, 'is it really you?'

'My darling, yes,' he answered, stooping to kiss her and hiding his helmet in the way.

'Bob, take this confounded thing off.'

Bob did as he desired, then discreetly retired to the other end of the armoury, while, after years of separation, am old doubt, and sorrow, the lips of husband and wife met.

'What a kiss it was—long, lingering, sweet! With it was given once more all the love of youth—all the stored love of long, long years spent apart; to both it was like receiving one back from the dead.'

'Is it really you, Jack?' she said—'really you in the flesh? I thought you were dead. He told me you were dead.'

'He lied!' Jack answered. 'It is really me, my wife, in the flesh. But I have my doubts of you, my love. Look at this little white hand—surely, surely it belongs to a spirit woman?'

'I am no spirit woman,' she answered; 'though for years I have been thought one. Oh, husband, love, we have much, much to tell one another. But first tell me, have we still two little children, Jack?'

'We have still two children,' he answered, smiling; 'but Miepah is as big as you, Muriel, and Noel a great boy.'

'Take me to them,' she whispered; 'let me see my children.'

'Not yet,' he answered; 'we must prepare them first. Remember, love, they thought they lost their mother years ago, as I thought I had lost my wife. Let me set out this armoury, then tell me all that has happened since that dreadful day when I thought you had left me.'

'You doubted me, then, Jack?'

'God forgive me—yes; and yet how could I help it?—I had the news in your handwriting.'

'I never doubted you,' she answered, 'though he told me you had let me go willingly, in exchange for two thousand pounds. He showed me your receipt for the sum; but I knew it was a forgery, and I told him so.'

'You were more faithful than I,' he said, humbly; 'but you know it was not because I did not love you that I doubted. I left England a broken-hearted man. I could scarcely—'

A groan from Mrs Graham interrupted him; they had quite forgotten her in their new-found joy. She sat up; then, seeing Muriel, hid her face once more.

'Spare me—spare me!' she said, in a trembling voice.

'You shall be spared if you will confess all you know,' Jack said—'all about the forged will and the rest of Ralph Sefton's wickedness.'

The woman hesitated; Muriel moved a little nearer to her; she shrank away.

'Keep off—keep off!' she said loudly. 'I'll promise anything, only do not come near me. I will write all I know, and send it to the clergyman—only let me go now.'

'You can go,' Jack answered.

And, covering her face, the woman went.

'Now to hear the whole history,' Jack said, sitting down and drawing his wife to his side.

'Bob, come here and hear the history, and be introduced to my darling—my wife.'

Bob, who had meanwhile got rid of his armour, came forward.

'To my friend,' Jack said, 'I owe more than I can ever repay. He was the first to make me doubt that the letter seemingly in your handwriting was genuine; it was he who found out that Mrs Graham, the post-mistress, was making one of her usual monthly visits here to-night; it was he who devised the plan of getting into two of the suits of armour. Had it not been for him, perhaps I should never have held you in my arms again. I shall ever owe him a debt of gratitude.'

'And I,' Muriel said, putting out her hand, and looking up at him with eyes like Miepah's—'I wish I could thank you properly.'

'For anything I have done I shall ask you to pay me over and over again some day,' Bob answered.

Muriel looked puzzled, but Jack smiled.

'I think you will have your payment,' he said. 'Muriel, he wants our daughter for his wife.'

'What! Baby Miepah? Both men laughed softly.

'Miepah is no longer a baby,' Jack said. 'She is a beautiful girl, the image of her mother. And now, love, the story.'

'Let me begin from the beginning,' she said; then went on without waiting:

'You know, Jack, when you asked me to be your wife, I refused, thinking a marriage with me might ruin your prospects. Then you went to your father, and, though he did not approve, which was natural, perhaps, he did not forbid you to marry me. You came back to me, told me this, and I promised to let things be as you wished.'

'Well, we were married; your father did not come to the wedding, but your cousin did. Then we went abroad. When in Paris we had a letter from your father, saying that, as you had disobeyed him (which you had not) by marrying beneath you (and I was beneath you, dear), you were no longer a son of his, and he should make your cousin Ralph his heir.'

'A forgery, of course,' Bob said.

Jack started.

'Do you really think so?' he asked.

'Undoubtedly.'

'You wrote to your father, and had the letter returned unopened; you were high-spirited, and you did not write again.'

'We stayed abroad; Miepah was born, then Noel. We were very happy. You sent your father the papers with the births of the children in; but he took no notice. After a time you grew homesick, and we came back to England. You heard your father was ill, and tried to see him; but the servants—new ones since you had left home—would not let you in. Now comes my story.'

'I was walking down the village when one of the carriages from the castle passed me, and stopped a little way ahead. Ralph Sefton got out, and came to me.'

'My uncle is very ill,' he said; 'he has asked to see you—it may mean much to Jack. Will you come?'

'I never thought of foul play; I never doubted for a moment; I stepped into the carriage, and we were driven off. I thought only of you, and what it yet might mean to you if your father should consider me worthy of being his daughter.'

'We reached the castle; Ralph led me up four flights of stairs. I thought it strange an old man should care to sleep so high up, but said nothing; it might be a fancy of his.'

'He opened a door at last; we went in; then he turned and locked it.'

'My uncle is dead,' he said; 'his will leaves me everything; Jack is a beggar. You are a woman; therefore you love the good things of this world. I can give you all your heart desires; Jack can have a letter this evening in so good an imitation of your handwriting that he will not doubt but that it comes from you, to say you have left him for me; he will never doubt but that it is true. You are my prisoner, my captive, but your chains will be chains of gold, for I love you.'

'You may well imagine my horror, and how powerless I was to escape from this man. He tried to kiss me, but I snatched a knife from the table, and I have kept it ever since. I have been his prisoner—nothing more.'

'More than a year passed by; he told me you were dead, and asked me to be his wife, I refused. I tried all I could to escape, but I could not, I was too safely guarded. He told me my name was a by-word of shame—that everyone thought I had left you for him—that I should be hooted and stoned out of the village if I did escape.'

'More years passed onward, I fell ill, and I wished with all my heart that I could die. The doctor was called in—a strange doctor. He ordered me to be moved down stairs, and I was moved. He was kind and attentive, and in spite of my wish I began to mend. I would have told him my story, only I was never alone; an old woman named Stiffe was always with me. Ralph was afraid to come near me. It was scarlet fever I had.'

'The fever left me, and the doctor came no more. I heard he had gone abroad for

his holiday. I was still very weak, but getting better fast.

'One day, when Mrs Stiffe was sitting by my bedside, I began to cry. She asked me why I was crying, and I said I would I were dead. "Why?" she asked. "So that I might get away from here," I answered.

'She seemed to think for a little while. "Do you want to get away from here so much?" she said.

'"I would give all I possess to get away from here," I answered.

'I saw her glance down at my fingers, on which your rings were still flashing, Jack.

'"Would you give the pretty diamonds?" she asked.

'"Yes, yes," I answered; it seemed horrible to part with your rings, Jack, but more horrible to be there.

'"I will show you a way of escape," she said; "but you must let me say that you are dead. I can manage everything. My son-in-law is an undertaker; he will tell no tales if the coffin has nobody in it; it will be a job for him. The doctor is a friend of master's and will send the certificate right enough. Give me the rings, and I'll get you away to-night."

'Then I felt a little frightened. Where could I go when I escaped? There was simply no home open for us.

'I said I scarcely thought I felt strong enough to go at once.

'You can stop where I am going to put you for a day or two, if you like,' she said; 'but you must get away from this room today, or not at all. The master's gone up to town, and the servants are mostly out.'

'So I dressed myself, with her help; then she gave me her arm, and I managed painfully to drag my limbs along. She led

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