

having departed without any disturbance, in the morning, returned at night with two police officers; and, summoning all his servants, insisted upon an immediate search of their rooms, their boxes, and their effects. It was done accordingly, and, in a trunk belonging to the servant Gardner were found the ring and the diamond appertaining to it; but the jewel was detached from its setting, and appeared to have been snipped out with some violence. The object, apparently, was to effect a separate, immediate, and undetected sale. Gardner, who seemed overwhelmed with astonishment, professed himself innocent, but, of course, he was consigned to the hands of the two officers. Subsequently, at the assizes, the man was liberated, as there appeared no prosecutor. What became of the servant whose character was thus blasted transpired not for some time. Perhaps a year might have elapsed, when one day, at the Chataworth Parsonage, or Rectory, where the new Rector was in want of a servant, there presented himself, as desirous of the vacant place, a very proper-looking man named Gardner. You will remember that the Rectory in question was in a part of England remote from Mr Wimmer's present county, the local news of which, more especially in trivial matters, such as an obscene indictment never pushed to a conclusion, did not penetrate to so great a distance. The Rector knew nothing about Gardner's previous accusation and exposure. He asked for his character. *The man produced a five years' charter from Lord Hailey, then abroad; adding that since quitting his Lordship's service he had lived with his own mother, just dead. The parson, finding the man very tractable in respect to wages, engaged him. This happened in Cumberland, while Mr Wimmer was absent from his home, which was in Wales. He was absent in Paris, whence he wrote to Agnes, who had the habit of keeping all his letters, as he knew. Now, the Rev. Mr Curton's new servant, Gardner, about two months after he had been engaged, disappeared suddenly from the Rectory, and was never heard of more. Another month, during which Mr Wimmer continued to write from Paris, to Agnes—but giving her no address—elapsed; and then that gentleman returned home. I forgot to tell you a singular little thing which had occurred, on the occasion when Wimmer brought, as you will remember, the two police-officers to search his servants' effects, and ultimately to take the man Gardner into custody. Wimmer had then treated the two officers with refreshments, had himself sat and chatted in their company, and had repeatedly designated Agnes to them as "his mistress." I now return. When he came home from Paris, he stayed about a month; and then left the cottage and Agnes. It was the last time she ever saw him. He had told her for what amount she could draw on his banker periodically, and she lived with her child alone. She grieved not much, you may suppose, at his continued absence; until, one day, she saw in the papers the announcement, in customary form, of her husband's marriage with the beautiful Miss Wjborough, "only daughter and heiress of C. Wyborough, of —, Esq., etc." I pass over her amazement, her horror, her reflections, on the consequences to Agnes, her only child, thus paraded for ever as illegitimate. Her first step was to hasten to London to see Wimmer; which she found she could in no manner accomplish, being steadily referred, as an impudent impostress, to his solicitor. She then consulted a lawyer, whose first demand was to see the certificate or attested copy of the register in which her marriage was recorded. She could produce no such document, but still avowed her determination to obtain from the law justice to herself and to her child. The next proceeding was a journey to Cumberland, in company with her legal adviser (a clever man), to inspect the register itself. Strange to say, they found that not only the page containing what concerned her, but many other pages, affecting entries of various dates, and of several years, at irregular intervals, were torn out. The manner in which this was done was remarkable. Had only that one page been missing, the inferences, though dark and mysterious, would have justified a certain amount of presumption of, no doubt, a dreadful nature. But so many parts of the book mutilated! Some leaves were only half torn; in several were marks of tobacco juice; between two the flattened stump of a cigar was found wedged in the juncture; three or four of them were singed at the edges, and one was burnt through as if with a dropped spark. The actual Rector had either not noticed the state of the book (which was perfect in its more recent pages), or had not liked to mention it. He never smoked, and had no one in his establishment who did; never had had, except one; and the man in question, a dissipated, drunken, and biased character, as was afterwards learnt, had been with him only a couple of months, and had suddenly disappeared, and never been seen since; he had suddenly disappeared, taken nothing, not even some new but coarse shirts, marked with his name, H. Gardner. The lawyer made notes of all these particulars, and departed with his dismayed client. On their way back to London, he asked her the names of her witnesses, and of every person she could recollect who had been present at her marriage. He found that all were certainly dead, except William Austin, whom she knew not to be dead, but knew not to be living, and of whom she had irrecoverably lost sight ever since he had inherited his 'Indian property,' and gone, as she supposed, to Calcutta. Every effort was made by private inquiry, and by public advertisement, to discover this individual; but every effort was in vain. Still, the distracted lady, for the sake of her girl Agnes, would appeal to the law. A prosecution for bigamy was undertaken against Wimmer, and it failed utterly. Nay, the public judged that the prosecutrix had been always notoriously esteemed by those who knew anything about her at all as the salaried mistress of Wimmer; the evidence of the two police-officers who had arrested Gardner tending strongly to countenance and establish that conclusion. One point more. Had Gardner any resentment against the lady? And had he, when with the Rector, destroyed the register, out of malice? On the contrary, it was Wimmer who had been harsh to Gardner, and it was at the lady's intercession that Wimmer had refused to prosecute. The result of the trial completed the work of crushing and killing the unfortunate and broken-hearted lady who had been my first love. I had not seen her for twenty years since the epoch of my only duel. I now received a note, signed "Agnes Wimmer," summoning me to her death bed. There she told me all that she knew; and adjured me, as she was dying, and dying a lawful wife and wedded mother, to adopt her poor orphan, and to right her falsely dishonoured name. I accepted the charge, desperate as part of it appeared; I accepted it with tears and with sobe; and, kneeling with that*

beauteous orphan, whom you have all beheld, by the death-bed, received along with her the last blessing of a murdered, wronged, and spotless woman.

That night, the night of her departure to another world, Wimmer and his new wife were seated together in this room, and at this fireplace, with just such a storm as the storm to which we now listen raging round this old building. It was the first house to which he had formerly brought poor Agnes. The bride was musing; the bridegroom was reading. Suddenly something made both turn together, and gaze in the direction of that old sideboard; and, with her right hand resting upon its brass edge, and her left lifted, as in warning, and shining with the single plain adornment of a wedding ring, the reproachful vision of the dead stood before the living. Many like things took place, gentlemen, with which I will not trouble you on this occasion. Hark to that tremulous descent of the intricate fastenings and bindings themselves! They witnessed many a murderous cruelty, and many a mysterious *reminder*. But to night, in this house, which I have purchased, and in this very room, I can say that I have kept my solemn pledge to the departed. Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!

A pause here ensued; and then Mr Blamfydd concluded: "It was manifest to me that the only chance of justice was, that William Austin should be still living, and should be produced. I meditated long how to proceed. If the man live, said I, the reason, and the sole possible reason why he should never have been accessible or discoverable, is that he has been so managed by him who alone has an awful interest in his concealment. No one knows who he is, or where he is, or can know it—I added in my own meditation—save Wimmer himself. By Wimmer he is paid, maintained, and kept at a distance. I felt that one false step would ruin my last chance. I reasoned closely as I used to reason in "The Twenty Questions." Having determined on my plan, I sought a clever fellow on whom I could rely; and, having carefully and perfectly disciplined him in his part, I arranged every preparation. I knew that if I was unhappily wrong in my assumptions, that to do what I desired was an impossibility in every respect. Therefore I proceeded on the basis of being entirely correct in my first logical data. As Wimmer must know where this man was, in order to supply him with his allowance, to preserve means of intercourse with him, and to keep him out of a risk of destroying his guilty paymaster, it was absolutely certain that, if Wimmer could be alarmed into suspecting that we were on the traces of the missing witness, his very first measure would be to communicate with this minor but vital accomplice, either by letter or personally. All business must necessarily cede at once to momentous necessity. Just before the last London post went out, I called, and rushed into Wimmer's presence, with an air compounded of excitement, indignation, and triumph. I told him that all was at last discovered. "Austin lives," cried I, "and you shall meet your dues!" I said no more, but sternly departed. The man had lived in terror of this very chance for years. Either I was right, I repeat, in this, or I had undertaken what was a sheer impossibility. But, thanks to Divine Providence, I was right.

"In less than a quarter of an hour, a man, muffled in a cloak, came out of this house, and crept, through the dusk, to the post office. Of course no one can put a letter into the box without stretching out his arm. As Wimmer did so, a drunken man, who staggered near him, fell over the extended arm, bearing the precious letter to the ground. The drunkard took up the letter, read the superscription, and, hiccuping an apology, handed it back to Wimmer. That drunken man was that clever agent. In less than five minutes I learned that the missive was addressed to a "M. Jacques, Rue du Pont, No. 8 Brest." I reached Brest as soon as the letter: I found that M. Jacques was William Austin! and William Austin is now, while I speak, in this house.

Heddingham, the reason you are so depressed is, that Agnes has refused you; but the reason Agnes refused you is that she had a blight upon her own inherited fause; and that blight is now removed for ever. She shall be reintegrated in her parent's repute before all the world; and this night, Heddingham, my dear boy, she will cancel her own award against you. This is the story which I had to tell; and many a merry Christmas and many a happy new year may you enjoy with Agnes, Lady Heddingham. That, I repeat, is all the story I had to tell. My own early hopes perished in this dark underground tragedy; but, at length, in the second generation, I have lived to see it flow out into the sunshine, and close in peace!

When he ended, one present—a staid and truth spoken man of business, it became himself—declared solemnly that he saw, near the old sideboard, amid the dimness and the shadows, a lady in white, deadly pale, but smiling sweetly, wave for a moment from her left hand the glittering of a wedding-ring, and then disappear, just as the joybells at twelve, rang in the Christmas morning.

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