

question to be decided is shall we go on as we are doing now until, say, the end of six months, and then make another appeal to your guardian. It is just possible he may be more inclined to listen to reason then."

"I will do whatever you wish," she answered simply. "I fear, however, that while Mr Bursfield lives he will take no other view of the case."

"We must hope that he will," Jim replied. "In the meantime, as long as I know that you are true to me and love me as I love you, I shall be quite happy."

"You do believe that I love you, don't you, Jim?" she asked, looking up at her lover in the starlight.

"Of course I do," he answered. "God knows what a lucky man I deem myself for having been permitted to win your love. I am supremely thankful for one thing, and that is the fact that my poor father learnt to know and love you before his death."

"As I had learnt to love him," she replied. "But there, who could help doing so?"

"One man at least," Jim replied. "Unhappily we have the worst of reasons for knowing that there was one person in the world who bore him a mortal hatred."

"You have heard nothing yet from the police?"

"Nothing at all," Jim answered, shaking his head mournfully. "They have given me their most positive assurance that they are leaving no stone unturned to find the man, and yet, so far, they appear to have been entirely unsuccessful. If they do not soon run him down I shall take up the case myself, and see what I can do with it. And now here we are at the gate. You do not know how hard it is for me to let you go even for so short a time. With the closing of that door the light seems to go out of my life."

"I hope and pray that you will always be able to say that," she answered solemnly.

Then they bade each other good night, and she disappeared into the house, leaving Jim free to resume his walk. He had not gone many steps, however, before he heard his name called, and turning round, beheld no less a person than Mr Bursfield hurrying towards him. He waited for the old gentleman to come up. It was the first time that Jim had known him to venture beyond the limits of his own grounds. The circumstance was as puzzling as it was unusual.

"Will you permit me a short conversation with you, Mr Standerton?" Bursfield began. "I recognised your voice as you bade Miss Decie goodbye, and hurried after you in the hope of catching you up."

For a moment he hoped that the old man had come after him in order to make amends, and to withdraw his decision of a few nights before. This hope, however, was extinguished as soon as it was born.

"Mr Standerton," said Abraham Bursfield, "you may remember what I told you a few evenings since with regard to the proposal you did me the honour of making on behalf of my ward, Miss Decie?"

"I remember it perfectly," Jim replied. "It is scarcely likely that I should forget."

"Since then I have given the matter careful consideration, and I may say that I have found no reason for deviating from my previous decision."

"I am sorry indeed to hear that. The more so as your ward and myself are quite convinced that our affections are such as will not change or grow weaker with time. Indeed, Mr Bursfield, I have had another idea in my mind which I fancied might possibly commend itself to you and induce you to reconsider your decision. You have already told me that Miss Decie's presence is necessary to your happiness. As a proof of what a good girl she is I might inform you that, only a few moments since, she told me that she could not consent to leave you, for the reason that she felt that she owed all she possessed to you."

"I am glad that Helen has one little spark of gratitude," he answered. "It is a fact though you may not believe it, that she does owe everything to me. And now for this idea of yours."

"What I was going to propose is," said Jim, "that in six months time or so, you should permit me to marry your ward, and from that day forward should take up your residence with us."

The old man looked at him in astonishment. Then he burst into a torrent of speech.

"Such a thing is not to be thought of," he cried. "I could not consider it for a moment. It would be little short of madness. I am a recluse. I care less than nothing for such things as society; my books are my only companions. I want, and will have, no others. Besides, I could not live in that house of yours, were you to offer me all the gold in the world."

Here he grasped Jim's arm so tightly that the young man almost winced.

"I have of course heard of your father's death," he continued. "It is said that he was murdered. But, surely, knowing what you do, you are not going to be foolish enough to believe that?"

"And why should I not do so?" Jim asked in great surprise. "I can believe nothing else, for every circumstance of the case points to murder. Good heavens, Mr Bursfield, if my father was not murdered, how did he meet his death?"

The other was silent for a moment before he replied. Then he drew a step nearer, and looking up at Jim, asked in a low voice:—

"Have you forgotten what I said to you concerning the mystery of the house? Did I not tell you that one of the former owners was found dead in bed, having met his fate in identically the same way as your father did? Does not this appear significant to you? If not, your understanding must be dull."

The new explanation of the mys-

tery was so extraordinary, that Jim did not know what to say or think about it. That his father's death had resulted from any supernatural agency, had never crossed his mind.

"I fear I am not inclined to agree with you, Mr Bursfield," he said somewhat coldly. "Even if one went so far as to believe in such things, the evidence given by the doctor at the inquest, would be sufficient to refute the idea."

"In that case let us drop the subject," Bursfield answered. "My only desire was to warn you. It is rumoured in the village that on the night of your father's death, one of your domestics was confronted by the spectre known as the Black Dwarf, and fainted in consequence. My old manservant also told me this morning that your butler had seen it on another occasion. I believe the late Lord Childerbridge also saw it, as did the individual who preceded him. One died a violent death—the other abandoned the property at once. Be warned in time, Mr Standerton. For my own part, as I have said before, though it was the home of my ancestors, I would not pass a night at Childerbridge for the wealth of all the Indies."

"In that case you must be more easily frightened than I am," Jim returned. "On the two occasions you mention, the only evidence we have to rely upon is the word of a hysterical maid-servant, and the assurance of a butler, who, for all we know to the contrary, may have treated himself more liberally than usual on that particular evening, to my poor father's whisky."

"Scuff as you will," Bursfield returned, "but so far as you are concerned I have done my duty. I have given you warning, and if you do not care to profit by it, that has nothing to do with me. And now to return to the matter upon which I hastened after you this evening. I refer to your proposed marriage with my ward."

Jim said nothing, but waited for him to continue. He had a vague feeling that what he was about to hear would mean unhappiness for himself.

"I informed you the other day," Mr Bursfield continued, "that it was impossible for me to sanction such a proposal. I regret that I am still compelled to adhere to this decision. In point of fact I feel that it is necessary for me to go even further, and to say that I must for the future ask you to refrain from addressing yourself to Miss Decie at all."

"Do you mean that you refuse me permission to see her or to speak with her?" Jim asked in amazement.

"If, by seeing her, you mean holding personal intercourse with her, I must confess that you have judged the situation correctly. I am desirous of preventing Miss Decie from falling into the error of believing that she will ever be your wife."

"But, my dear sir, this is a most absurd proceeding. Why should you

object to me, in this fashion? You know nothing against me, and you are aware that I love your ward. You admitted on the last occasion that I discussed the matter with you, that Miss Decie might expect little or nothing from you at your death. Why, therefore, in the name of common sense, are you so anxious to prevent her marrying the man she loves, and who is in a position to give her all the comfort and happiness wealth and love can bestow?"

"You have heard my decision," the other replied quietly. "I repeat that on no consideration will I consent to a marriage between my ward and yourself. And as I said just now I will go even further and forbid you most positively for the future either to see or to communicate with her."

"And you will not give me your reasons for taking this extraordinary step?"

"I will not. That is all I have to say to you, and I have the honour to wish you a good evening."

"But I have not finished yet," said Jim, whose anger by this time had got the better of him. "Once and for all let me tell you this, Mr Bursfield, I have already informed you that I am desirous at any cost to make Miss Decie my wife. I may add now, that your tyrannical behaviour will only make me the more anxious to do so. If the young lady deems it incumbent upon her to await your consent before marrying me, I will listen to her and not force the matter; but give her up I certainly will not so long as I live."

"Beware, sir, I warn you, beware!" the other almost shrieked.

"If that is all you have to say to me I will bid you good evening," said Jim.

But Bursfield did not answer; he merely turned on his heel and strode back in the direction of the Dover House. Jim stood for a moment looking after his retreating figure, and when he could no longer distinguish it, turned and made his way homewards.

On reaching the Manor House he informed his sister of what had taken place between himself and Helen's guardian.

"He must be mad to treat you so," said Alice when her brother had finished. "He knows that Helen loves you; surely he cannot be so selfish as to prefer his own comfort to her happiness."

"I am afraid that is exactly what he does do," said Jim. "However, I suppose I must make allowances for him. Old age is apt to be selfish. Besides, we have to remember, as Helen says, that she owes much to him. I shall see what he says at the end of six months, and then, if he is not agreeable, take the matter into my own hands."

But though he spoke so calmly he was by no means at ease in his own mind. He was made much happier, however, by a note which was



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