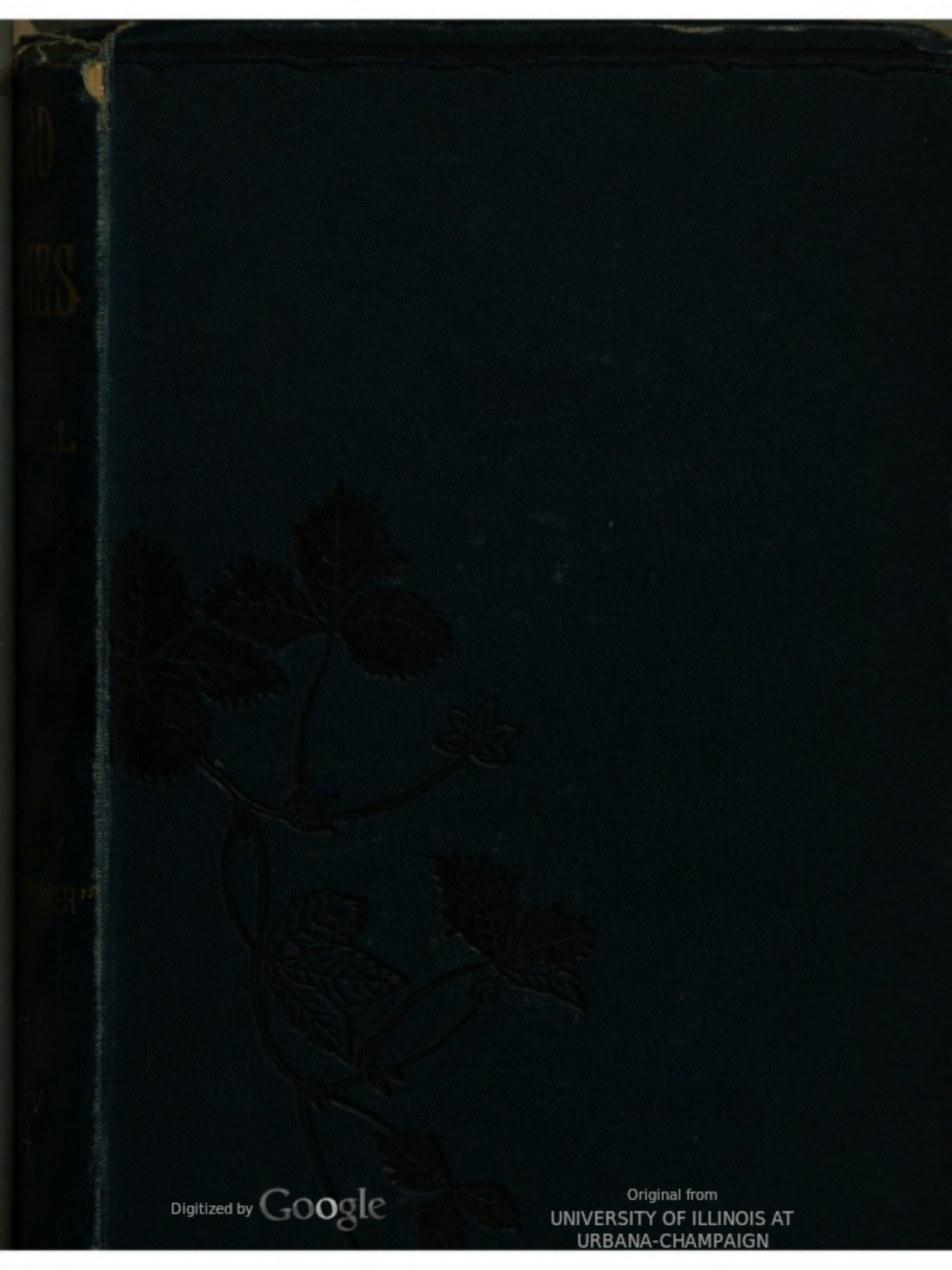

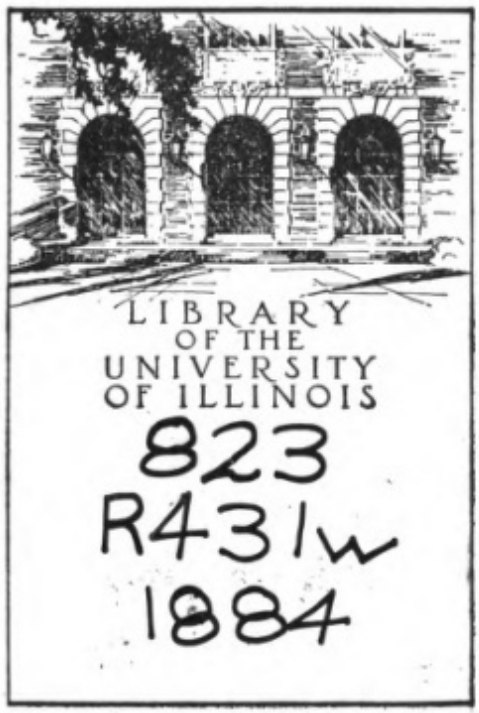

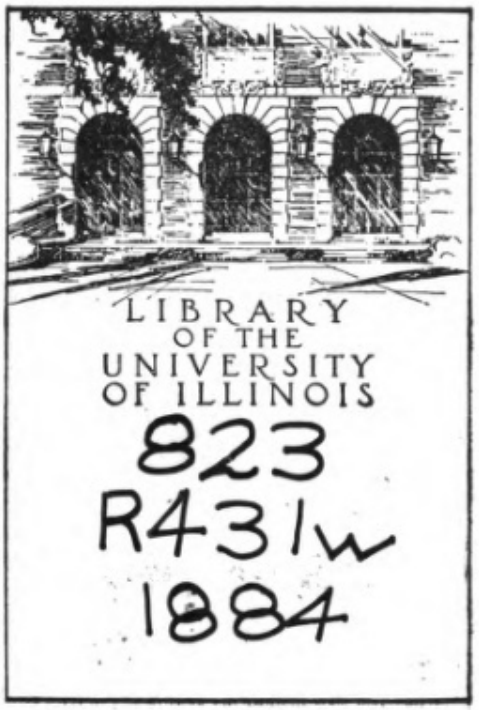

WEIRD STORIES.

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BY

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WALNUT-TREE HOUSE.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEW OWNER.

MANY years ago there stood at the corner of a street leading out of Upper Kennington Lane a great red brick house, covering a goodly area of ground, and surrounded by gardens magnificent in their proportions, when considered in relation to the populous neighbourhood mentioned.

Originally a place of considerable pretention; a gentleman's seat in the country probably when Lambeth Marsh had not a shop in the whole of it; when Vauxhall Gardens were still *in nubibus;* when no South-Western Railway was planned or thought of; when London was comparatively a very small place, and its present suburbs were mere country villages—hamlets lying quite remote from the heart of the city.

Once, the house in question had been surrounded by a small park, and at that time there

were fish-ponds in the grounds, and quite a stretch of meadow-land within the walls. Bit by bit, however, the park had been cut up into building ground and let off on building leases; the meadows were covered with bricks and mortar, shops were run up where cows once chewed the cud, and the roar and rumble of London traffic sounded about the old house and the deserted garden, formerly quiet and silent as though situated in some remote part of the country.

Many a time in the course of the generations that had come and gone, been born and quried, since the old house was built, the freehold it covered changed hands. On most estates of this kind round London there generally is a residence, which passes like a horse from buyer to buyer. When it has served one man's need it is put up for sale and bid for by another. When rows and rows of houses, and line after line of streets, have obliterated all the familiar marks, it is impossible to cultivate a sentiment as regards property; and it is unlikely that the descendants of the first possessors of Walnut-Tree House who had grown to be county folk and lived in great state, oblivious of business people, and entertaining a great contempt for trade, knew that in a very undesirable part of London there

still stood the residence where the first successful man of their family went home each day from his counting-house over against St. Mildred's Church, in The Poultry.

One very wet evening, in an autumn the leaves of which have been dead and gone this many a year, Walnut-Tree House, standing grim and lonely in the mournful twilight, looked more than ordinarily desolate and deserted.

There was not a sign of life about it; the shutters were closed—the rusty iron gates were fast locked—the approach was choked up with grass and weeds—through no chink did the light of a single candle flicker. For seven years it had been given over to rats and mice and blackbeetles; for seven years no one had been found to live in it; for seven years it had remained empty, while its owner wore out existence in fits of moody dejection or of wild frenzy in the madhouse close at hand; and now that owner was dead and buried and forgotten, and the new owner was returning to take possession. This new owner had written to his lawyers, or rather he had written to the lawyers of his late relative, begging them to request the person in charge of the house to have rooms prepared for his arrival; and, when the train drew into the station at Waterloo, he

was met by one of the clerks in Messrs. Timpson and Co.'s office, who, picking out Mr. Stainton, delivered to that gentleman a letter from the firm, and said he would wait and hear if there were any message in reply.

Mr. Stainton read the letter—looked at the blank flyleaf—and then, turning back to the first words, read what his solicitors had to say all through once again, this time aloud.

"The house has stood empty for more than seven years," he said, half addressing the clerk and half speaking to himself. "Must be damp and uninhabitable; there is no one living on the premises. Under these circumstances we have been unable to comply with your directions, and can only recommend you to go to an hotel till we are able personally to discuss future arrangements."

"Humph," said the new owner, after he had finished. I'll go and take a look at the place anyhow. Is it far from here, do you know?" he asked, turning to the young man from Timpsons'.

"No, Sir; not very far."

"Can you spare time to come over there with me?" continued Mr. Stainton.

The young man believed that he could, adding, "If you want to go into the house we had better call for the key. It is at an Estate Agent's in the Westminster Bridge Road."

"I cannot say I have any great passion for hotels," remarked the new owner, as he took his seat in the cab.

"Indeed, Sir."

"No; either they don't suit me, or I don't suit them. I have led a wild sort of life: not much civilisation in the bush, or at the gold-fields, I can tell you. Rooms full of furniture, houses where a fellow must keep to the one little corner he has hired, seem to choke me. Then I have not been well, and I can't stand noise and the trampling of feet. I had enough of that on board ship; and I used to lie awake at nights and think how pleasant it would be to have a big house all to myself, to do as I liked in."

"Yes, Sir," agreed the clerk.

"You see, I have been used to roughing it, and I can get along very well for a night without servants."

"No doubt, Sir."

"I suppose the house is in substantial repair —roof tight, and all that sort of thing?"

"I can't say, I am sure, Sir."

"Well, if there is a dry corner where I can spread a rug, I shall sleep there to-night."

The clerk coughed. He looked out of the window, and then he looked at Messrs. Timpsons' client.

"I do not think,"—he began, apologetically, and then stopped.

"You don't think what?" asked the other.

"You'll excuse me, Sir, but I don't think—I really do not think, if I were you, I'd go to that house to-night."

"Why not?"

"Well, it has not been slept in for nearly seven years, and it must be blue mouldy with damp; and if you have been ill, that is all the more reason you should not run such a risk. And, besides—"

"Besides"—suggested Mr. Stainton; "Out with it! Like a postscript, no doubt, that 'besides' holds the marrow of the argument."

"The house has stood empty for years, Sir, because—there is no use in making any secret of it—the place has a bad name."

"What sort of a bad name—unhealthy?"

"Oh, no!"

"Haunted?"

The clerk inclined his head. "You have hit it, Sir," he said.

"And that is the reason no one has lived there?"

"We have been quite unable to let the house on that account."

"The sooner it gets unhaunted, then, the better," retorted Mr. Stainton. "I shall cer-

tainly stop there to-night. You are not disposed to stay and keep me company, I suppose?"

With a little gesture of dismay the clerk drew back. Certainly, this was one of the most unconventional of clients. The young man from Timpsons' did not at all know what to make of him.

"A rough sort of fellow," he said afterwards, when describing the new owner; "boorish; never mixed with good society, that sort of thing."

He did not in the least understand this rich man, who treated him as an equal, who objected to hotels, who didn't mind taking up his abode in a house where not even a drunken charwoman could be induced to stop, and who calmly asked a stranger on whom he had never set eyes before—a clerk in the respectable office of Timpson and Co., a young fellow anxious to rise in the world, careful as to his associates, particular about the whiteness of his shirts and the sit of his collar and the cut of his coats—to "rough" things with him in that dreadful old dungeon, where, perhaps, he might even be expected to light a fire.

Still, he did not wish to offend the new owner. Messrs. Timpson expected him to be a profitable client; and to that impartial firm the

money of a boor would, he knew, seem as good as the money of a Count.

"I am very sorry," he stammered; "should only have felt too much honoured; but the fact is—previous engagement—"

Mr. Stainton laughed.

"I understand," he said. "Adventures are quite as much out of your line as ghosts. And now tell me about this apparition. Does the 'old man' walk?"

"Not that I ever heard of," answered the other.

"Is it, then, the miserable beggar who tried to do for himself?"

"It is not the late Mr. Stainton, I believe," said the young man, in a tone which mildly suggested that reference to a client of Timpsons' as a "miserable beggar" might be considered bad taste.

"Then who on earth is it?" persisted Mr. Stainton.

"If you must know, Sir, it is a child—a child who has driven every tenant in succession out of the house."

The new owner burst into a hearty laugh—a laugh which gave serious offence to Timpsons' clerk.

"That is too good a joke," said Mr. Stainton. "I do not know when I heard anything so delicious."

"It is a fact, whether it be delicious or not," retorted the young man, driven out of all his former propriety of voice and demeanour by the comtemptuous ridicule this "digger" thought fit to cast on his story; "and I, for one, would not, after all I have heard about your house, pass a night in it—no, not if anybody offered me fifty pounds down."

"Make your mind easy, my friend," said the new owner, quietly. "I am not going to bid for your company. The child and I can manage, I'll be bound, to get on very comfortably by ourselves."

CHAPTER II.

THE CHILD.

IT was later on in the same evening; Mr. Stainton had an hour previously taken possession of Walnut-Tree House, dismissed his cab, bidden Timpsons' clerk good evening, and, having ordered in wood and coals from the nearest greengrocer, besides various other necessary articles from various other tradesmen, he now stood by the front gate waiting the coming of the goods purchased.

As he waited, he looked up at the house, which in the uncertain light of the street lamps appeared gloomier and darker than had been the case even in the gathering twilight.

The long rows of shuttered windows, the silent solemnity of the great trees, remnants of a once goodly avenue that had served to give its name to Walnut-Tree House; the appalling silence of everything within the place, when contrasted with the noise of passing cabs and whistling street boys, and men trudging home with unfurled umbrellas and women scudding along with draggled petticoats, might well have

impressed even an unimpressionable man, and Edgar Stainton, spite of his hard life and rough exterior, was impressionable and imaginative.

"It has an 'uncanny' look, certainly," he considered; "but is not so cheerless for a lonely man as the 'bush;' and though I am not overtired, I fancy I shall sleep more soundly in my new home than I did many a night at the gold-fields. When once I can get a good fire up I shall be all right. Now, I wonder when those coals are coming!"

As he turned once again towards the road, he beheld on its way the sack of fuel with which the nearest greengrocer said he thought he could—indeed, said he would—"oblige" him. A ton—half a ton—quarter of a ton, the greengrocer affirmed would be impossible until the next day; but a sack—yes—he would promise that. Bill should bring it round; and Bill was told to put his burden on the truck, and twelve bundles of wood, "and we'll make up the rest to-morrow," added Bill's master, with the air of one who has conferred a favour.

In the distance Mr. Stainton descried a very grimy Bill, and a very small boy, coming along with the truck leisurely, as though the load had been Herculean.

Through the rain he watched the pair ad-

vancing, and greeted Bill with a glad voice of welcome.

"So you've come at last; that's right. Better late than never. Bring them this way, I'll have this small lot shot in the kitchen for the night."

"Begging your pardon, Sir," answered Bill, "I don't think you will—that is to say not by me. As I told our governor, I'll take 'em to the house as you've sold 'em to the house, but I won't set a foot inside it."

"Do you mean to say you are going to leave them out on the pavement," asked Mr. Stainton

"Well, Sir, I don't mind taking them to the front door if it'll be a convenience."

"That will do. You are a brave lot of people in these parts I must say."

"As for that," retorted Bill, with sack on back and head bent forward, "I dare say we're as brave about here as where you come from."

"It is not impossible," retorted Mr. Stainton; "there are plenty of cowards over there too."

With a feint of being very much afraid, Bill, after he had shot his coals on the margin of the steps, retreated from the door, which stood partly open, and when the boy who brought up the wood was again out with the truck, said, putting his knuckles to his eyebrows—

"Beg pardon, Sir, but I suppose you couldn't give us a drop of beer? Very wet night, Sir."

"No, I could not," answered Mr. Stainton, very decidedly. "I shall have to shovel these coals into the house myself; and, as for the night, it is as wet for me as it is for you."

Nevertheless, as Bill shuffled along the short drive—shuffling wearily—like a man who, having nearly finished one day's hard work, was looking forward to beginning another hard day in the morning, the new owner relented.

"Here," he said, picking out a sixpence to give him, "it isn't your fault, I suppose, that you believe in old women's tales."

"Thank you kindly, Sir," Bill answered; "I am sure I am extremely obliged; but if I was in your shoes I wouldn't stop in that house—you'll excuse me, Sir, meaning no offence—but I wouldn't; indeed I wouldn't."

"It seems to have got a good name, at any rate," thought Mr. Stainton, while retracing his steps to the banned tenement. "Let us see what effect a fire will have in routing the shadows."

He entered the house, and, striking a match, lighted some candles he had brought in with him from a neighbouring oil-shop.

Years previously the gas company, weary of receiving no profit from the house, had taken

away their meter and cut off their connections. The water supply was in the same case, as Mr. Stainton, going round the premises before it grew quite dark, had discovered.

Of almost all small articles of furniture easily broken by careless tenants, easily removed by charwomen, the place was perfectly bare; and as there were no portable candlesticks in which to place the lights, the new tenant was forced to make his illumination by the help of some dingy mirrors provided with sconces, and to seek such articles as he needed by the help of a guttering mould candle stuck in the neck of a broken bottle. After an inspection of the ground-floor rooms he decided to take up his quarters for the night in one which had evidently served as a library.

In the centre of the apartment there was the table covered with leather. Around the walls were bookcases, still well filled with volumes, too uninviting to borrow, too valueless in the opinion of the ignorant to steal. In one corner, stood a bureau, where the man, who for so many years had been dead even while living, kept his letters and papers.

The floor was bare. Once a Turkey carpet had been spread over the centre of the polished oak boards, but it lay in its wonted place no longer; between the windows hung a convex

mirror, in which the face of any human being looked horrible and distorted; whilst over the mantle-shelf, indeed, forming a portion of it, was a long, narrow glass, bordered by a frame ornamented with a tracery of leaves and flowers. The ceiling was richly decorated, and, spite of the dust and dirt and neglect of years, all the appointments of the apartment he had selected gave Edgar Stainton the impression that it was a good thing to be the owner of such a mansion, even though it did chance to be situated as much out of the way of fashionable London as the diggings whence he had come.

"And there is not a creature but myself left to enjoy it all," he mused, as he sat looking into the blazing coals. "My poor mother, how she would have rejoiced to-night, had she lived to be the mistress of so large a place! And my father, what a harbour this would have seemed after the storms that buffeted him! Well, they are better off, I know; and yet I cannot help thinking how strange it all is—that I, who went away a mere beggar, should come home rich, to be made richer, and yet stand so utterly alone that in the length and breadth of England I have not a relative to welcome me or to say I wish you joy of your inheritance."

He had eaten his frugal supper, and now, pushing aside the table on which the remains of

his repast were spread, he began walking slowly up and down the room, thinking over the past and forming plans for the future.

Buried in reflection, the fire began to die down without his noticing the fact; but a sudden feeling of chilliness at length causing him instinctively to look towards the hearth, he threw wood into the grate, and, while the flames went blazing up the wide chimney, piled on coals as though he desired to set the house alight.

While he was so engaged there came a knock at the door of the room—a feeble, hesitating knock, which was repeated more than once before it attracted Mr. Stainton's attention.

When it did, being still busy with the fire, and forgetting he was alone in the house, he called out, "Come in."

Along the panels there stole a rustling sort of touch, as if someone were feeling uncertainly for the handle—a curious noise, as of a weak hand fumbling about the door in the dark; then, in a similar manner, the person seeking admittance tried to turn the lock.

"Come in, can't you?" repeated Mr. Stainton; but even as he spoke he remembered he was, or ought to be, the sole occupant of the mansion.

He was not alarmed, he was too much accus-

tomed to solitude and danger for that; but he rose from his stooping position and instinctively seized his revolver, which he had chanced, while unpacking some of his effects, to place on the top of the bureau.

"Come in, whoever you are," he cried; but seeing the door remained closed, though the intruder was evidently making futile efforts to open it, he strode half-way across the room, and then stopped, amazed.

For suddenly the door opened, and there entered, shyly and timidly, a little child—a child with the saddest face mortal ever beheld; a child with wistful eyes and long ill-kept hair; a child poorly dressed, wasted and worn, and with the mournfullest expression on its countenance that face of a child ever wore.

"What a hungry little beggar," thought Mr. Stainton. "Well, young one, and what do you want here?" he added, aloud.

The boy never answered, never took the slightest notice of his questioner, but simply walked slowly round the room, peering into all the corners, as if looking for something. Searching the embrasures of the windows, examining the recesses beside the fire-place, pausing on the hearth to glance under the library table, and finally, when the doorway was reached once more, turning to survey the

contents of the apartment with an eager and yet hopeless scrutiny.

"What *is* it you want, my boy?" asked Mr. Stainton, glancing as he spoke at the child's poor thin legs, and short, shabby frock, and shoes wellnigh worn out, and arms bare and lean and unbeautiful. "Is it anything I can get for you?"

Not a word—not a whisper; only for reply a glance of the wistful brown eyes.

"Where do you come from, and who do you belong to?" persisted Mr. Stainton.

The child turned slowly away.

"Come, you shall not get off so easily as you seem to imagine," persisted the new owner, advancing towards his visitor. "You have no business to be here at all; and before you go you must tell me how you chance to be in this house, and what you expected to find in this room."

He was close to the doorway by this time, and the child stood on the threshold, with its back towards him.

Mr. Stainton could see every detail of the boy's attire—his little plaid frock, which he had outgrown, the hooks which fastened it; the pinafore, soiled and crumpled, tied behind with strings broken and knotted; in one place the skirt had given from the body, and a piece of

thin, poor flannel showed that the child's under habiliments matched in shabbiness his exterior garments.

"Poor little chap," thought Mr. Stainton. "I wonder if he would like something to eat. Are you hungry, my lad?"

The child turned and looked at him earnestly, but answered never a word.

"I wonder if he is dumb," marvelled Mr. Stainton; and, seeing he was moving away, put out a hand to detain him. But the child eluded his touch, and flitted out into the hall and up the wide staircase with swift, noiseless feet.

Only waiting to snatch a candle from one of the sconces, Mr. Stainton pursued as fast as he could follow.

Up the easy steps he ran at the top of his speed; but, fast as he went, the child went faster. Higher and higher he beheld the tiny creature mounting, then, still keeping the same distance between them, it turned when it reached the top story and trotted along a narrow corridor with rooms opening off to right and left. At the extreme end of this passage a door stood ajar. Through this the child passed, Mr. Stainton still following.

"I have run you to earth at last," he said, entering and closing the door. "Why, where has the boy gone?" he added, holding the

candle above his head and gazing round the dingy garret in which he found himself.

The room was quite empty. He examined it closely, but could find no possible outlet save the door, and a skylight which had evidently not been opened for years.

There was no furniture in the apartment, except a truckle bedstead, a rush-bottomed chair, and a rickety washstand. No wardrobe, or box, or press, where even a kitten might have lain concealed.

"It is very strange," muttered Mr. Stainton, as he turned away baffled. "Very strange!" he repeated, while he walked along the corridor. "I don't understand it at all," he decided, proceeding slowly down the topmost flight of stairs; but then all at once he stopped.

"IT IS THE CHILD!" he exclaimed aloud, and the sound of his own voice woke strange echoes through the silence of that desolate house. "IT IS THE CHILD!" and he descended the principal staircase very slowly, with bowed head, and his grave thoughtful face graver and more thoughtful than ever.

CHAPTER III.

SEEKING FOR INFORMATION.

IT was enough to make any man look grave; and as time went on the new owner of Walnut-Tree House found himself pondering continually as to what the mystery could be which attached to the child he had found in possession of his property, and who had already driven tenant after tenant out of the premises. Inclined at first to regard the clerk's story as a joke, and his own experience on the night of his arrival a delusion, it was impossible for him to continue incredulous when he found, even in broad daylight, that terrible child stealing down the staircase and entering the rooms, looking—looking, for something it never found.

Never after the first horror was overpast did Mr. Stainton think of leaving the house in consequence of that haunting presence which had kept the house tenantless. It would have been worse than useless, he felt. With the ocean stretching between, his spirit would still be in the old mansion at Lambeth—his mental vision

would always be watching the child engaged in the weary search to which there seemed no end —that never appeared to produce any result.

At bed and at board he had company, or the expectation of it. No apartment in the building was secure from intrusion. It did not matter where he lay; it did not matter where he ate; between sleeping and waking, between breakfast and dinner whenever the notion seized it, the child came gliding in, looking, looking, looking, and never finding; not lingering longer than was necessary to be certain the object of its search was absent, but wandering hither and thither, from garret to kitchen, from parlour to bed-chamber, in that quest which still seemed fresh as when first begun.

Mr. Stainton went to his solicitors as the most likely persons from whom to obtain information on the subject, and plunged at once into the matter.

"Who is the child supposed to be, Mr. Timpson?" he asked, making no secret that he had seen it.

"Well, that is really very difficult to say," answered Mr. Timpson.

"There *was* a child once, I suppose?—a real child—flesh and blood?"

Mr. Timpson took off his spectacles and wiped them.

"There were two; yes, certainly, in the time of Mr. Felix Stainton—a boy and a girl."

"In that house?"

"In that house. They survived him."

"And what became of them?"

"The girl was adopted by a relation of her father's, and the—boy—died."

"Oh! the boy died, did he? Do you happen to know what he died of?"

"No; I really do not. There was nothing wrong about the affair, however, if that is what you are thinking of. There never was a hint of that sort."

Mr. Stainton sat silent for a minute; then he said—

"Mr. Timpson, I can't shake off the idea that somehow there has been foul play with regard to those children. Who were they?"

"Felix Stainton's grandchildren. His daughter made a low marriage, and he cast her adrift. After her death the two children were received at Walnut-Tree House on sufferance—fed and clothed, I believe, that was all; and when the old man died the heir-at-law permitted them to remain."

"Alfred Stainton?"

"Yes; the unhappy man who became insane. His uncle died intestate, and he consequently succeeded to everything but the personalty

which was very small, and of which these children had a share."

"There was never any suspicion, you say, of foul play on the part of the late owner?"

"Dear, dear! No; quite the contrary."

"Then you cannot throw the least light on the mystery?"

"Not the least; I wish I could."

For all that, Mr. Stainton carried away an impression Mr. Timpson knew more of the matter than he cared to tell; and was confirmed in this opinion by a chance remark from Mr. Timpson's partner, whom he met in the street almost immediately after.

"Why can't you let the matter rest, Mr. Stainton?" asked the Co. with some irritation of manner when he heard the object of their client's visit. "What is the use of troubling your head about a child who has been lying in Lambeth Churchyard these dozen years? Take my advice, have the house pulled down and let or sell the ground for building. You ought to get a pot of money for it in that neighbourhood. If there were a wrong done it is too late to set it right now."

"What wrong do you refer to?" asked Mr. Stainton eagerly, thinking he had caught Timpson's partner napping. But that gentleman was too sharp for him.

"I remarked *if* there were a wrong done—not that there had been one," he answered: and then, without a pause, added, "We shall hope to hear from you that you have decided to follow our advice."

But Mr. Stainton shook his head.

"I will not pull down the old house just yet," he said, and walked slowly away.

"There is a mystery behind it all," he considered. "I must learn more about these children. Perhaps some of the local tradespeople may recollect them."

But the local tradespeople for the most part were new comers—or else had not supplied "the house."

"So far as ever I could understand," said one "family butcher," irascibly sharpening his knife as he spoke, "there was not much to supply. *That* custom was not worth speaking of. I hadn't it, so what I am saying is not said on my own account. A scrag end of neck of mutton—a bit of gravy beef— two pennyworth of sheep's liver—that was the sort of thing. Misers, sir, misers; the old gentleman bad, and the nephew worse. A bad business, first and last. But what else could be expected? When people as can afford to live on the fat of the land never have a sirloin inside their doors, why, worse must come of it. No, sir, I never set eyes on

the children to my knowledge; I only knew there were children by hearing one of them was dead, and that it was the poorest funeral ever crossed a decent threshold."

"Poor little chap," thought Mr. Stainton, looking straight out into the street for a moment; then added, "lest the family misfortunes should descend to me, you had better send round a joint to Walnut-Tree House."

"Law, sir, are you the gentleman as is living there. I begyour pardon, I am sure, but I have been so bothered with questions in regard of that house and those children that I forget my manners when I talk about them. A joint, sir, what would you please to have?"

The new owner told him: and while counting out the money to pay for it Mr. Parker remarked—

"There is only one person I can think of, sir, likely to be able to give you any information about the matter."

"And that is"—

"Mr. Hennings, at the Pedlar's Dog. He had some acquaintance with the old lady as was housekeeper both to Mr. Felix Stainton and the gentleman that went out of his mind."

Following this advice, the new owner repaired to the Pedlar's Dog, where (having on his first arrival at Walnut-Tree House ordered some

creature comforts from that well-known public) he experienced a better reception than had been accorded to him by Mr. Parker.

"Do I know Walnut-Tree House, sir?" said Mr. Hennings, repeating his visitor's question. "Well, yes, rather. Why, you might as well ask me, do I know the Pedlar's Dog. As boy and man I can remember the old house for close on five-and-fifty years. I remember Mr. George Stainton; he used to wear a skull-cap and knee-breeches. There was an orchard then where Stainton Street is now, and his whole time was taken up in keeping the boys out of it. Many a time I have run from him."

"Did you ever see anything of the boy and girl who were there, after Mr. Alfred succeeded to the property?—Felix Stainton's grandchildren, I mean," asked the new owner, when a pause in Mr. Hennings' reminiscences enabled him to take his part in the conversation.

"Well, sir, I may have seen the girl, but I can't bring it to my recollection: the boy I do remember, however. He came over here two or three times with Mrs. Toplis, who kept house for both Mr. Staintons, and I took notice of him, both because he looked so peaky and old-fashioned, and also on account of the talk about him."

"There was talk about him, then?"

"Bless you, yes, sir; as much talk while he was living as since he died. Everybody thought he ought to have been the heir."

"Why?" enquired the new owner.

"Because there was a will made leaving the place to him.'

Here was information.Mr. Stainton's heart seemed to stand still for a second and then leap on with excitement.

"Who made the will?"

"The grandfather, Felix Stainton, to be sure; who else should make it?"

"I did not mean that. Was it not drawn out by a solicitor?"

"Oh! yes—now I understand you, sir. The will was drawn right enough by Mr. Quinance, in the Lambeth Road, a very clever lawyer."

"Not by Timpson, then? How was that?"

"The old man took the notion of making it late one night, and so Mrs. Toplis sent to the nearest lawyer she knew of."

"Yes; and then"—

"Well, the will was made and signed and witnessed, and everything regular; and from that day to this no one knows what has become of it."

"How very strange."

"Yes, sir, it is more than strange—unaccountable. At first Mr. Quinance was suspected of

having given it up to Mr. Alfred; but Mrs. Toplis and Quinance's clerk—he has succeeded to the business now—say that old Felix insisted upon keeping it himself. So, whether he destroyed it or the nephew got hold of it, Heaven only knows; for no man living does, I think."

"And the child—the boy I mean?"

"If you want to hear all about him, sir, Mrs. Toplis is the one to tell you. If you have a mind to give a shilling to a poor old lady who always did try to keep herself respectable, and who, I will say, paid her way honourable as long as she had a sixpence to pay it honourable with, you cannot do better than go and see Mrs Toplis, who will talk to you for hours about the time she lived at Walnut-Tree House."

And with this delicate hint that his minutes were more valuable then the hours of Mrs. Toplis, Mr. Hennings would have closed the interview, but that his visitor asked where he should be able to find the housekeeper.

"A thousand pardons!" he answered, with an air; "forgetting the very cream and marrow of it, wasn't I? Mrs. Toplis, sir, is to be found in Lambeth Workhouse—and a pity, too."

Edgar Stainton turned away, heart-sick. Was this all wealth had done for his people and those connected with them?

No man seemed to care to waste a moment in speaking about their affairs; no one had a good word for, or kindly memory of them. The poorest creature he met in the streets might have been of more use in the world then they. The house they had lived in mentioned as if a curse rested on the place; themselves only recollected as leaving everything undone which it befitted their station to do. An old servant allowed to end her days in the workhouse!

"Heaven helping me," he thought, "I will not so misuse the wealth which has been given me."

The slight put upon his family tortured and made him wince, and the face of the dead boy who ought to have been the heir seemed, as he hurried along the streets, to pursue and look on him with a wistful reproach.

"If I cannot lay that child I shall go mad," he said, almost audibly, "as mad, perhaps, as Alfred Stainton." And then a terrible fear took possession of him. The horror of that which is worse than any death, made for the moment this brave, bold man, more timid than a woman.

"God preserve my senses," he prayed, and then determinedly putting that phantom behind him, he went on to the Workhouse.

CHAPTER IV.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

MR. STAINTON had expected to find Mrs. Toplis a decrepid crone, bowed with age and racked with rheumatism, and it was therefore like a gleam of sunshine streaming across his path to behold a woman, elderly, certainly, but carrying her years with ease, ruddy cheeked, clear eyed, upright as a dart, who welcomed him with respectful enthusiasm.

"And so you are Mr. Edgar, the son of the dear old Captain," she said, after the first greetings and explanations were over, after she had wiped her eyes and uttered many ejaculations of astonishment and expressions of delight. "Eh! I remember him coming to the house just after he was married, and telling me about the sweet lady his wife. I never heard a gentleman so proud; he never seemed tired of saying the words, "My wife."

"She was a sweet lady," answered the new owner.

"And so the house has come to you, sir? Well, I wish you joy. I hope you may have

peace, and health, and happiness, and prosperity in it. And I don't see why you should not—no, indeed, sir."

Edgar Stainton sat silent for a minute, thinking how he should best approach his subject.

"Mrs. Toplis," he began at last, plunging into the very middle of the difficulty, "I want you to tell me about it. I have come here on purpose to ask you what it all means."

The old woman covered her face with her hands, and he could see that she trembled violently.

"You need not be afraid to speak openly to me," he went on. "I am quite satisfied there was some great wrong done in the house, and I want to put it right, if it lies in my power to do so. I am a rich man. I was rich when the news of this inheritance reached me, and I would gladly give up the property to-morrow if I could only undo whatever may have been done amiss."

Mrs. Toplis shook her head.

"Ah, sir; you can't do that," she said. "Money can't bring back the dead to life; and, if it could, I doubt if even you could prove as good a friend to the poor child sleeping in the churchyard yonder as his Maker did when he took him out of this troublesome world. It was just soul rending to see the boy the last few

months of his life. I can't bear to think of it, sir! Often at night I wake in a fright, fancying I still hear the patter, patter of his poor little feet upon the stair."

"Do you know, it is a curious thing, but he doesn't frighten me," said Mr. Stainton; "that is when I am in the house; although when I am away from it the recollection seems to dog every step I take."

"What?" cried Mrs. Toplis; "*have you then seen him, too?* There! what am I talking about? I hope, sir, you will forgive my foolishness."

"I see him constantly," was the calm reply.

"I wonder what it means!—I wonder what it can mean!" exclaimed the housekeeper, wringing her hands in dire perplexity and dismay.

"I do not know," answered the new owner, philosophically; "but I want you to help me to find out. I suppose you remember the children coming there at first?"

"Well, sir—well, they were poor Miss Mary's son and daughter. She ran away, you know, with a Mr. Fenton—made a very poor match; but I believe he was kind to her. When they were brought to us, a shivering little pair, my master was for sending them here. Ay, and he would have done it, too, if somebody had not said he could be made to pay for their keep.

You never saw brother and sister so fond of one another—never. They were twins. But, Lor'! the boy was more like a father to the little girl than aught else. He'd have kept an apple a month, rather than eat it unless she had half; and the same with everything. I think it was seeing that—watching the love they had, he for her and she for him, coming upon them unsuspected, with their little arms round one another's necks, made the old gentleman alter his mind about leaving the place to Mr. Alfred; for he said to me, one day, thoughtful like, pointing to them, 'Wonderful fond, Toplis!' and I answered, 'Yes, sir; for all the world like the Babes in the Wood;' not thinking of how lonely that meant——

"Shortly afterwards he took to his bed; and while he was lying there, no doubt, better thoughts came to him, for he used to talk about his wife and Miss Mary, and the Captain, your father, sir, and ask if the children were gone to bed, and such like—things he never used to mention before.

"So when he made the will Mr. Quinance drew out I was not surprised—no, not a bit. Though before that time he always spoke of Mr. Alfred as his heir, and treated him as such."

"That will never was found," suggested Mr.

Stainton, anxious to get at another portion of the narrative.

"Never, sir; we hunted for it high and low Perhaps I wronged him, but I always thought Mr. Alfred knew what became of it. After the old gentleman's death the children were treated shameful—shameful. I don't mean beaten, or that like; but half-starved and neglected. He would not buy them proper clothes, and he would not suffer them to wear decent things if anybody else bought them. It was just the same with their food. I durs'n't give them even a bit of bread and butter unless it was on the sly; and, indeed, there was not much to give in that house. He turned regular miser. Hoarding came into the family with Mrs. Lancelot Stainton, Mr. Alfred's great grandmother, and they went on from bad to worse, each one closer and nearer than the last, begging your pardon for saying so, sir; but it is the truth."

"I fear so, Mrs. Toplis," agreed the man, who certainly was neither close nor near.

"Well, sir, at last, when the little girl was about six years old, she fell sick, and we didn't think she would get over the illness. While she was about at her worst, Mrs. May, her father's sister, chanced to be stopping up in London, and, as Mr. Alfred refused to let a doctor inside his doors, she made no more ado but wrapped

the child up in blankets, sent for a cab, and carried her off to her own lodgings. Mr. Alfred made no objection to that. All he said as she went through the hall was,

"'If you take her now, remember, you must keep her.'

"'Very well,' she replied, 'I will keep her.'"

"And the boy? the boy?" cried Mr. Stainton, in an agony of impatience.

"I am coming to him, sir, if you please. He just dwindled away after his sister and he were parted, and died in December, as she was taken away in the July."

"What did he die of?"

"A broken heart, sir. It seems a queer thing to say about a child; but if ever a heart was broken his was. At first he was always wandering about the house looking for her, but towards the end he used to go up to his room and stay there all by himself. At last I wrote to Mrs. May, but she was ill when the letter got to her, and when she did come up he was dead. My word, she talked to Mr. Alfred! I never heard any one person say so much to another. She declared he had first cheated the boy of his inheritance, and then starved him to death; but that was not true, the child broke his heart fretting after his sister."

"Yes; and when he was dead——"

"Sir, I don't like to speak of it, but as true as I am sitting here, the night he was put in his coffin he came pattering down just as usual, looking, looking for his sister. I went straight upstairs, and, if I had not seen the little wasted body lying there still and quiet, I must have thought he had come back to life. We were never without him afterwards, never; that, and nothing else, drove Mr. Alfred mad. He used to think he was fighting the child and killing it. When the worst fits were on him he tried to trample it under foot or crush it up in a corner, and then he would sob and cry, and pray for *it* to be taken away. I have heard he recovered a little before he died, and said his uncle told him there was a will leaving all to the boy, but he never saw such a paper. Perhaps it was all talk, though, or that he was still raving."

"You are quite positive there was no foul play as regards the child?" asked Mr. Stainton, sticking to that question pertinaciously.

"Certain, Sir; I don't say but Mr. Alfred wished him dead. That is not murder, though."

"I am not clear about that," answered Mr. Stainton.

CHAPTER V.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON.

MR. STAINTON was trying to work off some portion of his perplexities by pruning the grimy evergreens in front of Walnut-Tree House, and chopping away at the undergrowth of weeds and couch grass which had in the course of years matted together beneath the shrubs, when his attention was attracted to two ladies who stood outside the great iron gate looking up at the house.

"It seems to be occupied now," remarked the elder, turning to her companion. "I suppose the new owner is going to live here. It looks just as dingy as ever; but you do not remember it, Mary."

"I think I do," was the answer. "As I look the place grows familiar to me. I do recollect some of the rooms, I am sure, just like a dream, as I remember Georgie. What I would give to have a peep inside."

At this juncture the new owner emerged from amongst the bushes, and, opening the gate,

asked if the ladies would like to look over the place.

The elder hesitated; whilst the younger whispered, "Oh, aunt, pray do!"

"Thank you," said Mrs. May to the stranger, whom she believed to be a gardener; "but perhaps Mr. Stainton might object."

"No; he wouldn't, I know," declared the new owner. "You can go through the house if you wish. There is no one in it. Nobody lives there except myself."

"Taking charge, I suppose?" suggested Mrs. May, blandly.

"Something of that sort," he answered.

"I do not think he is a caretaker," said the girl, as she and her relative passed into the old house together.

"What do you suppose he is, then?" asked her aunt.

"Mr. Stainton himself."

"Nonsense, child!" exclaimed Mrs. May, turning, nevertheless, to one of the windows, and casting a curious glance towards the new owner, who was now, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, walking idly up and down the drive.

After they had been all over the place, from hall to garret, with a peep into this room and a glance into that, Mrs. May found the man who puzzled her leaning against one of the pillars

of the porch, waiting, apparently, for their re-appearance.

"I am sure we are very much obliged to you," she began, with a certain hesitation in her manner.

"Pray do not mention it," he said.

"This young lady has sad associations connected with the house," Mrs. May proceeded, still doubtfully feeling her way.

He turned his eyes towards the girl for a moment, and, though her veil was down, saw she had been weeping.

"I surmised as much," he replied. "She is Miss Fenton, is she not?"

"Yes, certainly," was the answer; "and you are——"

"Edgar Stainton," said the new owner, holding out his hand.

"I am all alone here," he went on, after the first explanations were over. "But I can manage to give you a cup of tea. Pray do come in, and let me feel I am not entirely alone in England."

Only too well pleased, Mrs. May complied, and ten minutes later the three were sitting round a fire, the blaze of which leapt and flickered upon the walls and over the ceiling, casting bright lights on the dingy mirrors and the dark oak shelves.

"It is all coming back to me now," said the girl softly, addressing her aunt. "Many an hour George and I have sat on that hearth seeing pictures in the fire."

But she did not see something which was even then standing close beside her, and which the new owner had witnessed approach with a feeling of terror that precluded speech.

It was the child! The child searching about no longer for something it failed to find, but standing at the girl's side still and motionless, with its eyes fixed upon her face, and its poor, wasted figure nestling amongst the folds of her dress.

"Thank Heaven she does not see it!" he thought, and drew his breath, relieved.

No; she did not see it—though its wan cheek touched her shoulder, though its thin hand rested on her arm, though through the long conversation which followed it never moved from her side, nor turned its wistful eyes from her face.

When she went away—when she took her fresh young beauty out of the house it seemed to gladden and light up—the child followed her to the threshold; and then in an instant it vanished, and Mr. Stainton watched for its flitting up the staircase all in vain.

But later on in the evening, when he was sit-

ting alone beside the fire, with his eyes bent on the glowing coals, and perhaps seeing pictures there, as Mary said she and her brother had done in their lonely childhood, he felt conscious, even without looking round, that the boy was there once again.

And when he fell to thinking of the long, long years during which the dead child had kept faithful and weary watch for his sister, searching through the empty rooms for one who never came, and then bethought him of the sister to whom her dead brother had become but the vaguest of memories, of the summers and winters during the course of which she had probably forgotten him altogether, he sighed deeply; and heard his sigh echoed behind him in the merest faintest whisper.

More, when he, thinking deeply about his newly found relative and trying to recall each feature in her face, each tone of her voice, found it impossible to dissociate the girl grown to womanhood from the child he had pictured to himself as wandering about the old house in company with her twin-brother, their arms twined together, their thoughts one, their sorrows one, their poor pleasures one—he felt a touch on his hand, and knew the boy was beside him, looking with wistful eyes into the firelight, too.

But when he turned he saw that sadness clouded those eyes no longer. She was found; the lost had come again to meet a living friend on the once desolate hearth, and up and down the wide desolate staircase those weary little feet pattered no longer.

The quest was over, the search ended; into the darksome corners of that dreary house the child's glance peered no longer.

She was come! Through years he had kept faithful watch for her, but the waiting was ended now.

That night Edgar Stainton slept soundly; and yet when morning dawned he knew that once in the darkness he wakened suddenly and was conscious of a small, childish hand smoothing his pillow and touching his brow.

Sweet were the dreams which visited his rest subsequently; sweet as ought to be the dreams of a man who had said to his own soul—and meant to hold fast by words he had spoken—

"As I deal by that orphan girl, so may God deal with me!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MISSING WILL.

ERE long there were changes in the old house. Once again Mrs. Toplis reigned there, but this time with servants under her—with maids she could scold and lads she could harass.

The larder was well plenished, the cellars sufficiently stocked; windows formerly closely shuttered now stood open to admit the air; and on the drive grass grew no longer—too many footsteps passed that way for weeds to flourish.

It was Christmas-time. The joints in the butchers' shops were gay with ribbons; the grocers' windows were tricked out to delight the eyes of the children, young and old, who passed along. In Mr. May's house up the Clapham Road all was excitement, for the whole of the family—father, mother, grown-up sons and daughters—girls still in short frocks and boys in round jackets—were going to spend Christmas Eve with their newly-found cousin, whom they had adopted as a relation with an unanimity as rare as charming.

Cousin Mary also was going—Cousin Mary had got a new dress for the occasion, and was having her hair done up in a specially effective manner by Cissie May, when the toilette proceedings were interrupted by half a dozen young voices announcing—

"A gentleman in the parlour wants to see you, Mary. Pa says you are to make haste and come down immediately."

Obediently Mary made haste as bidden and descended to the parlour, to find there the clerk from Timpsons', who met Mr. Stainton on his arrival in London.

His business was simple, but important. Once again he was the bearer of a letter from Timpson and Co., this time announcing to Miss Fenton that the will of Mr Felix Stainton had been found, and that under it she was entitled to the interest of ten thousand pounds, secured upon the houses in Stainton Street.

"Oh! aunt, oh! uncle, how rich we shall be," cried the girl, running off to tell her cousins; but the uncle and aunt looked grave. They were wondering how this will might effect Edgar Stainton.

While they were still talking it over—after Timpsons' young man had taken his departure, Mr. Edgar Stainton himself arrived.

"Oh, it's all right!" he said, in answer to

their questions. "I found the will in the room where Felix Stainton died. Walnut-Tree House and all the freeholds were left to the poor little chap who died, chargeable with Mary's ten thousand pounds, five hundred to Mrs. Toplis, and a few other legacies. Failing George, the property was to come to me. I have been to Quinance's successor, and found out the old man and Alfred had a grievous quarrel, and that in consequence he determined to cut him out altogether. Where is Mary? I want to wish her joy."

Mary was in the little conservatory, searching for a rose to put in her pretty brown hair.

He went straight up to her, and said,

"Mary, dear, you have had one Christmas gift to-night, and I want you to take another with it."

"What is it, Cousin Edgar?" she asked; but when she looked in his face she must have guessed his meaning, for she drooped her head, and began pulling her sweet rose to pieces.

He took the flower, and with it her fingers.

"Will you have me, dear?" he asked. "I am but a rough fellow, I know; but I am true, and I love you dearly."

Somehow, she answered him as he wished, and all spent a very happy evening in the old house.

Once, when he was standing close beside her

in the familiar room, hand clasped in hand, Edgar Stainton saw the child looking at them.

There was no sorrow or yearning in his eyes as he gazed—only a great peace, a calm which seemed to fill and light them with an exquisite beauty.

THE OPEN DOOR.

SOME people do not believe in ghosts. For that matter some people do not believe in anything. There are persons who even affect incredulity concerning that open door at Ladlow Hall. They say it did not stand wide open—that they could have shut it; that the whole affair was a delusion; that they are sure it must have been a conspiracy; that they are doubtful whether there is such a place as Ladlow on the face of the earth; that the first time they are in Meadowshire they will look it up.

That is the manner in which this story, hitherto unpublished, has been greeted by my acquaintances. How it will be received by strangers is quite another matter. I am going to tell what happened to me exactly as it happened, and readers can credit or scoff at the tale as it pleases them. It is not necessary for me to find faith and comprehension in addition to a

ghost story, for the world at large. If such were the case, I should lay down my pen.

Perhaps, before going further, I ought to premise there was a time when I did not believe in ghosts either. If you had asked me one summer's morning years ago when you met me on London Bridge, if I held such appearances to be probable or possible, you would have received an emphatic "No" for answer.

But, at this rate, the story of the Open Door will never be told; so we will, with your permission, plunge into it immediately.

"Sandy!"

"What do you want?"

"Should you like to earn a sovereign?"

"Of course I should."

A somewhat curt dialogue, but we were given to curtness in the office of Messrs. Frimpton, Frampton, and Fryer, auctioneers and estate agents, St. Benet's Hill, City.

(My name is not Sandy or anything like it, but the other clerks so styled me because of a real or fancied likeness to some character, an ill-looking Scotchman, they had seen at the theatre. From this it may be inferred I was not handsome. Far from it. The only ugly specimen in my family, I knew I was very plain; and it chanced to be no secret to me either that I felt grievously discontented with my lot.

I did not like the occupation of clerk in an auctioneer's office, and I did not like my employers.

We are all of us inconsistent, I suppose, for it was a shock to me to find they entertained a most cordial antipathy to me.)

"Because," went on Parton, a fellow, my senior by many years—a fellow who delighted in chaffing me, "I can tell you how to lay hands on one."

"How?" I asked, sulkily enough, for I felt he was having what he called his fun.

"You know that place we let to Carrison, the tea-dealer?"

Carrison was a merchant in the China trade, possessed of fleets of vessels and towns of warehouses; but I did not correct Parton's expression, I simply nodded.

"He took it on a long lease, and he can't live in it; and our governor said this morning he wouldn't mind giving anybody who could find out what the deuce is the matter, a couple of sovereigns and his travelling expenses."

"Where is the place?" I asked, without turning my head; for the convenience of listening I had put my elbows on the desk and propped up my face with both hands.

"Away down in Meadowshire, in the heart of the grazing country."

"And what *is* the matter?" I further inquired.

"A door that won't keep shut."

"What?"

"A door that will keep open, if you prefer that way of putting it," said Parton.

"You are jesting."

"If I am, Carrison is not, or Fryer either. Carrison came here in a nice passion, and Fryer was in a fine rage; I could see he was, though he kept his temper outwardly. They have had an active correspondence it appears, and Carrison went away to talk to his lawyer. Won't make much by that move, I fancy."

"But tell me," I intreated, "why the door won't keep shut?"

"They say the place is haunted."

"What nonsense!" I exclaimed.

"Then you are just the person to take the ghost in hand. I thought so while old Fryer was speaking."

"If the door won't keep shut," I remarked, pursuing my own train of thought, "why can't they let it stay open?"

"I have not the slightest idea. I only know there are two sovereigns to be made, and that I give you a present of the information."

And having thus spoken, Parton took down

his hat and went out, either upon his own business or that of his employers.

There was one thing I can truly say about our office, we were never serious in it. I fancy that is the case in most offices nowadays; at all events it was the case in ours. We were always chaffing each other, playing practical jokes, telling stupid stories, scamping our work, looking at the clock, counting the weeks to next St. Lubbock's Day, counting the hours to Saturday.

For all that we were all very earnest in our desire to have our salaries raised, and unanimous in the opinion no fellows ever before received such wretched pay. I had twenty pounds a year, which I was aware did not half provide for what I eat at home. My mother and sisters left me in no doubt on the point, and when new clothes were wanted I always hated to mention the fact to my poor worried father.

We had been better off once, I believe, though I never remember the time. My father owned a small property in the country, but owing to the failure of some bank, I never could understand what bank, it had to be mortgaged; then the interest was not paid, and the mortgagees foreclosed, and we had nothing left save the half-pay of a major, and about a hundred a year which my mother brought to the common fund.

We might have managed on our income, I think, if we had not been so painfully genteel; but we were always trying to do something quite beyond our means, and consequently debts accumulated, and creditors ruled us with rods of iron.

Before the final smash came, one of my sisters married the younger son of a distinguished family, and even if they had been disposed to live comfortably and sensibly she would have kept her sisters up to the mark. My only brother, too, was an officer, and of course the family thought it necessary he should see we preserved appearances.

It was all a great trial to my father, I think, who had to bear the brunt of the dunning and harass, and eternal shortness of money; and it would have driven me crazy if I had not found a happy refuge when matters were going wrong at home at my aunt's. She was my father's sister, and had married so "dreadfully below her" that my mother refused to acknowledge the relationship at all.

For these reasons and others, Parton's careless words about the two sovereigns stayed in my memory.

I wanted money badly—I may say I never had sixpence in the world of my own—and I thought if I could earn two sovereigns I

might buy some trifles I needed for myself, and present my father with a new umbrella. Fancy is a dangerous little jade to flirt with, as I soon discovered.

She led me on and on. First I thought of the two sovereigns; then I recalled the amount of the rent Mr. Carrison agreed to pay for Ladlow Hall; then I decided he would gladly give more than two sovereigns if he could only have the ghost turned out of possession. I fancied I might get ten pounds—twenty pounds. I considered the matter all day, and I dreamed of it all night, and when I dressed myself next morning I was determined to speak to Mr. Fryer on the subject.

I did so—I told that gentleman Parton had mentioned the matter to me, and that if Mr. Fryer had no objection, I should like to try whether I could not solve the mystery. I told him I had been accustomed to lonely houses, and that I should not feel at all nervous; that I did not believe in ghosts, and as for burglars, I was not afraid of them.

"I don't mind your trying," he said at last. "Of course you understand it is no cure, no pay. Stay in the house for a week; if at the end of that time you can keep the door shut, locked, bolted, or nailed up, telegraph for me, and I will go down—if not,

come back. If you like to take a companion, there is no objection."

I thanked him, but said I would rather not have a companion.

"There is only one thing, sir, I should like," I ventured.

"And that——?" he interrupted.

"Is a little more money. If I lay the ghost, or find out the ghost, I think I ought to have more than two sovereigns."

"How much more do you think you ought to have?" he asked.

His tone quite threw me off my guard, it was so civil and conciliatory, and I answered boldly:

"Well, if Mr. Carrison cannot now live in the place perhaps he wouldn't mind giving me a ten-pound note."

Mr. Fryer turned, and opened one of the books lying on his desk. He did not look at, or refer to it in any way—I saw that.

"You have been with us how long, Edlyd?" he said.

"Eleven months to-morrow," I replied.

"And our arrangement was, I think, quarterly payments, and one month's notice on either side?"

"Yes, sir." I heard my voice tremble, though I could not have said what frightened me.

"Then you will please to take your notice now. Come in before you leave this evening, and I'll pay you three months' salary, and then we shall be quits."

"I don't think I quite understand," I was beginning, when he broke in:

"But I understand, and that's enough. I have had enough of you and your airs, and your indifference, and your insolence here. I never had a clerk I disliked as I do you. Coming and dictating terms, forsooth! No, you shan't go to Ladlow. Many a poor chap"—(he said, "devil")—"would have been glad to earn half a guinea, let alone two sovereigns; and perhaps you may be before you are much older."

"Do you mean that you won't keep me here any longer, sir?" I asked in despair. "I had no intention of offending you. I——"

"Now you need not say another word," he interrupted, "for I won't bandy words with you. Since you have been in this place you have never known your position, and you don't seem able to realise your position. When I was foolish enough to take you, I did it on the strength of your connexions, but your connexions have done nothing for me. I have never had a penny out of any one of your friends—if you have any. You'll not do any good in

business for yourself or anybody else, and the sooner you go to Australia—or"—(here he was very emphatic)—"and get off these premises, the better I shall be pleased."

I did not answer him—I could not. He had worked himself to a white heat by this time, and evidently intended I should leave his premises then and there. He counted five pounds out of his cash-box, and, writing a receipt, pushed it and the money across the table, and bade me sign and be off at once.

My hand trembled so I could scarcely hold the pen, but I had presence of mind enough left to return one pound ten in gold, and three shillings and fourpence I had, quite by the merest good fortune, in my waistcoat pocket.

"I can't take wages for work I haven't done," I said, as well as sorrow and passion would let me. "Good-morning," and I left his office and passed out among the clerks.

I took from my desk the few articles belonging to me, left the papers it contained in order, and then, locking it, asked Parton if he would be so good as to give the key to Mr. Fryer.

"What's up?" he asked. "Are you going?"

I said, "Yes, I am going."

"Got the sack?"

"That is exactly what has happened."

"Well, I'm ———!" exclaimed Mr. Parton.

I did not stop to hear any further commentary on the matter, but bidding my fellow-clerks good-bye, shook the dust of Frimpton's Estate and Agency Office from off my feet.

I did not like to go home and say I was discharged, so I walked about aimlessly, and at length found myself in Regent Street. There I met my father, looking more worried than usual.

"Do you think, Phil," he said (my name is Theophilus), "you could get two or three pounds from your employers."

Maintaining a discreet silence regarding what had passed, I answered:

"No doubt I could."

"I shall be glad if you will then, my boy," he went on, "for we are badly in want of it."

I did not ask him what was the special trouble. Where would have been the use? There was always something—gas, or water, or poor-rates, or the butcher, or the baker, or the bootmaker. Well, it did not much matter, for we were well accustomed to the life; but, I thought, "if ever I marry, we will keep within our means." And then there rose up before me a vision of Patty, my cousin—the blithest, prettiest, most useful, most sensible girl that ever made sunshine in a poor man's house.

My father and I had parted by this time, and

I was still walking aimlessly on, when all at once an idea occurred to me. Mr. Fryer had not treated me well or fairly. I would hoist him on his own petard. I would go to head-quarters, and try to make terms with Mr. Carrison direct.

No sooner thought than done. I hailed a passing omnibus, and was ere long in the heart of the city. Like other great men, Mr. Carrison was difficult of access—indeed, so difficult of access, that the clerk to whom I applied for an audience told me plainly I could not see him at all. I might send in my message if I liked, he was good enough to add, and no doubt it would be attended to. I said I should not send in a message, and was then asked what I would do. My answer was simple. I meant to wait till I did see him. I was told they could not have people waiting about the office in this way.

I said I supposed I might stay in the street. "Carrison didn't own that," I suggested.

The clerk advised me not to try that game, or I might get locked up.

I said I would take my chance of it.

After that we went on arguing the question at some length, and we were in the middle of a heated argument, in which several of Carrison's "young gentlemen," as they called themselves, were good enough to join, when we were all

suddenly silenced by a grave-looking individual, who authoritatively inquired:

"What is all this noise about?"

Before anyone could answer I spoke up:

"I want to see Mr. Carrison, and they won't let me."

"What do you want with Mr. Carrison?"

"I will tell that to himself only."

"Very well, say on—I am Mr. Carrison."

For a moment I felt abashed and almost ashamed of my persistency; next instant, however, what Mr. Fryer would have called my "native audacity" came to the rescue, and I said, drawing a step or two nearer to him, and taking off my hat:

"I wanted to speak to you about Ladlow Hall, if you please, sir."

In an instant the fashion of his face changed, a look of irritation succeeded to that of immobility; an angry contraction of the eyebrows disfigured the expression of his countenance.

"Ladlow Hall!" he repeated; "and what have you got to say about Ladlow Hall?"

"That is what I wanted to tell you, sir," I answered, and a dead hush seemed to fall on the office as I spoke.

The silence seemed to attract his attention, for he looked sternly at the clerks, who were not using a pen or moving a finger.

"Come this way, then," he said; abruptly; and next minute I was in his private office.

"Now, what is it?" he asked, flinging himself into a chair, and addressing me, who stood hat in hand beside the great table in the middle of the room.

I began—I will say he was a patient listener—at the very beginning, and told my story straight through. I concealed nothing. I enlarged on nothing. A discharged clerk I stood before him, and in the capacity of a discharged clerk I said what I had to say. He heard me to the end, then he sat silent, thinking.

At last he spoke.

"You have heard a great deal of conversation about Ladlow, I suppose?" he remarked.

"No, sir; I have heard nothing except what I have told you."

"And why do you desire to strive to solve such a mystery?"

"If there is any money to be made, I should like to make it, sir."

"How old are you?"

"Two-and-twenty last January."

"And how much salary had you at Frimpton's?"

"Twenty pounds a year."

"Humph! More than you are worth, I should say."

"Mr. Fryer seemed to imagine so, sir, at any rate," I agreed, sorrowfully.

"But what do you think?" he asked, smiling in spite of himself.

"I think I did quite as much work as the other clerks," I answered.

"That is not saying much, perhaps," he observed. I was of his opinion, but I held my peace.

"You will never make much of a clerk, I am afraid," Mr. Carrison proceeded, fitting his disparaging remarks upon me as he might on a lay figure. "You don't like desk-work?"

"Not much, sir."

"I should judge the best thing you could do would be to emigrate," he went on, eyeing me critically.

"Mr. Fryer said I had better go to Australia or——" I stopped, remembering the alternative that gentleman had presented.

"Or where?" asked Mr. Carrison.

"The ——, sir," I explained, softly and apologetically.

He laughed—he lay back in his chair and laughed—and I laughed myself, though ruefully.

After all, twenty pounds was twenty pounds, though I had not thought much of the salary till I lost it.

We went on talking for a long time after that; he asked me all about my father and my early life, and how we lived, and where we lived, and the people we knew; and, in fact, put more questions than I can well remember.

"It seems a crazy thing to do," he said at last; "and yet I feel disposed to trust you. The house is standing perfectly empty. I can't live in it, and I can't get rid of it; all my own furniture I have removed, and there is nothing in the place except a few old-fashioned articles belonging to Lord Ladlow. The place is a loss to me. It is of no use trying to let it, and thus, in fact, matters are at a dead lock. You won't be able to find out anything, I know, because, of course, others have tried to solve the mystery ere now; still, if you like to try you may. I will make this bargain with you. If you like to go down, I will pay your reasonable expenses for a fortnight; and if you do any good for me, I will give you a ten-pound note for yourself. Of course I must be satisfied that what you have told me is true and that you are what you represent. Do you know anybody in the city who would speak for you?"

I could think of no one but my uncle. I hinted to Mr. Carrison he was not grand enough or rich enough, perhaps, but I knew nobody else to whom I could refer him.

"What!" he said, "Robert Dorland, of Cullum Street. He does business with us. If he will go bail for your good behaviour I shan't want any further guarantee. Come along." And to my intense amazement, he rose, put on his hat, walked me across the outer office and along the pavements till we came to Cullum Street.

"Do you know this youth, Mr. Dorland?" he said, standing in front of my uncle's desk, and laying a hand on my shoulder.

"Of course I do, Mr. Carrison," answered my uncle, a little apprehensively; for, as he told me afterwards, he could not imagine what mischief I had been up to. "He is my nephew."

"And what is your opinion of him—do you think he is a young fellow I may safely trust?"

My uncle smiled, and answered. "That depends on what you wish to trust him with."

"A long column of addition, for instance."

"It would be safer to give that task to someone else."

"Oh, uncle!" I remonstrated; for I had really striven to conquer my natural antipathy to figures—worked hard, and every bit of it against the collar.

My uncle got off his stool, and said, standing with his back to the empty fire-grate:

"Tell me what you wish the boy to do, Mr.

Carrison, and I will tell you whether he will suit your purpose or not. I know him, I believe, better than he knows himself."

In an easy, affable way, for so rich a man, Mr. Carrison took possession of the vacant stool, and nursing his right leg over his left knee, answered:

"He wants to go and shut the open door at Ladlow for me. Do you think he can do that?"

My uncle looked steadily back at the speaker, and said, "I thought, Mr. Carrison, it was quite settled no one could shut it?"

Mr. Carrison shifted a little uneasily on his seat, and replied: "*I* did not set your nephew the task he fancies he would like to undertake."

"Have nothing to do with it, Phil," advised my uncle, shortly.

"You don't believe in ghosts, do you, Mr. Dorland?" asked Mr. Carrison, with a slight sneer.

"Don't you, Mr. Carrison?" retorted my uncle.

There was a pause—an uncomfortable pause—during the course of which I felt the ten pounds, which, in imagination, I had really spent, trembling in the scale. I was not afraid. For ten pounds, or half the money, I would have faced all the inhabitants of spirit land. I longed to tell them so; but something in the way