

Stories from the Diary of a Doctor.

By the Authors of "THE MEDICINE LADY."

IX.—AN OAK COFFIN.



On a certain cold morning in early spring, I was visited by two ladies, mother and daughter. The mother was dressed as a widow. She was a tall, striking-looking woman, with full, wide-open dark eyes, and a mass of rich hair turned back from a white and noble brow. Her lips were firm, her features well formed. She seemed to have plenty of character, but the deep lines of sadness under her eyes and round her lips were very remarkable. The daughter was a girl of fourteen, slim to weediness. Her eyes were dark, like her mother's, and she had an abundance of tawny brown and very handsome hair. It hung down her back below her waist, and floated over her shoulders. She was dressed, like her mother, in heavy mourning, and round her young mouth and dark, deep eyes there lingered the same inexpressible sadness.

I motioned my visitors to chairs, and waited as usual to learn the reason of their favouring me with a call.

"My name is Heathcote," said the elder lady. "I have lately lost my husband. I have come to you on account of my daughter—she is not well."

I glanced again more attentively at the young girl. I saw that she looked overstrained and nervous. Her restlessness, too, was so apparent that she could scarcely sit still, and catching up a paper-knife which stood on the table near, she began twirling it rapidly between her finger and thumb.

"It does me good to fidget with something," she said, glancing apologetically at her mother.

"What are your daughter's symptoms?" I asked.

Mrs. Heathcote began to describe them in the vague way which characterizes a certain class of patient. I gathered at last from her words that Gabrielle would not eat—she slept badly—she was weak and depressed—she took no interest in anything.

"How old is Miss Gabrielle?" I asked.

"She will be fifteen her next birthday," replied her mother.

All the while Mrs. Heathcote was speaking, the young daughter kept her eyes fixed on

the carpet—she still twirled the paper-knife, and once or twice she yawned profoundly.

I asked her to prepare for the usual medical examination. She complied without any alacrity, and with a look on her face which said plainly, "Young as I am, I know how useless all this fuss is—I only submit because I must."

I felt her pulse and sounded her heart and lungs. The action of the heart was a little weak, but the lungs were perfectly healthy. In short, beyond a general physical and mental debility, I could find nothing whatever the matter with the girl.

After a time, I rang the bell to desire my servant to take Miss Heathcote into another room, in order that I might speak to her mother alone.

The young lady went away very unwillingly. The sceptical expression on her face was more apparent than ever.

"You will be sure to tell me the exact truth?" said Mrs. Heathcote, as soon as we were alone.

"I have very little to tell," I replied. "I have examined your daughter carefully. She is suffering from no disease to which a name can be attached. She is below par, certainly; there is weakness and general depression, but a tonic ought to set all these matters right."

"I have tried tonics without avail," said Mrs. Heathcote.

"Has not your family physician seen Miss Heathcote?"

"Not lately." The widow's manner became decidedly hesitating. "The fact is, we have not consulted him since—since Mr. Heathcote's death," she said.

"When did that take place?"

"Six months ago."

Here she spoke with infinite sadness, and her face, already very pale, turned perceptibly paler.

"Is there nothing you can tell me to give me a clue to your daughter's condition? Is there anything, for instance, preying on her mind?"

"Nothing whatever."

"The expression of her face is very sad for so young a girl."



"I FELT HER PULSE."

"You must remember," said Mrs. Heathcote, "that she has lately lost her father."

"Even so," I replied; "that would scarcely account for her nervous condition. A healthy-minded child will not be overcome with grief to the serious detriment of health after an interval of six months. At least," I added, "that is my experience in ordinary cases."

"I am grieved to hear it," said Mrs. Heathcote.

She looked very much troubled. Her agitation was apparent in her trembling hands and quivering lips.

"Your daughter is in a nervous condition," I said, rising. "She has no disease at present, but a little extra strain might develop real disease, or might affect her nerves, already overstrung, to a dangerous degree. I should recommend complete change of air and scene immediately."

Mrs. Heathcote sighed heavily.

"You don't look very well yourself," I said, giving her a keen glance.

She flushed crimson.

"I have felt my sorrow acutely," she replied.

I made a few more general remarks, wrote a prescription for the daughter, and bade Mrs. Heathcote good-bye. About the same hour on the following morning I was astonished when my servant brought me a card on which was scribbled in pencil the name *Gabrielle Heathcote*, and underneath, in the same upright, but unformed hand, the words, "I want to see you most urgently."

A few moments later, Miss Gabrielle was standing in my consulting-room. Her appearance was much the same as yesterday, except that now her face was eager, watchful, and all awake.

"How do you do?" she said, holding out her hand, and blushing.

"I have ventured to come alone, and I haven't brought a fee. Does that matter?"

"Not in the least," I replied. "Pray sit down and tell me what you want."

"I would rather stand," she answered; "I feel too restless and excited to sit still. I stole away from home without letting mother know. I liked your look yesterday and determined to see you again. Now, may I confide in you?"

"You certainly may," I replied.

My interest in this queer child was a good deal aroused. I felt certain that I was right in my conjectures of yesterday, and that this young creature was really burdened with some secret which was gravely undermining her health.

"I am willing to listen to you," I continued. "You must be brief, of course, for I am a very busy man, but anything you can say which will throw light on your own condition, and so help me to cure you, will, of course, be welcome."

"You think me very nervous?" said Miss Gabrielle.

"Your nerves are out of order," I replied.

"You know that I don't sleep at night?"

"Yes."

Miss Gabrielle looked towards the door.

"Is it shut?" she asked, excitedly

"Of course it is."

She came close to me, her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper, her face turned not only white but grey.

"I can stand it no longer," she said. "I'll tell you the truth. You wouldn't sleep either if you were me: *My father isn't dead!*"

"Nonsense," I replied. "You must control such imaginings, Miss Gabrielle, or you will really get into a very unhealthy condition of mind."

"That's what mother says when I speak to her," replied the child. "But I tell you, this thing is true. My father is not dead. I know it."

"How can you possibly know it?" I asked.

"I have seen him—there!"

"You have seen your father!—but he died six months ago?"

"Yes. He died—and was buried, and I went to his funeral. But all the same he is not dead now."

"My dear young lady," I said, in as soothing a tone as I could assume, "you are the victim of what is called a hallucination. You have felt your father's death very acutely."

"I have. I loved him beyond words. He was so kind, so affectionate, so good to me. It almost broke my heart when he died. I thought I could never be happy again. Mother was as wretched as myself. There weren't two more miserable people in the wide world. It seemed impossible to either of us to smile or be cheerful again. I began to sleep badly, for I cried so much, and my eyes ached, and I did not care for lessons any more."

"All these feelings will pass," I replied; "they are natural, but time will abate their violence."

"You think so?" said the girl, with a strange smile. "Now let me go on with my story: It was at Christmas time I first saw my father. We live in an old house at Brixton. It has a walled-in garden. I was standing by my window about midnight. I had been in bed for an hour or more, but I could not sleep. The house was perfectly quiet. I got out of bed and went to the window and drew up the blind. I stood by the window and looked out into the garden, which was covered with snow. There, standing under the window, with his arms folded,

was father. He stood perfectly still, and turned his head slowly, first in the direction of my room and then in that of mother's. He stood there for quite five minutes, and then walked across the grass into the shelter of the shrubbery. I put a cloak on and rushed downstairs. I unbolted the front door and went into the garden. I shouted my father's name and ran into the shrubbery to look for him, but he wasn't there, and—I think I fainted. When I came to myself I was in bed and mother was bending over me. Her face was all blistered as if she had been crying terribly. I told her that I had just seen father, and she said it was a dream."

"So it was," I replied.

Miss Gabrielle's dark brows were knit in some pain.

"I did not think you would take that commonplace view," she responded.

"I am sorry I have offended you," I answered. "Girls like you do have bad dreams when they are in trouble, and those dreams are often so vivid, that they mistake them for realities."

"Very well, then, I have had more of those vivid dreams. I have seen my father again. The last time I saw him he was in the house. It was about a month ago. As usual, I could not sleep, and I went downstairs quite late to get the second volume of a novel which interested me. There was father walking across the passage. His back was to me. He opened the study door and went in. He shut it behind him. I rushed to it in order to open it and follow him. It was locked, and though I screamed through the key-hole, no one replied to me. Mother found me kneeling by the study door and shouting through the key-hole to father. She was up and dressed, which seemed strange at so late an hour. She took me upstairs and put me to bed, and pretended to be angry with me, but when I told her that I had seen father she burst into the most awful bitter tears and said:—

"'Oh, Gabrielle, he is dead—dead—quite dead!'

"'Then he comes here from the dead,' I said. 'No, he is not dead. I have just seen him.'

"'My poor child,' said mother, 'I must take you to a good doctor without delay. You must not get this thing on your brain.'

"'Very well,' I replied; 'I am quite willing to see Dr. Mackenzie.'

I interrupted the narrative to inquire who Dr. Mackenzie was.



"I SCREAMED THROUGH THE KEY-HOLE."

"He is our family physician," replied the young lady. "He has attended us for years."

"And what did your mother say when you proposed to see him?"

"She shivered violently, and said: 'No, I won't have him in the house.' After a time she decided to bring me to you."

"And have you had that hallucination again?" I inquired.

"It was not a hallucination," she answered, pouting her lips.

"I will humour you," I answered. "Have you seen your father again?"

"No, and I am not likely to."

"Why do you think that?"

"I cannot quite tell you—I think mother is in it. Mother is very unhappy about something, and she looks at me at times as if she were afraid of me." Here Miss Heathcote rose. "You said I was not to stay long," she remarked. "Now I have told you everything. You see that it is absolutely impossible for ordinary medicines to cure me, any more than ordinary medicines can cure mother of her awful dreams."

"I did not know that your mother dreamt badly," I said.

"She does—but she doesn't wish it spoken of. She dreams so badly, she cries out so terribly in her sleep, that she has moved from her old bedroom next to mine, to one in a distant wing of the house. Poor mother, I am sorry for her, but I am glad at least that I have had courage to tell you what I have seen. You will make it your business to find out the truth now, won't you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Why, of course, my father is alive," she retorted. "You have got to prove that he is, and to give him back to me again. I leave the matter in your hands. I know you are wise and very clever. Good-bye, good-bye!"

The queer girl left me, tears rolling down her cheeks. I was obliged to attend to other patients, but it was impossible for me to get Miss Heathcote's story out of my head. There was no doubt whatever that she

was telling me what she firmly believed to be the truth. She had either seen her father once more in the flesh, or she was the victim of a very strong hallucination. In all probability the latter supposition was the correct one. A man could not die and have a funeral and yet still be alive; but, then, on the other hand, when Mrs. Heathcote brought Gabrielle to see me yesterday, why had she not mentioned this central and principal feature of her malady? Mrs. Heathcote had said nothing whatever with regard to Gabrielle's delusions. Then why was the mother so nervous? Why did she say nothing about her own bad dreams, dreams so disturbing, that she was obliged to change her bedroom in order that her daughter should not hear her scream?

"I leave the matter in your hands!" Miss Heathcote had said. Poor child, she had done so with a vengeance. I could not get the story out of my thoughts, and so uncomfortable did the whole thing make me that I determined to pay Dr. Mackenzie a visit.

Mackenzie was a physician in very large

practice at Brixton. His name was already familiar to me—on one or two occasions I had met him in consultation. I looked up his address in the Medical Directory, and that very evening took a hansom to his house. He happened to be at home. I sent in my card and was admitted at once.

Mackenzie received me in his consulting-room, and I was not long in explaining the motive of my visit. After a few preliminary remarks, I said that I would be glad if he would favour me with full particulars with regard to Heathcote's death.

"I can easily do so," said Mackenzie. "The case was a perfectly straightforward one—my patient was consumptive, had been so for years, and died at last of hemoptysis."

"What aged man was he?" I asked.

"Not old—a little past forty—a tall, slight, good-looking man, with a somewhat emaciated face. In short, his was an ordinary case of consumption."

I told Mackenzie all about the visit which I had received from Mrs. Heathcote, and gave him a faithful version of the strange story which Miss Gabrielle Heathcote had told me that day.

"Miss Gabrielle is an excitable girl," replied the doctor. "I have had a good deal to do with her for many years, and always thought her nerves highly strung. She is evidently the victim of a delusion, caused by the effect of grief on a somewhat delicate organism. She probably inherits her father's disease. Mrs. Heathcote should take her from home immediately."

"Mrs. Heathcote looks as if she needed change almost as badly as her daughter," I answered; "but now you will forgive me if I ask you a few more questions. Will you oblige me by describing Heathcote's death as faithfully as you can?"

"Certainly," replied the physician.

He sank down into a chair at the opposite side of the hearth as he spoke.

"The death, when it came," he continued, "was, I must confess, unexpected. I had sounded Heathcote's lungs about three months previous to the time of his death seizure. Phthisis was present, but not to an advanced degree. I recommended his wintering abroad. He was a solicitor by profession, and had a good practice. I remember his asking me, with a comical rise of his brows, how he was to carry on his profession so many miles from Chancery Lane. But to come to his death. It took place six months ago, in the beginning of September. It had been a hot season, and I had just returned from my holiday. My portmanteau and Gladstone bag had been placed in the hall, and I was paying the cabman his fare, when a servant from the Heathcotes arrived, and begged of me to go immediately to her master, who was, she said, dying.

"I hurried off to the house without a moment's delay. It is a stone's throw from here. In fact, you can see the walls of the garden from

the windows of this room in the daytime. I reached the house. Gabrielle was standing in the hall. I am an old friend of hers. Her face was quite white and had a stunned expression. When she saw me she rushed to me, clasped one of my hands in both of hers, and burst into tears.

"Go and save him!" she gasped, her voice choking with sobs, which were almost hysterical.

"A lady who happened to be staying in the house came and drew the girl away into one of the sitting-rooms, and I went upstairs. I found Heathcote in his own room. He was lying on the bed—he was a ghastly sight. His face wore the sick hue of death itself; the sheet, his



"I WAS PAYING THE CABMAN HIS FARE."

hair, and even his face were all covered with blood. His wife was standing over him, wiping away the blood, which oozed from his lips. I saw, of course, immediately what was the matter. Hemoptysis had set in, and I felt that his hours were numbered.

"'He has broken a blood vessel,' exclaimed Mrs. Heathcote. 'He was standing here, preparing to go down to dinner, when he coughed violently—the blood began to pour from his mouth; I got him on the bed and sent for you. The hemorrhage seems to be a little less violent now.'

"I examined my patient carefully, feeling his pulse, which was very weak and low; I cautioned him not to speak a single word, and asked Mrs. Heathcote to send for some ice immediately. She did so. I packed him in ice and gave him a dose of ergotine. He seemed easier, and I left him, promising to return again in an hour or two. Miss Gabrielle met me in the hall as I went out.

"'Is he any better? Is there any hope at all?' she asked, as I left the house.

"'Your father is easier now,' I replied; 'the hemorrhage has been arrested. I am coming back soon. You must be a good girl and try to comfort your mother in every way in your power.'

"'Then there is no hope?' she answered, looking me full in the face.

"I could not truthfully say that there was. I knew poor Heathcote's days were numbered, although I scarcely thought the end would come so quickly."

"What do you mean?" I inquired.

"Why this," he replied. "Less than an hour after I got home, I received a brief note from Mrs. Heathcote. In it she stated that fresh and very violent hemorrhage had set in almost immediately after I left, and that her husband was dead."

"And——" I continued.

"Well, that is the story. Poor Heathcote had died of hemoptysis."

"Did you see the body after death?" I inquired, after a pause.

"No—it was absolutely unnecessary—the cause of death was so evident. I attended the funeral, though. Heathcote was buried at Kensal Green."

I made no comment for a moment or two.

"I am sorry you did not see the body after death," I said, after a pause.

My remark seemed to irritate Mackenzie. He looked at me with raised brows.

"Would you have thought it necessary to do so?" he asked. "A man known to be consumptive dies of violent hemorrhage of

the lungs. The family are in great trouble—there is much besides to think of. Would you under the circumstances have considered it necessary to refuse to give a certificate without seeing the body?"

I thought for a moment.

"I make a rule of always seeing the body," I replied; "but, of course, you were justified, as the law stands. Well, then, there is no doubt Heathcote is really dead?"

"Really dead?" retorted Mackenzie. "Don't you understand that he has been in his grave for six months?—That I practically saw him die?—That I attended his funeral? By what possible chance can the man be alive?"

"None," I replied. "He is dead, of course. I am sorry for the poor girl. She ought to leave home immediately."

"Girls of her age often have delusions," said Mackenzie. "I doubt not this will pass in time. I am surprised, however, that the Heathcotes allowed the thing to go on so long. I remember now that I have never been near the house since the funeral. I cannot understand their not calling me in."

"That fact puzzles me also," I said. "They came to me, a total stranger, instead of consulting their family physician, and Mrs. Heathcote carefully concealed the most important part of her daughter's malady. It is strange altogether; and, although I can give no explanation whatever, I am convinced there is one if we could only get at it. One more question before I go, Mackenzie. You spoke of Heathcote as a solicitor: has he left his family well off?"

"They are not rich," replied Mackenzie; "but as far as I can tell, they don't seem to want for money. I believe their house, Ivy Hall is its name, belongs to them. They live there very quietly, with a couple of maid-servants. I should say they belonged to the well-to-do middle classes."

"Then money troubles cannot explain the mystery?" I replied.

"Believe me, there is no mystery," answered Mackenzie, in an annoyed voice.

I held out my hand to wish him good-bye, when a loud peal at the front door startled us both. If ever there was frantic haste in anything, there was in that ringing peal.

"Someone wants you in a hurry," I said to the doctor.

He was about to reply, when the door of the consulting-room was flung wide open, and Gabrielle Heathcote rushed into the room.

"Mother is very ill," she exclaimed. "I think she is out of her mind. Come to her at once."



'GABRIELLE HEATHCOTE RUSHED INTO THE ROOM.'

She took Mackenzie's hand in hers
 "There isn't a minute to lose," she said, "she may kill herself. She came to me with a carving-knife in her hand; I rushed away at once for you. The two servants are with her now, and they are doing all they can; but, oh! pray, do be quick."

At this moment Gabrielle's eyes rested on me. A look of relief and almost ecstasy passed over her poor, thin little face.

"You are here!" she exclaimed. "You will come, too? Oh, how glad I am."

"If Dr. Mackenzie will permit me," I replied, "I shall be only too pleased to accompany him."

"By all means come, you may be of the greatest use," he answered.

We started at once. As soon as we left the house Gabrielle rushed from us.

"I am going to have the front door open for you both when you arrive," she exclaimed. She disappeared as if on the wings of the wind.

"That is a good girl," I said, turning to the other doctor.

"She has always been deeply attached to both her parents," he answered.

We did not either of us say another word until we got to Ivy Hall. It was a rambling old house, with numerous low rooms and a big entrance-hall. I could fancy that in the summer it was cheerful enough, with its large,

walled-in garden. The night was a dark one, but there would be a moon presently.

Gabrielle was waiting in the hall to receive us.

"I will take you to the door of mother's room," she exclaimed.

Her words came out tremblingly, her face was like death. She was shaking all over. She ran up the stairs before us, and then down a long passage which led to a room a little apart from the rest of the house.

"I told you mother wished to sleep in a room as far away from me as possible," she said, flashing a glance into my face as she spoke.

I nodded in reply. We opened the door and went in. The sight which met our eyes was one with which most medical men are familiar.

The patient was lying on the bed in a state of violent delirium. Two maid-servants were bending over her, and evidently much exciting her feelings in their efforts to hold her down. I spoke at once with authority.

"You can leave the room now," I said—"only remain within call in case you are wanted."

They obeyed instantly, looking at me with surprised glances, and at Mackenzie with manifest relief.

I shut the door after them and approached the bed. One glance showed that Mrs.

Heathcote was not mad in the ordinary sense, but that she was suffering at the moment from acute delirium. I put my hand on her forehead: it burned with fever. Her pulse was rapid and uneven. Mackenzie took her temperature, which was very nearly a hundred and four degrees. While we were examining her she remained quiet, but presently, as we stood together and watched her, she began to rave again.

"What is it, Gabrielle? No, no, he is quite dead, child. I tell you I saw the men screw his coffin down. He's dead—quite dead. Oh, God! oh, God! yes, dead, dead!"

She sat up in bed and stared straight before her.

"You mustn't come here so often," she said, looking past us into the centre of the room, and addressing someone whom she seemed to see with distinctness, "I tell you it isn't safe. Gabrielle suspects. Don't come so often—I'll manage some other way. Trust me. Do trust me. You know I won't let you starve. Oh, go away, go away."

She flung herself back on the bed and pressed her hands frantically to her burning eyes.

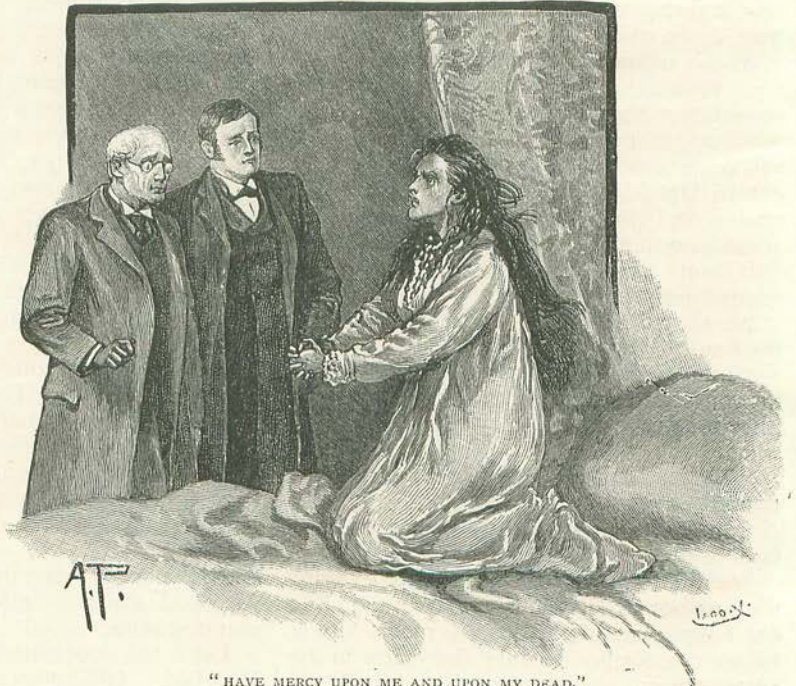
"Your father has been dead six months now, Gabrielle," she said, presently, in a changed voice.

"No one was ever more dead. I tell you I saw him die; he was buried, and you went to his funeral." Here again her voice altered. She sat upright and motioned with her hand. "Will you bring the coffin in here, please, into this room? Yes; it seems a nice coffin—well finished. The coffin is made of oak. That is right. Oak lasts. I can't bear coffins that crumble away very quickly. This is a good one—you have taken pains with it—I am pleased. Lay him in gently.

He is not very heavy, is he? You see how worn he is. Consumption!—yes, consumption. He had been a long time dying, but at the end it was sudden. Hemorrhage of the lungs. We did it to save Gabrielle, and to keep away—what, what, *what* did we want to keep away?—Oh, yes, dishonour! The—the——" Here she burst into a loud laugh.

"You don't suppose, you undertaker's men, that I'm going to tell you what we did it for? Dr. Mackenzie was there—he saw him just at the end. Now you have placed him nicely in his coffin, and you can go. Thank you, you can go now. I don't want you to see his face. A dead face is too sacred. You must not look on it. He is peaceful, only pale, very pale. All dead people look pale. Is he as pale as most dead people? Oh, I forgot—you can't see him. And as cold? Oh, yes, I think so, quite. You want to screw the coffin down, of course, of course—I was forgetting. Now, be quick about it. Why, do you know, I was very nearly having him buried with the coffin open! Screw away now, screw away. Ah, how that noise grates on my nerves. I shall go mad if you are not quick. Do be quick—be *quick*, and leave me alone with my dead. Oh, God, with my dead, my dead!"

The wretched woman's voice sank to a



"HAVE MERCY UPON ME AND UPON MY DEAD."

hoarse whisper. She struggled on to her knees, and folding her hands, began to pray.

"God in Heaven have mercy upon me and upon my dead," she moaned. "Now, now, now! where's the screwdriver? Oh, heavens, it's lost, it's lost! We are undone! My God, what is the matter with me? My brain reels. Oh, my God, my God!"

She moaned fearfully. We laid her back on the bed. Her mutterings became more rapid and indistinct. Presently she slept.

"She must not be left in this condition," said Mackenzie to me. "It would be very bad for Gabrielle to be with her mother now. And those young servants are not to be trusted. I will go and send in a nurse as soon as possible. Can you do me the inestimable favour of remaining here until a nurse arrives?"

"I was going to propose that I should, in any case, spend the night here," I replied.

"That is more than good of you," said the doctor.

"Not at all," I answered; "the case interests me extremely."

A moment or two later Mackenzie left the house. During his absence Mrs. Heathcote slept, and I sat and watched her. The fever raged very high—she muttered constantly in her terrible dreams, but said nothing coherent. I felt very anxious about her. She had evidently been subjected to a most frightful strain, and now all her nature was giving way. I dared not think what her words implied. My mission was at present to do what I could for her relief.

The nurse arrived about midnight. She was a sensible, middle-aged woman, very strong too, and evidently accustomed to fever patients. I gave her some directions, desired her to ring a certain bell if she required my assistance, and left the room. As I went slowly downstairs I noticed the moon had risen. The house was perfectly still—the sick woman's moans could not be heard beyond the distant wing of the house where she slept. As I went downstairs I remembered Gabrielle's story about the moonlit garden and her father's figure standing there. I felt a momentary curiosity to see what the garden was like, and, moving aside a blind, which concealed one of the lobby windows, looked out. I gave one hurried glance and started back. Was I, too, the victim of illusion? Standing in the garden was the tall figure of a man with folded arms. He was looking away from me, but the light fell on his face: it was cadaverous and ghastly white; his hat was off; he moved into a deep

shadow. It was all done in an instant—he came and went like a flash.

I pursued my way softly downstairs. This man's appearance seemed exactly to coincide with Mackenzie's description of Heathcote; but was it possible, in any of the wonderful possibilities of this earth, that a man could rise from his coffin and walk the earth again?

Gabrielle was waiting for me in the cheerful drawing-room. A bright fire burned in the grate, there were candles on brackets, and one or two shaded lamps placed on small tables. On one table, a little larger than the rest, a white cloth was spread. It also contained a tray with glasses, some claret and sherry in decanters, and a plate of sandwiches.

"You must be tired," said Gabrielle. "Please have a glass of wine, and please eat something. I know those sandwiches are good—I made them myself."

She pressed me to eat and drink. In truth, I needed refreshment. The scene in the sick room had told even on my iron nerves, and the sight from the lobby window had almost taken my breath away.

Gabrielle attended on me as if she were my daughter. I was touched by her solicitude, and by the really noble way in which she tried to put self out of sight. At last she said, in a voice which shook with emotion:—

"I know, Dr. Halifax, that you think badly of mother."

"Your mother is very ill indeed," I answered.

"It is good of you to come and help her. You are a great doctor, are you not?"

I smiled at the child's question.

"I want you to tell me something about the beginning of your mother's illness," I said, after a pause. "When I saw her two days ago, she scarcely considered herself ill at all—in fact, you were supposed to be the patient."

Gabrielle dropped into the nearest chair.

"There is a mystery somewhere," she said, "but I cannot make it out. When I came back, after seeing you to-day, mother seemed very restless and troubled. I thought she would have questioned me about being so long away, and ask me at least what I had done with myself. Instead of that, she asked me to tread softly. She said she had such an intolerable headache that she could not endure the least sound. I saw she had been out, for she had her walking boots on, and they were covered with mud. I tried to coax her to eat something, but she would not, and as I saw she really wished to be alone, I left her.

"At tea-time, our parlour-maid, Peters, told me that mother had gone to bed and had given directions that she was on no account to be disturbed. I had tea alone, and then came in here and made the place as bright and comfortable as I could. Once or twice before, since my father's death, mother has suffered from acute headaches, and has gone to bed; but when they got better, she has dressed and come downstairs again. I thought she might like to do so to-night, and that she would be pleased to see a bright room and everything cheerful about her.

"I got a story-book and tried to read, but my thoughts were with mother, and I felt dreadfully puzzled and anxious. The time seemed very long too, and I heartily wished that the night were over. I went upstairs about eight o'clock, and listened outside mother's door. She was moaning and talking to herself. It seemed to me that she was saying dreadful things. I quite shuddered as I listened. I knocked at the door, but there was no answer. Then I turned the handle and tried to enter, but the door was locked.

I went downstairs again, and Peters came to ask me if I would like supper. She was still in the room, and I had not made up my mind whether I could eat anything or not, when I heard her give a short scream, and turning round, I saw mother standing in the room in her nightdress. She had the carving-knife in her hand.

"'Gabrielle,' she said, in a quiet voice, but with an awful look in her eyes, 'I want you to tell me the truth. Is there any blood on my hands?'

"'No, no, mother,' I answered.

"She gave a deep sigh, and looked at them as if she were Lady Macbeth.

"'Gabrielle,' she said again, 'I can't

live any longer without your father. I have made this knife sharp, and it won't take long.'

"Then she turned and left the room. Peters ran for cook, and they went upstairs after her, and I rushed for Dr. Mackenzie."

"It was a fearful ordeal for you," I said, "and you behaved very bravely; but you must not think too much about your mother's condition, nor about any words which she happened to say. She is highly feverish at present, and is not accountable for her actions. Sit down now, please, and take a glass of wine yourself."

"No, thank you—I never take wine."

"I'm glad to hear you say so, for in that case a glass of this good claret will do wonders for you. Here, I'm going to pour one out—now drink it off at once."

She obeyed me with a patient sort of smile. She was very pale, but the wine brought some colour into her cheeks.

"I am interested in your story," I said, after a pause. "Particularly in what you told me about your poor father. He must have been an interesting man, for you to treasure his memory so deeply. Do you mind describing him to me?"

She flushed up when I spoke. I saw that tears were very near her eyes, and she bit her lips to keep back emotion.

"My father was like no one else," she said. "It is impossible for me to make a picture of him for one who has not seen him."

"But you can at least tell me if he were tall or short, dark or fair, old or young?"

"No, I can't," she said, after another pause.

"He was just father. When you love your father, he has a kind of eternal youth to you, and you don't discriminate his features. If you are his only child,



"IS THERE ANY BLOOD ON MY HANDS?"

his is just the one face in all the world to you. I find it impossible to describe the face, although it fills my mind's eye, waking and sleeping. But, stay, I have a picture of him. I don't show it to many, but you shall see it."

She rushed out of the room, returning in a moment with a morocco case. She opened it, and brought over a candle at the same time so that the light should fall on the picture within. It represented a tall, slight man, with deep-set eyes and a very thin face. The eyes were somewhat piercing in their glance; the lips were closely set and firm; the chin was cleft. The face showed determination. I gave it a quick glance, and, closing the case, returned it to Gabrielle.

The face was the face of the man I had seen in the garden.

My patient passed a dreadful night. She was no better the next morning. Her temperature was rather higher, her pulse quicker, her respiration more hurried. Her ravings had now become almost incoherent. Mackenzie and I had an anxious consultation over her. When he left the house I accompanied him.

"I am going to make a strange request of you," I said. "I wish for your assistance, and am sure you will not refuse to give it to me. In short, I want to take immediate steps to have Heathcote's coffin opened."

I am quite sure Mackenzie thought that I was mad. He looked at me, opened his lips as if to speak, but then waited to hear my next words.

"I want to have Heathcote's body exhumed," I said. "If you will listen to me, I will tell you why."

I then gave him a graphic account of the man I had seen in the garden.

"There is foul play somewhere," I said, in conclusion. "I have been dragged into this thing almost against my will, and now I am determined to see it through."

Mackenzie flung up his hands.

"I don't pretend to doubt your wisdom," he said; "but to ask me gravely to assist you to exhume the body of a man who died of consumption six months ago, is enough to take my breath away. What reason can you possibly give to the authorities for such an action?"

"That I have strong grounds for believing that the death never took place at all," I replied. "Now, will you co-operate with me in this matter, or not?"

"Oh, of course, I'll co-operate with you," he answered. "But I don't pretend to say that I like the business."

We walked together to his house, talking over the necessary steps which must be taken to get an order for exhumation. Mackenzie promised to telegraph to me as soon as ever this was obtained, and I was obliged to hurry off to attend to my own duties. As I was stepping into my hansom I turned to ask the doctor one more question.

"Have you any reason to suppose that Heathcote was heavily insured?" I asked.

"No; I don't know anything about it," he answered.

"You are quite sure there were no money troubles anywhere?"

"I do not know of any; but that fact amounts to nothing, for I was not really intimate with the family, and, as I said yesterday evening, never entered the house until last night from the day of the funeral. I have never *heard* of money troubles; but, of course, they might have existed."

"As soon as ever I hear from you, I will make an arrangement to meet you at Kensal Green," I replied, and then I jumped into the hansom and drove away.

In the course of the day I got a telegram acquainting me with Mrs. Heathcote's condition. It still remained absolutely unchanged, and there was, in Mackenzie's opinion, no necessity for me to pay her another visit. Early the next morning, the required order came from the coroner. Mackenzie wired to apprise me of the fact, and I telegraphed back, making an appointment to meet him at Kensal Green on the following morning.

I shall not soon forget that day. It was one of those blustering and intensely cold days which come oftener in March than any other time of the year. The cemetery looked as dismal as such a place would on the occasion. The few wreaths of flowers which were scattered here and there on newly-made graves were sodden and deprived of all their frail beauty. The wind blew in great gusts, which were about every ten minutes accompanied by showers of sleet. There was a hollow moaning noise distinctly audible in the intervals of the storm.

I found, on my arrival, that Mackenzie was there before me. He was accompanied by one of the coroner's men and a police-constable. Two men who worked in the cemetery also came forward to assist. No one expressed the least surprise at our strange errand. Around Mackenzie's lips, alone, I read an expression of disapproval.

Kensal Green is one of the oldest cemeteries which surround our vast Metropolis,

and the Heathcotes' burying-place was quite in the oldest portion of this God's acre. It was one of the hideous, ancient, rapidly-going-out-of-date vaults. A huge brick erection was placed over it, at one side of which was the door of entrance.

The earth was removed, the door of the vault opened, and some of the men went down the steps, one of them holding a torch, in order to identify the coffin. In a couple of minutes' time it was borne into the light of day. When I saw it I remembered poor Mrs. Heathcote's wild ravings.

"A good, strong oak coffin, which wears well," she had exclaimed.

Mackenzie and I, accompanied by the police-constable and the coroner's man, followed the bearers of the coffin to the mortuary.

As we were going there, I turned to ask Mackenzie how his patient was.

He shook his head as he answered me.

"I fear the worst," he replied. "Mrs. Heathcote is very ill indeed. The fever rages high and is like a consuming fire. Her temperature was a hundred and five this morning."

"I should recommend packing her in sheets wrung out of cold water," I answered. "Poor woman!—how do you account for this sudden illness, Mackenzie?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Shock of some sort," he answered. Then he continued: "If she really knew of this day's work, it would kill her off pretty quickly. Poor soul," he added, "I hope it may never reach her ears."

We had now reached the mortuary. The men who had borne the coffin on their shoulders lowered it on to a pair of trestles. They then took turn-screws out of their pockets, and in a business-like and callous manner unscrewed the lid. After doing this they left the mortuary, closing the door behind them.

The moment we found ourselves alone, I

said a word to the police-constable, and then going quickly up to the coffin, lifted the lid. Under ordinary circumstances, such a proceeding would be followed by appalling results, which need not here be described. Mackenzie, whose face was very white, stood near me. I looked at him for a moment, and then flung aside the pall which was meant to conceal the face of the dead.

The dead truly! Here was death, which had never, in any sense, known life like ours. Mackenzie uttered a loud exclamation. The constable and the coroner's man came close. I lifted a bag of flour out of the coffin!

There were many similar bags there. It had been closely packed, and evidently with a view to counterfeit the exact weight of the dead man.

Poor Mackenzie was absolutely speechless. The coroner's man began to take copious notes; the police-constable gravely did the same.

Mackenzie at last found his tongue.

"I never felt more stunned in my life," he said. "In very truth, I all but saw the man die. Where is he? In the name of Heaven, what has become of him? This is the most monstrous thing I have ever heard of in the whole course of my life, and—and I attended the funeral of those *bags of flour!* No wonder that woman never cared to see me inside the house again. But what puzzles me," he continued, "is the motive—what *can* the motive be?"

"Perhaps one of the insurance companies can tell us that," said the police-officer. "It is my duty to report this thing, sir," he con-



"THEY UNSCREWED THE LID."

tinued, turning to me. "I have not the least doubt that the Crown will prosecute."

"I cannot at all prevent your taking what steps you think proper," I replied, "only pray understand that the poor lady who is the principal perpetrator in this fraud lies at the present moment at death's door."

"We must get the man himself," murmured the police-officer. "If he is alive we shall soon find him."

Half an hour later, Mackenzie and I had left the dismal cemetery.

I had to hurry back to Harley Street to attend to some important duties, but I arranged to meet Mackenzie that evening at the Heathcotes' house. I need not say that my thoughts were much occupied with Mrs. Heathcote and her miserable story. What a life that wretched Heathcote must have led during the last six months. No wonder he looked cadaverous as the moonlight fell over his gaunt figure. No ghost truly was he, but a man of like flesh and blood to ourselves—a man who was supposed to be buried in Kensal Green, but who yet walked the earth.

It was about eight o'clock when I reached the Heathcotes' house. Mackenzie had already arrived—he came into the hall to meet me.

"Where is Miss Gabrielle?" I asked at once.

"Poor child," he replied; "I have begged of her to stay in her room. She knows nothing of what took place this morning, but is in a terrible state of grief about her mother. That unfortunate woman's hours are numbered. She is sinking fast. Will you come to her at once, Halifax—she has asked for you several times."

Accompanied by Mackenzie, I mounted the stairs and entered the sick room. One glance at the patient's face showed me all too plainly that I was in the chamber of death. Mrs. Heathcote lay perfectly motionless. Her bright hair, still the hair of quite a young woman, was flung back over the pillow. Her pale face was wet with perspiration. Her eyes, solemn, dark, and awful in expression, turned and fixed themselves on me as I approached the bedside. Something like the ghost of a smile quivered round her lips. She made an effort to stretch out a shadowy hand to grasp mine.

"Don't stir," I said to her. "Perhaps you want to say something? I will stoop down to listen to you. I have very good hearing, so you can speak as low as you please."

She smiled again with a sort of pleasure at my understanding her.

"I have something to confess," she said, in a hollow whisper. "Send the nurse and— and Dr. Mackenzie out of the room."

I was obliged to explain the dying woman's wishes to my brother physician. He called to the nurse to follow him, and they immediately left the room.

As soon as they had done so, I bent my head and took one of Mrs. Heathcote's hands in mine.

"Now," I said, "take comfort—God can forgive sin. You have sinned?"

"Oh, yes, yes; but how can you possibly know?"

"Never mind. I am a good judge of character. If telling me will relieve your conscience, speak."

"My husband is alive," she murmured.

"Yes," I said, "I guessed as much."

"He had insured his life," she continued, "for—for about fifteen thousand pounds. The money was wanted to—to save us from dishonour. We managed to counterfeit—death."

She stopped, as if unable to proceed any further. "A week ago," she continued, "I—I saw the man who is supposed to be dead. He is really dying now. The strain of knowing that I could do nothing for him—nothing to comfort his last moments—was too horrible. I felt that I could not live without him. On the day of my illness I took—poison, a preparation of Indian hemp. I meant to kill myself. I did not know that my object would be effected in so terrible a manner."

Here she looked towards the door. A great change came over her face. Her eyes shone with sudden brightness. A look of awful joy filled them. She made a frantic effort to raise herself in bed.

I followed the direction of her eyes, and then, indeed, a startled exclamation passed my lips.

Gabrielle, with her cheeks crimson, her lips tremulous, her hair tossed wildly about her head and shoulders, was advancing into the room, leading a cadaverous, ghastly-looking man by the hand. In other words, Heathcote himself in the flesh had come into his wife's dying chamber.

"Oh, Horace!" she exclaimed; "Horace—to die in your arms—to know that you will soon join me. This is too much bliss—this is too great joy!"

The man knelt by her, put his dying arms round her, and she laid her head on his worn breast.

"We will leave them together," I said to Gabrielle.



"LEADING A CADAVEROUS, GHASTLY-LOOKING MAN BY THE HAND."

I took the poor little girl's hand and led her from the room.

She was in a frantic state of excitement.

"I said he was not dead," she repeated—"I always said it. I was sitting by my window a few minutes ago, and I saw him in the garden. This time I was determined that he should not escape me. I rushed downstairs. He knew nothing until he saw me at his side. I caught his hand in mine. It was hot and thin. It was like a skeleton's hand—only it burned with living fire. 'Mother is dying—come to her at once,' I said to him, and then I brought him into the house."

"You did well—you acted very bravely," I replied to her.

I took her away to a distant part of the house.

An hour later, Mrs. Heathcote died. I was not with her when she breathed her last. My one object now was to do what I could for poor little Gabrielle. In consequence, therefore, I made arrangements to have an interview with Heathcote. It was no longer possible for the wretched man to remain in hiding. His own hours were plainly numbered, and it was more than evident that

he had only anticipated his real death by some months.

I saw him the next day, and he told me in a few brief words the story of his supposed death and burial.

"I am being severely punished now," he said, "for the one great sin of my life. I am a solicitor by profession, and when a young man was tempted to appropriate some trust funds—hoping, like many another has done before me, to replace the money before the loss was discovered. I married, and had a happy home. My wife and I were devotedly attached to each other. I was not strong, and more than one physician told me that I was threatened with a serious pulmonary affection. About eight months ago, the blow which I never looked for fell. I need not enter into particulars. Suffice it to say that I was expected to deliver over twelve thousand pounds, the amount of certain trusts committed to me, to their rightful owners within three months' time. If I failed to realize this money, imprisonment, dishonour, ruin, would be mine. My wife and child would also be reduced to beggary. I had effected an insurance on my life for fifteen thousand pounds. If this sum could be realized, it would cover the deficit in the trust, and also leave a small overplus for the use of my wife and daughter. I knew that my days were practically numbered, and it did not strike me as a particularly heinous crime to forestall my death by a few months. I talked the matter over with my wife, and at last got her to consent to help me. We managed everything cleverly, and not a soul suspected the fraud which was practised on the world. Our old servants, who had lived with us for years, were sent away on a holiday. We had no servant in the house except a charwoman, who came in for a certain number of hours daily."

"You managed your supposed dying condition with great skill," I answered. "That hemorrhage, the ghastly expression of your face, were sufficiently real to deceive even a keen and clever man like Mackenzie."

Heathcote smiled grimly.

"After all," he said, "the fraud was simple enough. I took an emetic, which I knew would produce the cadaverous hue of approaching death, and the supposed hemorrhage was managed with some bullock's blood. I got it from a distant butcher, telling him that I wanted it to mix with meal to feed my dogs with."

"And how did you deceive the undertaker's men?" I asked.

"My wife insisted on keeping my face covered, and I managed to simulate rigidity. As to the necessary coldness, I was cold enough lying with only a sheet over me. After I was placed in the coffin my wife would not allow anyone to enter the room but herself: she brought me food, of course. We bored holes, too, in the coffin lid. Still, I shall never forget the awful five minutes during which I was screwed down.

"It was all managed with great expedition. As soon as ever the undertaker's men could be got out of the way, my wife unscrewed the coffin and released me. We then filled it with bags of flour, which we had already secured and hidden for the purpose. My supposed funeral took place with due honours. I left the house that night, intending to ship to America. Had I done this, the appalling consequences which have now ended in the death of my wife might never have taken place, but, at the eleventh hour, my courage failed me. I could do much to shield my wife and child, but I could not endure the thought of never seeing them again. Contrary to all my wife's entreaties, I insisted on coming into the garden, for the selfish pleasure of catching even a glimpse of Gabrielle's little figure, as she moved about her bedroom. She saw me once, but I escaped through the shrubbery and by a door which we kept on purpose unlocked, before she reached me. I thought I would never again transgress, but once

more the temptation assailed me, and I was not proof against it. My health failed rapidly. I was really dying, and on the morning when my wife's illness began, had suffered from a genuine and very sharp attack of hemorrhage. She found me in the wretched lodging where I was hiding in a state of complete misery, and almost destitution. Something in my appearance seemed suddenly to make her lose all self-control.

"'Horace,' she exclaimed, 'I cannot stand this. When you die, I will die. We will carry our shame and our sorrow and our unhappy love into the grave, where no man can follow us. When you die, I will die. Oh, to see you like this drives me mad!'

"She left me. She told me when I saw her during those last few moments yesterday, that she had hastened her end by a powerful dose of Indian hemp. That is the story. I know that I have laid myself open to criminal prosecution of the gravest character, but I do not think I shall live to go through it."

Heathcote was right. He passed away that evening quite quietly in his sleep.

Poor little Gabrielle! I saw her once since her parents' death, but it is now a couple of years since I have heard anything about her. Will she ever get over the severe shock to which she was subjected? What does the future hold in store for her? I cannot answer these questions. Time alone can do that.



"WHEN YOU DIE, I WILL DIE."