

## The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings.

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.

### VI.—THE STAR-SHAPED MARKS.



IN a certain Sunday in the spring of 1897, as Dufroyer and I were walking in the Park, we came across one of his friends, a man of the name of Loftus Durham. Durham was a rising artist, whose portrait paintings had lately attracted notice. He invited us both to his studio on the following Sunday, where he was to receive a party of friends to see his latest work, an historical picture for the coming Academy.

"The picture is an order from a lady, who has herself sat for the principal figure," said Durham. "I hope you may meet her also on Sunday. My impression is that the picture will do well; but if so, it will be on account of the remarkable beauty of my model. But I must not add more—you will see what I mean for yourselves."

He walked briskly away.

"Poor Durham," said Dufroyer, when he had left us. "I am glad that he is beginning to get over the dreadful catastrophe which threatened to ruin him body and soul a year back."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I allude to the tragic death of his young wife," said Dufroyer. "They were only married two years. She was thrown from her horse on the hunting-field, broke her back, and died a few hours afterwards. There was a child, a boy of about four months old at the time of the mother's death. Durham was so frightfully prostrated from the shock, that some of his friends feared for his reason; but I now see

that he is regaining his usual calibre. I trust his new picture will be a success; but, notwithstanding his remarkable talent, I own I have my doubts. It takes a man in ten thousand to do a good historical picture."

On the following Sunday, about four o'clock, Dufroyer and I found ourselves at Durham's house, in Lanchester Gardens. A number of well-known artists and their wives had already assembled in his studio. We found the visitors all gazing at a life-sized picture in a heavy frame which stood on an easel facing the window.

Dufroyer and I took our places in the



"IN THE STUDIO."



background, and looked at the group represented on the canvas in silence. Any doubt of Durham's ultimate success must have immediately vanished from Dufrazer's mind. The picture was a magnificent work of art, and the subject was worthy of an artist's best efforts. It was taken from "The Lady of the Lake," and represented Ellen Douglas in the guard-room of Stirling Castle, surrounded by the rough soldiers of James the Fifth of Scotland. It was named "Soldiers, Attend!"—Ellen's first words as she flung off her plaid, and revealed herself in all her dark proud beauty to the wonder of the soldiers. The pose and attitude were superb, and did credit both to Durham and the rare beauty of his model.

I was just turning round to congratulate him warmly on his splendid production, when I saw standing beside him Ellen Douglas herself, not in the rough garb of a Scotch lassie, but in the simple and yet picturesque dress of a well-bred English girl. Her large black velvet hat, with its plume of ostrich feathers, contrasted well with a face of dark and striking beauty, but I noticed even in that first glance a peculiar expression lingering round the curves of her beautiful lips, and filling the big brown eyes. A secret care, an anxiety artfully concealed, and yet all too apparent to a real judge of character, spoke to me from her face. All the same, that very look of reserve and sorrow but strengthened her beauty, and gave that final touch of genius to the lovely figure on the canvas.

Just then Durham touched me on the shoulder.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, pointing to the picture.

"I congratulate you most heartily," I responded.

"I owe any success which I may have achieved to this lady," he continued. "She has done me the honour to sit as Ellen Douglas. Mr. Head, may I introduce Lady Faulkner?"

I bowed an acknowledgment, to which Lady Faulkner gravely responded. She stepped a little aside, and seemed to invite me to follow her.

"I am also glad you like the picture," she said, eagerly. "For years I have longed to have that special subject painted. I asked Mr. Durham to do it for me on condition that I should be the model for Ellen Douglas. The picture is meant as a present for my husband."

"Has he seen it yet?" I asked.

"No, he is in India; it is to greet him as

a surprise on his return. It has always been one of his longings to have a really great picture painted on that magnificent subject, and it was also one of his fancies that I should take the part of Ellen Douglas. Thanks to Mr. Durham's genius, I have succeeded, and am much pleased."

A new arrival came up to speak to her. I turned aside, but her face continued to attract me, and I glanced at her from time to time. Suddenly, I noticed that she held up her hand as if to arrest attention, and then flew to the door of the studio. Outside was distinctly audible the patter of small feet, and also the sound of a woman's voice raised in expostulation. This was followed by the satisfied half coo, half cry, of a young child, and the next instant Lady Faulkner re-appeared, carrying Durham's baby boy in her arms.

He was a splendid little fellow, and handsome enough in himself to evoke unlimited admiration. A mass of thick, golden curls shadowed his brow; his eyes were large, and of a deep and heavenly blue. He had the round limbs and perfect proportions of a happy, healthy baby. The child had clasped his arms round Lady Faulkner's neck. Seeing a great many visitors in the room, he started in some slight trepidation, but, turning again to Lady Faulkner, smiled in her face.

"Ah! there you are, Robin," said Durham, glancing at the child with a lighting-up of his own somewhat sombre face. "But, Lady Faulkner, please don't let the little chap worry you—you are too good to him. The fact is, you spoil him dreadfully."

"That is a libel, for no one could spoil you, could they, Robin?" said Lady Faulkner, kissing the boy on his brow. She seated herself on the window-sill. I went up and took a place beside her. She was so altogether absorbed by the boy that she did not at first see me. She bent over him and allowed him to clasp and unclasp a heavy gold chain of antique pattern which she wore round her neck. From time to time she kissed him. Suddenly glancing up, her eyes met mine.

"Is he not a splendid little fellow?" she said. "I don't know how I could have lived through the last few months but for this little one. I have been kept in London on necessary business, and consequently away from my own child; but little Robin has comforted me. We are great friends, are we not, Robin?"

"The child certainly seems to take to you," I said.



"Take to me?" she cried. "He adores me; don't you, baby?"

The boy looked up as she addressed him, opened his lips, as if to utter some baby word, then, with a coy, sweet smile, hid his face against her breast.

"You have a child of your own?" I said.

"Yes, Mr. Head, a boy. Now, I am going to confide in you. My boy is the image of this little one. He is the same age as Robin, and Robin and he are so alike in every feature that the resemblance is both uncommon and extraordinary. But, stay, you shall see for yourself."

She produced a locket, touched a spring, and showed me a painted photograph of a young child. It might have been taken from little Robin Durham. The likeness was certainly beyond dispute.

Dufrayer came near, and I pointed it out to him.

"Is it not remarkable?" I said. "This locket contains a picture of Lady Faulkner's own little boy. You would not know it from little Robin Durham, would you?"

Dufrayer glanced from the picture to the child, then to the face of Lady Faulkner. To my surprise she coloured under his gaze, which was so fixed and staring as to seem almost rude.

Remarking that the picture might assuredly be taken from Durham's boy, he gravely handed back the locket to Lady Faulkner, and immediately afterwards, without waiting for me, took his leave.

Lady Faulkner looked after his retreating form, and I noticed that a new expression came into her eyes—a defiant, hard, even

desperate, look. It came and quickly went. She clasped her arms more tightly round the boy, kissing him again. I took my own leave soon afterwards, but during the days which immediately followed, I often thought with some perplexity of Lady Faulkner, and also of Durham's boy.

I had received a card for the private view of the Academy, and remembering Durham's picture, determined to go there on the afternoon of the great day. I strolled through the rooms, which were crowded, so much so indeed that it was almost impossible to get a good view of the pictures; but by-and-by I caught a sight of Durham's masterpiece. It

occupied a place of honour on the line. Beyond doubt, therefore, his success was assured. I had taken a fancy to him, and was glad of this, and now pushed my way into the midst of a knot of admirers, who, arrested by the striking scene which the picture portrayed, and the rare grace and beauty of the central figure, were making audible and flattering remarks. Presently, just behind me, two voices, which I could not fail to recognise, fell on my ears. I started, and then remained motionless. The voices belonged to Lady Faulkner and to Mme. Koluchy. They were together, and were talking eagerly. They could not have seen me, for



"DUFRAYER GLANCED FROM THE PICTURE TO THE CHILD."

I heard Lady Faulkner's voice, high and eager. The following words fell on my ears:—

"I shall do it to-morrow or next day. My husband returns sooner than I thought, and there is no time to lose. You have arranged about the nurse, have you not?"



"Yes; you can confidently leave the matter in my hands," was Madame's reply.

"And I am safe? There is not the slightest danger of——"

They were pushed on by the increasing crowd, and I could not catch the end of the last sentence, but I had heard enough. The pictures no longer attracted me. I made my way hurriedly from the room. As I descended the stairs my heart beat fast. What had Lady Faulkner to do with Mme. Koluchy? Were the words which unwittingly had fallen on my ears full of sinister meaning? Madame seldom attached herself to anyone without a strong reason. Beyond doubt, the beautiful young Scotch woman was an acquaintance of more than ordinary standing. She was in trouble, and Madame was helping her. Once more I was certain that in a new and startling manner Madame was about to make a fresh move in her extraordinary game.

I went straight off to Dufroyer's office, found him in, and told him what had occurred.

"Beyond doubt, Lady Faulkner's manner was that of a woman in trouble," I continued. "From her tone she knows Madame well. There was that in her voice which might dare anything, however desperate. What do you think of it, Dufroyer? Is Durham, by any possible chance, in danger?"

"That is more than I can tell you," replied Dufroyer. "Mme. Koluchy's machinations are beyond my powers to cope with. But as you ask me, I should say that it is quite possible that there is some new witchery brewing in her cauldron. By the way, Head, I saw that you were attracted by Lady Faulkner when you met her at Durham's studio."

"Were not you?" I asked.

"To a certain extent, yes, but I was also repelled. I did not like her expression as she sat with the child in her arms."

"What do you mean?"

"I can scarcely explain myself, but my belief is, that she has been subjected by Madame to a queer temptation. What, of course, it is impossible to guess. When you noticed the likeness between Durham's child and her own, I saw a look in her eyes which told me that she was capable of almost any crime to achieve her object."

"I hope you are mistaken," I answered, rising as I spoke. "At least, Durham has made a great success with that picture, and he largely owes it to Lady Faulkner. I must call round to see him, in order to congratulate him."

I did so a few days later. I found the artist busy in his studio working at a portrait of a City magnate.

"Here you are, Head. I am delighted to welcome you," he said, when I arrived. "Pray, take that chair. You will forgive me if I go on working? My big picture having sold so well, I am overpowered with orders. It has taken on; you have seen the reviews, have you not?"

"I have, and I also witnessed the crowds who collected round it on the opening day," I replied. "It is a magnificent work of art, Durham. You will be one of our foremost historical painters from this day out."

He smiled, and, brush in hand, continued to paint in rapidly the background of his picture.

"By the way," I said, abruptly, "I am much interested in that beautiful Scotch model who sat for your Ellen Douglas. I have seldom seen a more lovely face."

Durham glanced up at me, and then resumed his work.

"It is a curious story altogether," he said. "Lady Faulkner came to see me in the November of last year. She said that she had met my little boy in Regent's Park, was struck by the likeness between her child and mine; on account of this asked the name of the child, discovered that I was his father (it seems that my fame as a portrait painter had already reached her ears), and she ventured to visit me to know if I would care to undertake an historical picture. I had done nothing so ambitious before, and I hesitated. She pressed the matter, volunteered to sit for the central figure, and offered me £2,000 for the picture when completed.

"I am not too well off, and could not afford to refuse such a sum. I begged of her to employ other and better-known men, but she would not hear of it—she wanted my work, and mine alone. She was convinced that the picture would be a great success. In the end her enthusiasm prevailed. I consented to paint the picture, and set to work at once. For such a large canvas the time was short, and Lady Faulkner came to sit to me three or four times a week. She made one proviso—the child was to be allowed to come freely in and out of the room. She attracted little Robin from the first, and was more than good to him. The boy became fond of her, and she never looked better, nor more at her ease, than when she held him in her arms. She has certainly done me a good service, and for her



sake alone I cannot be too pleased that the picture is appreciated."

"Is Lady Faulkner still in town?" I asked.

"No, she left for Scotland only this morning. Her husband's place, Bram Castle, in Inverness, is a splendid old historical estate dating from the Middle Ages."

"How is your boy?" I asked. "You

"You can get tea, Collier," said his master. "By the way, is baby home yet?"

"No, sir," was the reply. "I cannot understand it," added the man; "Jane is generally back long before now."

Durham made no answer. He returned to his interrupted work. The servant withdrew. Tea was brought in, but there was no sign of the child. Durham handed me a

cup, then stood abstracted for a moment, looking straight before him. Suddenly he went to the bell and rang it.

"Tell nurse to bring Master Robin in," he said.

"But nurse and baby have not returned home yet, sir."

Durham glanced at the clock.

"It is just six," he exclaimed. "Can anything be wrong? I had better go out and look for them."

"Let me go with you," I said. "If you are going into Regent's Park, it is on my way home."

"Nurse generally takes the child to the Broad Walk," said Durham; "we will go in that direction."

We entered the park. No sign of nurse or child could we see, though we made several inquiries of the park-keepers, who could tell us nothing.

"I have no right to worry you with all this," said Durham, suddenly.

I glanced at him.

He had expressed no alarm in words, but I saw now that he was troubled and anxious, and his face wore a stern expression. A nameless suspicion suddenly visited my heart. Try as I would, I could not shake it off.

"We had better go back," I said; "in all probability you will find the little fellow safe at home."

I used cheerful words which I did not feel. Durham looked at me again.

"The child is not to me as an ordinary



"HOW IS YOUR BOY?" I ASKED.

keep him in town, I see; but you have good air in this part of London."

"Yes, capital; he spends most of his time in Regent's Park. The little chap is quite well, thank you. By the way, he ought to be in now. He generally joins me at tea. Would it worry you if he came in as usual, Head?"

"Not at all; on the contrary, I should like to see him," I said.

Durham rang the bell. A servant entered.



child," he said, dropping his voice. "You know the tragedy through which I have lived?"

"Dufroyer has told me," I replied.

"My whole life is wrapped up in the little fellow," he continued. "Well, I hope we shall find him all right on our return. Are you really coming back with me?"

"Certainly, if you will have me. I shall not rest easy myself until I know that the boy is safe."

We turned in the direction of Durham's house. We ran up the steps.

"Have you seen them, sir?" asked the butler, as he opened the door.

"No. Are they not back yet?" asked Durham.

"No, sir; we have heard nor seen nothing of either of them."

"This is quite unprecedented," said the artist. "Jane knows well that I never allow the boy to be out after five o'clock. It is nearly seven now. You are quite certain," he added, turning to the man, "that no message has come to account for the child's delay?"

"No, sir, nothing."

"What do you think of it, Head?" He looked at me inquiringly.

"It is impossible to tell you," I replied; "a thousand things may keep the nurse out. Let us wait for another hour. If the child has not returned by then, we ought certainly to take some action."

I avoided looking at Durham as I spoke, for Mme. Koluchy's words to Lady Faulkner returned unpleasantly to my memory.

"I shall do it to-morrow or next day—you have arranged about the nurse?"

We went into the studio, and Durham offered me a cigarette. As he did so I suddenly heard a commotion in a distant part of the house; there was the sound of hurrying feet and the noise of more than one voice raised in agitation and alarm. Durham's face turned ghastly.

"There has been an accident," he said. "I felt that there was something wrong. God help me!"

He rushed to the door. I followed him. Just as he reached it, it was flung open, and the nurse, a comely-looking woman, of between thirty and forty years of age, ran in and flung herself at Durham's feet.

"You'll never forgive me, sir," she gasped. "I feel fit to kill myself."

"Get up, Jane, at once, and tell me what has happened. Speak! Is anything wrong with the child?"

"Oh, sir, he is gone—he is lost! I don't

know where he is. Oh, I know you'll never forgive me. I could scarcely bring myself to come home to tell you."

"That was folly. Speak now. Tell the whole story at once."

Durham's manner had changed. Now that the blow had really fallen, he was himself once again—a man of keen action, resolute, resolved.

The woman stared at him, then she staggered to her feet, a good deal of her own self-control restored by his manner.

"It was this way, sir," she began. "Baby and I went out as usual early this afternoon. You know how fond baby has always been of Lady Faulkner?"

"Lady Faulkner has nothing to do with this matter," interrupted Durham. "Proceed with your story."

"Her ladyship is in Scotland; at least, it is supposed so, sir," continued the woman. "She came here late last night, and bade us all good-bye. I was undressing baby when she entered the nursery. She took him in her arms and kissed him many times. Baby loves her very much. He always called her 'Pitty lady.' He began to cry when she left the room."

"Go on! go on!" said Durham.

"Well, sir, baby and I went into the park. You know how active the child is, as merry as a lark, and always anxious to be down on his legs. It was a beautiful day, and I sat on one of the seats and baby ran about. He was very fond of playing hide-and-seek round the shrubs, and I used to humour him. He asked for his usual game. Suddenly I heard him cry out 'Pitty lady! Pitty lady,' and run as fast as ever he could round to the other side of a big clump of rhododendrons. He was within a few feet of me, and I was just about to follow him—for half the game, sir, was for me to peep round the opposite side of the trees and try to catch him—when a gentleman whose acquaintance I had made during the last two days came up and began to speak to me. He was a Mr. Ivanhoe, and a very gentlemanly person, sir. We talked for a minute or two, and I'll own I forgot baby. The moment I remembered him I ran round the rhododendrons to look for him, but from that hour to now, sir, I have seen nothing of the child. I don't know where he is—I don't know what has happened to him. Someone must have stolen him, but who, the Lord only knows. He must have fancied that he saw a likeness to Lady Faulkner in somebody else in the park, for he did cry out 'Pitty lady,' just as if his



whole heart was going out to someone, and away he trotted as fast as his feet could carry him. That is the whole story, sir. I'd have come back sooner, but I have been searching the place, like one distracted."

"He was a dark, handsome man," she said; then, slowly, "but with something peculiar about him, and he spoke like a foreigner."

I glanced at Durham. His eyes met mine



"WE TALKED FOR A MINUTE OR TWO."

"You did very wrong not to return at once. Did you by any chance happen to see the person the child ran to?"

"I saw no one, sir; only the cry of the child still rings in my ears and the delight in his voice. 'Pitty lady,' he said, and off he went like a flash."

"You should have followed him."

"I know it, sir, and I'm fit to kill myself; but the gentleman was that nice and civil, and I'll own I forgot everything else in the pleasure of having a chat with him."

"The man who spoke to you called himself Ivanhoe?"

"Yes, sir."

"I should like you to give me some particulars with regard to this man's appearance," I said, interrupting the conversation for the first time.

The woman stared at me. I doubt if she had ever seen me before.

in the most hopeless perplexity. I looked away. A thousand wild fears were rushing through my brain.

"There is no good in wasting time over unimportant matters," said the poor father, impatiently. "The thing to do is to find baby at once. Control yourself, please, Jane; you do not make matters any better by giving way to undue emotion. Did you mention the child's loss to the police?"

"Yes, sir, two hours back."

"Durham," I said, suddenly, "you and I had better go at once to Dufroyer. He will advise us exactly what is to be done."

Durham glanced at me, then without a word went into the hall and put on his hat. We both left the house.

"What do you think of it, Head?" he said, presently, as we were bowling away in a hansom to Dufroyer's flat.

"I cannot help telling you that I fear



there is grave danger ahead," I replied; "but do not ask me any more until we have consulted Dufroyer."

The lawyer was in, and the whole story of the child's disappearance was told to him. He listened gravely. When Durham had finished speaking, Dufroyer said, slowly:—

"There is little doubt what has happened."

"What do you mean?" cried Durham. "Is it possible that you have got a solution already?"

"I have, my poor fellow, and a grave one. I fear that you are one of the many victims of the greatest criminal in London. I allude to Mme. Koluchy."

"Mme. Koluchy!" said Durham, glancing from one of us to the other. "What can you mean? Are you dreaming? Mme. Koluchy! What can she have to do with my little boy? Is it possible that you allude to the great lady doctor?"

"The same," cried Dufroyer. "The fact is, Durham, Head and I have been watching this woman for months past. We have learned some grave things about her. I will not take up your time now relating them, but you must take our word for it that she is not to be trusted—that to know her is to be in danger—to be her friend is to be in touch with some monstrous and terrible crime. For some reason she has made a friend of Lady Faulkner. Head saw them standing together under your picture. Head, will you tell Durham the exact words you overheard Lady Faulkner say?"

I repeated them.

Durham, who had been listening attentively, now shook his head.

"We are only wasting time following a clue of that sort," he said. "Nothing would induce me to doubt Lady Faulkner. What object could she possibly have in stealing my child? She has a child of her own exactly like Robin. Head, you are on a wrong track—you waste time by these conjectures. Someone has stolen the child hoping to reap a large reward. We must go to the police immediately, and have wires sent to every station round London."

"I will accompany you, Durham, if you like, to Scotland Yard," said Dufroyer.

"And I will go back to Regent's Park to find out if the keepers have learned anything," I said.

We went our separate ways.

The next few days were spent in fruitless endeavours to recover the missing child. No stone was left unturned; the police were active in the search—large rewards were

freely offered. Durham, accompanied by a private detective, spent his entire time rushing from place to place. His face grew drawn and anxious, his work was altogether neglected. He slept badly, and morning after morning awoke feeling so ill that his friends became alarmed about him.

"If this fearful strain continues much longer I shall fear for his life," said Dufroyer, one evening, to me. This was at the end of the first week.

On the next morning there was a fresh development in the unaccountable mystery. The nurse, Jane Cleaver, who had been unfeignedly grieving for the child ever since his disappearance, had gone out and had not returned. Inquiries were immediately set on foot with regard to what had become of her, but not a clue could be obtained as to her whereabouts.

On the evening of that day I called to see Durham, and found the poor fellow absolutely distracted.

"If this suspense continues much longer, I believe I shall lose my reason," he said. "I cannot think what has come to me. It is not only the absence of the child. I feel as if I were under the weight of some terrible illness. I cannot explain to you what my nights are. I have horrible nightmares. I suffer from a sensation as if I were being scorched by fire. In the morning I awake more dead than alive. During the day I get a little better, but the following night the same thing is repeated. The image of the child is always before my eyes. I see him everywhere. I hear his voice crying to me to come and rescue him."

He turned aside, so overcome by emotion that he could scarcely speak.

"Durham," I said, suddenly, "I have come here this evening to tell you that I have made up my mind."

"To do what?" he asked.

"I am going to Scotland to-morrow. I mean to visit Lady Faulkner at Bram Castle. It is quite possible that she knows something of the fate of the child. One thing, at least, is certain, that a person who had a strong likeness to her beguiled the little fellow round the rhododendron clump."

Durham smiled faintly.

"I cannot agree with you," he said. "I would stake my life on the honour of Lady Faulkner."

"At least you must allow me to make inquiries," I replied. "I shall be away for a few days. I may return with tidings. Keep up your heart until you see me again."



On the following evening I found myself in Inverness-shire. I put up at a small village just outside the estate of Bram. The castle towering on its beetling cliffs hung over the rushing waters of the River Bramley. I slept at the little inn, and early on the following morning made my way to the castle. Lady Faulkner was at home, and showed considerable surprise at seeing me. I noticed that her colour changed, and a look of consternation visited her large, beautiful eyes.

"You startled me, Mr. Head," she said; "is anything wrong?"

"Wrong? Yes," I answered. "Is it possible you have not heard the news?"

"What news?" she inquired. She immediately regained her self-control, sat down on the nearest chair, and looked me full in the face.

"I have news which will cause you sorrow,

Faulkner looked at me gravely, with just the right expression of distress coming and going on her face. When I had finished my narrative there were tears in her eyes.

"This will almost send Mr. Durham to his grave," she cried; "but surely—surely the child will be found?"

"The child *must* be found," I said. As I spoke I looked at her steadily. Immediately my suspicions were strengthened. She gazed at me with that wonderful calm which I do not believe any man could adopt. It occurred to me that she was overdoing it. The slight hardening which I had noticed before round her lovely lips became again perceptible. In spite of all her efforts, an expression the reverse of beautiful filled her eyes.

"Oh, this is terrible!" she said, suddenly springing to her feet. "I can feel for Mr. Durham from my very heart. My own little Keith is so like Robin. You would like to see my boy, would you not, Mr. Head?"

"I shall be glad to see him," I answered. "You have spoken before of the extraordinary likeness between the children."

"It is marvellous," she cried; "you would scarcely know one from the other."

She rang the bell. A servant appeared.

"Tell nurse to bring baby here," said Lady Faulkner.

A moment later the door was opened—the nurse herself did not appear, but a little boy, dressed in white, rushed into the room. He ran up to Lady Faulkner, clasping his arms ecstatically round her knees.

"Mother's own little boy," she said. She lifted him into her arms. Her fingers were loaded with rings, and I noticed as she

held the child against her heart that they were trembling. Was all this excessive emotion for Durham's miserable fate?

"Lady Faulkner," I said, jumping to my feet, and speaking sternly, "I will tell you the truth. I have come here in a vain hope. The loss of the child is killing the poor father—can you do anything for his relief?"



"I HAVE NEWS WHICH WILL CAUSE YOU SORROW."

Lady Faulkner. You were fond of Durham's boy, were you not?"

"Mr. Durham's boy—sweet little Robin?" she cried. "Of course. Has anything happened to him?"

"Is it possible that you have not heard? The child is lost."

I then related all that had occurred. Lady  
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"I?" she said. "What do you mean?"

My words were unexpected, and they startled her.

"Can you do anything for his relief?" I repeated. "Let me look at that boy. He is exactly like the child who is lost."

"I always told you there was an extraordinary likeness," she answered. "Look round, baby, look at that gentleman—tell him you are mother's own, own little boy."

"Mummy's boy," lisped the baby. He looked full up into my face. The blue eyes, the mass of golden hair, the slow, lovely smile—surely I had seen them before.

Lady Faulkner unfastened her locket, opened it and gave it to me.

"Feature for feature," she said. "Feature for feature the same. Mr. Head, this is my child. Is it possible——" she let the child drop from her arms and stood up confronting me. Her attitude reminded me of Ellen Douglas. "Is it possible that you suspect me?" she cried.

"I will be frank with you, Lady Faulkner," I answered. "I do suspect you."

She seated herself with a perceptible effort.

"This is too grave a matter to be merely angry about," she said; "but do you realize what you are saying? You suspect me—me of having stolen Robin Durham from his father?"

"God help me, I do," I answered.

"Your reasons?"

She took the child again on her knee. He turned towards her and caught hold of her heavy gold chain. As he did so I remembered that I had seen Durham's boy playing with that chain in the studio at Lanchester Gardens.

I briefly repeated the reasons for my fears. I told Lady Faulkner what I had overheard at the Academy. I said a few strong words with regard to Mme. Koluchy.

"To be the friend of that woman is to condemn you," I said, at last. "Do you know what she really is?"

Lady Faulkner made no answer. During the entire narrative, she had not uttered a syllable.

"When my husband returns home," she said at last, faintly, "he will protect me from this cruel charge."

"Are you prepared to swear that the boy sitting on your knee is your own boy?" I asked.

She hesitated, then said, boldly, "I am."

"Will you take an oath on the Bible that he is your child?"

Her face grew white.

"Surely that is not necessary," she said.

"But will you do it?" I repeated.

She looked down again at the boy. The boy looked up at her.

"Pitty lady," he said, all of a sudden.

The moment he uttered the words I noticed a queer change on her face. She got up and rang the bell. A grave-looking, middle-aged woman entered the room.

"Take baby, nurse," said Lady Faulkner.

The woman lifted the boy in her arms and conveyed him from the room.

"I will swear, Mr. Head," said Lady Faulkner. "There is a Bible on that table—I will swear on the Bible."

She took the Book in her hands, repeated the usual words of the oath, and kissed the Book.

"I declare that that boy is my own son, born of my body," she said, slowly and distinctly.

"Thank you," I answered. "I laid the Bible down on the table."

"What else do you want me to do?" she said.

"There is one test," I replied, "which, in my opinion, will settle the matter finally. The test is this. If the boy I have just seen is indeed your son, he will not recognise Durham, for he has never seen him. If, on the other hand, he is Durham's boy, he cannot fail to know his father, and to show that he knows him when he is taken into his presence. Will you return with me to town to-morrow, bringing the child with you? If little Robin's father appears as a stranger to the boy, I will believe that you have spoken the truth."

Before Lady Faulkner could reply, a servant entered the room bearing a letter on a salver. She took it eagerly and tore it open, glanced at the contents, and a look of relief crossed her face as her eyes met mine. They were bright now and full of a curious defiance.

"I am willing to stand the test," she said. "I will come with you to-morrow."

"With the boy?"

"Yes, I will bring the boy."

"You must allow him to enter Durham's presence without you."

"He shall do so."

"Good," I answered. "We can leave here by the earliest train in the morning."

I left the castle a few minutes later, and wired to Dufroyer, telling him that Lady Faulkner and I would come up to town early on the following day, bringing Lady Faulkner's





"I DECLARE THAT THAT BOY IS MY OWN SON," SHE SAID.

supposed boy with us. I asked Dufrayer not to prepare Durham in any way.

Late in the evening I received a reply to my telegram.

"Come by first possible train," were its contents. "Durham is seriously ill."

I thought it best to say nothing of the illness to Lady Faulkner, and at an early hour on the following day we started on our journey. No nurse accompanied the child. He slept a good part of the day—Lady Faulkner herself was almost silent. She scarcely addressed me. Now and then I saw her eyes light upon the child with a curious expression. Once, as I was attending to her comfort, she looked me full in the face.

"You doubt me, Mr. Head," she said. "It is impossible for me to feel friendly towards you until your doubts are removed."

"I am more grieved than I can say," I answered; "but I must, God helping me, at any cost see justice done."

She shivered.

At 7 p.m. we steamed into King's Cross. Dufrayer was on the platform, and at the carriage door in a second. From the grave

expression on his face I saw that there was bad news. Was it possible that the worst had happened to Durham, and that now there would never be any means of proving whether the child were Lady Faulkner's child or not?

"Be quick," he exclaimed, when he saw me. "Durham is sinking fast; I am afraid I shall be too late as it is."

"What is the matter with him?" I asked.

"That is what no one can make out. Langley Chaston, the great nerve specialist, has been to see him this afternoon. Chaston is completely non-plussed, but he attributes the illness to the shock and strain caused by the loss of the child."

Dufrayer said these words eagerly, and as he imagined into my ear alone. A hand touched me on the shoulder. I turned and confronted Lady Faulkner.

"What are you saying?" she exclaimed. "Is it possible that Mr. Durham is in danger,

in danger of his life?"

"He is dying," said Dufrayer, brusquely.

Lady Faulkner stepped back as though someone had shot her. She quivered all over.

"Take the child," she said to me, in a faint voice.

I lifted the boy in my arms. A brougham awaited us, we got in. The child, weary with the journey, lay fast asleep.

In another moment we were rattling along the Marylebone Road towards Lanchester Gardens.

As we entered the house, Dr. Curzon, Durham's own physician, received us in the hall.

"You are too late," he said, "the poor fellow is unconscious. It is the beginning of the end. I doubt if he will live through the night."

The doctor's words were interrupted by a low cry. Looking round, I saw that Lady Faulkner had flung off her cloak, had lifted her veil, and was staring at Dr. Curzon as though she were about to take leave of her senses.

"Say those words again," she cried.



"My dear madam, I am sorry to startle you. Durham is very ill; quite unconscious; sinking fast."

"I must see him," she said, eagerly; "which is his room?"

"The bedroom facing you on the first landing," was the doctor's reply.

She rushed upstairs, not waiting for anyone. We followed her slowly. As we were about to enter the room, the child being still in my arms, Lady Faulkner came out, and confronted me.

"I have seen him," she said. "One glance at his face was sufficient. Mr. Head, I must speak to you, and alone, at once—at once! Take me where I can see you all alone."

I opened the door of another room on the same landing, and switched on the electric light.

"Put the child down," she said, "or take him away. This is too horrible; it is past bearing. I never meant things to go as far as this."

"Lady Faulkner, do you quite realize what you are saying?"

"I realize everything. Oh, Mr. Head, you were right. Madame is the most terrible woman in all the world. She told me that I might bring the boy to London in safety—that she had arranged matters so that his father should not recognise him—so that he would not recognise his father. I was to bring him straight here, and trust to her to put things right. I never knew she meant this. I have just looked at his face, and he is changed; he is horrible to look at now. Oh, my God! this will kill me."

"You must tell me all, Lady Faulkner," I said. "You have committed yourself now—you have as good as confessed the truth. Then the child—this child—is indeed Durham's son?"

"That child is Loftus Durham's son. Yes, I am the most miserable woman in the universe. Do what you will with me. Oh, yes, I could bring myself to steal the boy, but not, not to go to this last extreme step. This is murder, Mr. Head. If Mr. Durham dies, I am guilty of murder. Is there no chance of his life?"

"The only chance is for you to tell me everything as quickly as you can," I answered.

"I will," she replied. She pulled herself together, and began to speak hurriedly.

"I will tell you all in as few words as possible; but in order that you should understand why I committed the awful crime which

I have committed, you must know something of my early history. My father and mother died from shock after the death of three baby brothers in succession. Each of these children lived to be a year old, and then each succumbed to the same dreadful malady, and sank into an early grave. I was brought up by an aunt, who treated me sternly, suppressing all affection for me, and doing her utmost to get me married off her hands as quickly as possible. Sir John Faulkner fell in love with me when I was eighteen, and asked me to be his wife. I loved him, and eagerly consented. On the day when I gave my consent I met our family doctor. I told him of my engagement and of the unlooked-for happiness which had suddenly dawned on my path. To my astonishment old Dr. Macpherson told me that I did wrong to marry.

"There is a terrible disease in your family," he said; "you have no right to marry."

"He then told me an extraordinary and terrible thing. He said that in my family on the mother's side was a disease which is called pseudo-hypertrophic muscular paralysis. This strange disease is hereditary, but only attacks the male members of a house, all the females absolutely escaping. You have doubtless heard of it?"

I bowed. "It is one of the most terrible hereditary diseases known," I replied.

Her eyes began to dilate.

"Dr. Macpherson told me about it that dreadful day," she continued. "He said that my three brothers had died of it, that they had inherited it on the mother's side—that my mother's brothers had also died of it, and that she, although escaping herself, had communicated it to her male children. He told me that if I married, any boys who were born to me would in all probability die of this disease."

"I listened to him shocked. I went back and told my aunt. She laughed at my fears, told me that the doctor was deceiving me, assured me that I should do very wrong to refuse such an excellent husband as Sir John, and warned me never to repeat a word of what I had heard with regard to my own family to him. In short, she forced on the marriage."

"I cannot altogether blame her, for I also was only too anxious to escape from my miserable life, and but half-believed the doctor's story."

"I married to find, alas, that I had not entered into Paradise. My husband, although he loved me, told me frankly, a week after our marriage, that his chief reason for



marrying me was to have a healthy heir to his house. He said that I looked strong, and he believed my children would be healthy. He was quite morbid on this subject. We were married nearly three years before our child was born. My husband was almost beside himself with rejoicing when this took place. It was not until the baby lay in my arms that I suddenly remembered what I had almost forgotten—old Dr. Macpherson's warning. The child, however, looked perfectly strong, and I trusted that the dreadful disease would not appear in him.

"When the baby was four months old my husband was suddenly obliged to leave home in order to visit India. He was to be absent about a year. Until little Keith was a year old he remained perfectly healthy, then strange symptoms began. The disease commenced in the muscles of the calves of the legs, which became much enlarged. The child suffered from great weakness—he could only walk by throwing his body from side to side at each step.

"In terror I watched his symptoms. I took him then to see Dr. Macpherson. He told me that I had neglected his warning, and that my punishment had begun. He said there was not the slightest hope for the child—that he might live for a few months, but would in the end die.

"I returned home, mad with misery. I dared not let my husband know the truth. I knew that if I did he would render my life a hell, for the fate which had overtaken my first child would be the fate of every other boy born to me. My misery was beyond any words. Last winter, when baby's illness had just begun, I came up to town. I brought the child with me—he grew worse daily. When in town, I heard of the great fame of Mme. Koluchy and her wonderful cures. I went to see her, and told her my pitiful story. She shook her head when I described the features of the case, said that no medicine had ever yet

been discovered for this form of muscular paralysis, but said she would think over the case, and asked me to call upon her again.

"The next day, when in Regent's Park, I saw Loftus Durham's little boy. I was startled at the likeness, and ran forward with a cry, thinking that I was about to embrace my own little Keith. The child had the same eyes, the same build. The child *was* Keith to all intents and purposes, only he was healthy—a splendid little lad. I made friends with him on the spot. I went straight then to Mme. Koluchy, and told her that I had seen a child the very same as my own child. She then thought out the scheme which has ended so disastrously. She assured me it only needed courage on my part to carry it through. We discovered that the child was the only son of a widower, a rising artist of the name of Durham. Mr. Head, you know the rest. I determined to get acquainted with Mr. Durham, and in order to do so gave him a commission to paint the picture called 'Soldiers, Attend!'

"You can scarcely understand how I lived through the past winter. Madame had



"HE WAS LYING QUITE STILL."



persuaded me to send my dying child to her. A month ago I saw my boy breathe his last. I smothered my agony and devoted every energy to the kidnapping of little Robin. I took him away as planned, the nurse's attention being completely engrossed by a confederate of Mme. Koluchy's. It was arranged that in a week's time the nurse was also to be kidnapped, and removed from the country. She is now, I believe, on her way to New Zealand. Having removed the nurse, the one person we had to dread in the recognising of the child was the father himself. With great pains I taught the boy to call me 'Mummy,' and I believed he had learned the name and had forgotten his old title of 'Pitty lady.' But he said the words yesterday in your presence, and I have not the slightest doubt by so doing confirmed your suspicions. When I had taken the dreadful oath that the child was my own, and so perjured my soul, a letter from Mme. Koluchy arrived. She had discovered that you had gone to Scotland, and guessed that your suspicions were aroused. She said that you were her most terrible enemy, that more than once you had circumvented her in the moment of victory, but she believed that on this occasion we should win, and she further suggested that the very test which you demanded should be acceded to by me. She said that she had arranged matters in such a way that the father would *not* recognise the child, nor would the child know him; that I was to trust to her, and boldly go up to London, and bring the boy into his father's presence. The butler, Collier, who of course also knew the child, had, owing to Madame's secret intervention, been sent on a fruitless errand into the country, and so got out of the way. I now see what Madame really meant. She would kill Mr. Durham and so insure his silence for ever; but, oh! Mr. Head, bad as I am, I cannot commit murder. Mr. Head, you must save Mr. Durham's life."

"I will do what I can," I answered. "There is no doubt, from your confession, that Durham is being subjected to some slow poison. What we have to discover. I must leave you now, Lady Faulkner."

I went into the next room, where Dufrayer and Dr. Curzon were waiting for me. It was darkened. At the further end, in a bed against the wall, lay Durham. Bidding the nurse bring the lamp, I went across, and bent over him. I started back at his strange appearance. I scarcely recognised him. He was lying quite still, breathing so lightly that

at first I thought he must be already dead. The skin of the face and neck had a very strange appearance. It was inflamed and much reddened. I called the poor fellow by name very gently. He made no sign of recognition.

"What is all this curious inflammation due to?" I asked of Dr. Curzon, who was standing by my side.

"That is the mystery," he replied; "it is unlike anything I have seen before."

I took up my lens and examined it closely. It was certainly curious. Whatever the cause, the inflammation seemed to have started from many different centres of disturbance. I was at once struck by the curious shape of the markings. They were star-shaped, and radiated as if from various centres. As I still examined them, I could not help thinking that I had seen similar markings somewhere else not long ago, but when and connected with what I could not recall. This was, however, a detail of no importance. The terrible truth which confronted me absorbed every other consideration. Durham was dying before my eyes, and from Lady Faulkner's confession, Mme. Koluchy was doubtless killing him by means unknown. It was, indeed, a weird situation.

I beckoned to the doctor, and went out with him on to the landing.

"I have no time to tell you all," I said. "You noticed Lady Faulkner's agitation? She has made a strange and terrible confession. The child who has just been brought back to the house is Durham's own son. He was stolen by Lady Faulkner for reasons of her own. The woman who helped her to kidnap the child was the quack doctor, Mme. Koluchy."

"Mme. Koluchy?" said Dr. Curzon.

"The same," I answered; "the cleverest and the most wicked woman in London—a past-master in every shade of crime. Beyond doubt, Madame is at the bottom of Durham's illness. She is poisoning him—we have got to discover how. I thought it necessary to tell you as much, Dr. Curzon. Now, will you come back with me again to the sick room?"

The doctor followed me without a word.

Once more I bent over Durham, and as I did so the memory of where I had seen similar markings returned to me. I had seen them on photographic plates which had been exposed to the induction action of a brush discharge of high electro-motive force from the positive terminal of a Plante Rheostatic machine. An eminent electrician had drawn my attention to these markings at the time,



had shown me the plates, and remarked upon the strange effects. Could there be any relationship of cause and effect here?

"Has any kind of electrical treatment been tried?" I asked, turning to Dr. Curzon.

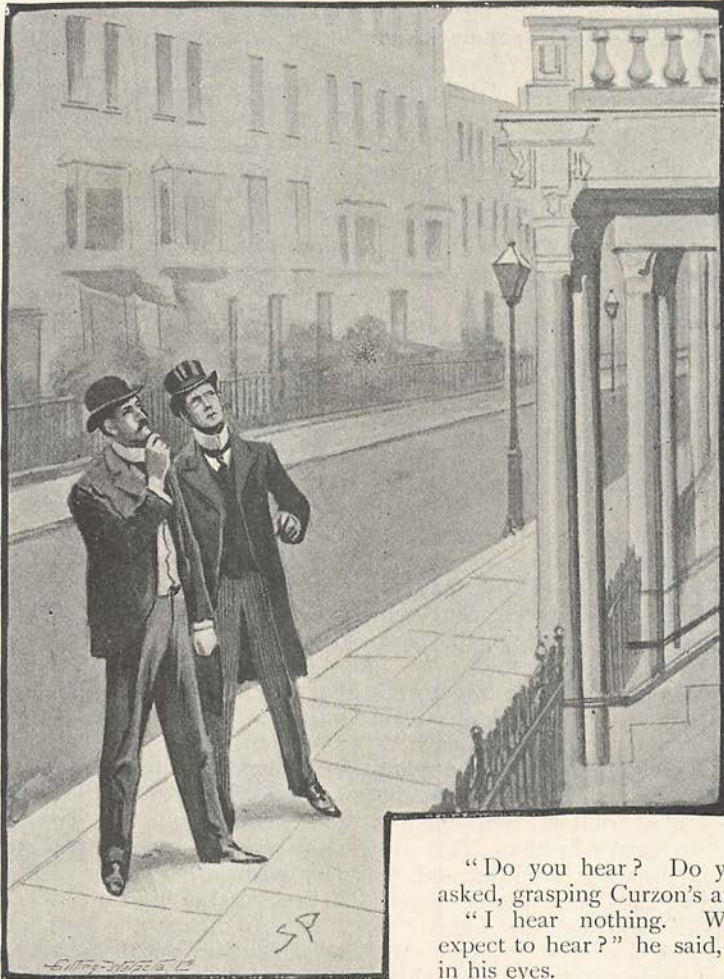
"None," he answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Because," I said, "I have seen similar effects produced on the skin by prolonged exposure to powerful X-rays, and the appearance of Durham's face suggests that

"Hush!" I cried, "stay quiet a moment."

There was immediately a dead silence in the room.

The dying man breathed more and more feebly. His face beneath the dreadful star-like markings looked as if he were already dead. Was I a victim to my own fancies, or did I hear muffled, distant, and faint the sound I somehow expected to hear—the sound of a low hum a long way off? An ungovernable excitement seized me.



"DUFRAVER AND I WENT INTO THE STREET AND LOOKED AT THE WINDOWS."

the skin might have been subjected to a powerful discharge from a focus tube."

"There has been no electricity employed, nor has any stranger been near the patient."

He was about to proceed, when I suddenly raised my hand.

"Do you hear? Do you hear?" I asked, grasping Curzon's arm.

"I hear nothing. What do you expect to hear?" he said, fear dawning in his eyes.

"Who is in the next room through there?" I asked, bending over the sick man and touching the wall behind his head.

"That room belongs to the next house, sir," said the nurse.

"Then, if that is so, we may have got the solution," I said. "Curzon, Dufraver, come with me at once."



We hurried out of the room.

"We must get into the next house without a moment's delay," I said.

"Into the next house? You must be mad," said the doctor.

"I am not. I have already told you that there is foul play in this extraordinary case, and a fearful explanation of Durham's illness has suddenly occurred to me. I have given a great deal of time lately to the study of the effect of powerful cathode and X-rays. The appearance of the markings on Durham's face are suspicious. Will you send a messenger at once to my house for my fluorescent screen?"

"I will fetch it," said Dufroyer. He hurried off.

"The next thing to be done is to move the bed on which the sick man lies to the opposite side of the room," I said.

Curzon watched me as I spoke, with a queer expression on his face.

"It shall be done," he said, briefly. We returned to the sick room.

In less than an-hour my fluorescent screen was in my hand. I held it up to the wall just where Durham's bed had been. It immediately became fluorescent, but we could make nothing out. This fact, however, converted my suspicions into certainties.

"I thought so," I said. "Who owns the next house?"

I rushed downstairs to question the servants. They could only tell me that it had been unoccupied for some time, but that the board "To let" had a month ago been removed. They did not believe that the new occupants had yet taken possession.

Dufroyer and I went into the street and looked at the windows. The house was to all appearance the counterpart of the one in which Durham lived. Dufroyer, who was now as much excited as I was, rushed off to the nearest fire-engine station, and quickly returned with an escape ladder. This was put up to one of the upper windows, and we managed to get in. The next instant we were inside the house, and the low hum of a "make and break" fell on our ears. We entered a room answering to the one where Durham's bedroom was situated, and there

immediately discovered the key to the diabolical mystery.

Close against the wall, within a few feet of where the sick man's bed had been, was an enormous focus tube, the platinum electrode turned so as to direct the rays through the wall. The machine was clamped in a holder, and stood on a square deal table, upon which also stood the most enormous induction coil I had ever seen. This was supplied from the main through wires coming from the electric light supplied to the house. This induction coil gave a spark of at least twenty-four inches. Insulated wires from it ran across the room, to a hole in the further wall into the next room, where the "make and break" was whirring. This had evidently been done in order that the noise of the hum should be as far away as possible.

"Constant powerful discharges of cathode and X-rays, such as must have been playing upon Durham for days and nights continuously, are now proved to be so injurious to life, that he would in all probability have been dead before the morning," I cried. "As it is, we may save him." Then I turned and grasped Dufroyer by the arm.

"I believe that at last we have evidence to convict Mme. Koluchy," I exclaimed. "What with Lady Faulkner's confession, and——"

"Let us go back at once and speak to Lady Faulkner," said Dufroyer.

We returned at once to the next house, but the woman whom we sought had already vanished. How she had gone, and when, no one knew.

The next day we learned that Mme. Koluchy had also left London, and that it was not certain when she would return. Doubtless, Lady Faulkner, having confessed, in a moment of terrible agitation, had then flown to Mme. Koluchy for protection. From that hour to now we have heard nothing more of the unfortunate young woman. Her husband is moving Heaven and earth to find her, but in vain.

Removed from the fatal influence of the rays, Durham has recovered, and the joy of having his little son restored to him has doubtless been his best medicine.