

## The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings.

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.

### X.—THE DOOM.



HE mysterious disappearance of Mme. Koluchy was now the universal topic of conversation. Her house was deserted, her numerous satellites were not to be found. The woman herself had gone as it were from the face of the earth. Nearly every detective in London was engaged in her pursuit. Scotland Yard had never been more agog with excitement; but day after day passed, and there was not the most remote tidings of her capture. No clue to her whereabouts could be obtained. That she was alive was certain, however, and my apprehensions never slumbered. I began to see that cruel face in my dreams, and whether I went abroad or whether I stayed at home, it equally haunted me.

A few days before Christmas I had a visit from Dufrayer. He found me pacing up and down my laboratory.

"What is the matter?" he said.

"The old story," I answered.

He shook his head.

"This won't do, Norman; you must turn your attention to something else."

"That is impossible," I replied, raising haggard eyes to his face.

He came up and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"You want change, Head, and you must have it. I have come in the nick of time with an invitation which ought to suit us both. We have been asked down to Rokesby Rectory to spend Christmas with my old friend, the rector. You have often heard me talk of William Sherwood. He is one of the best fellows I know. Shall I accept the invitation for us both?"

"Where is Rokesby Rectory?" I asked.

"In Cumberland, about thirty miles from Lake Windermere, a most picturesque quarter. We shall have as much seclusion as we like at Sherwood's house, and the air is bracing. If we run down next Monday, we shall be in time for a merry Christmas. What do you say?"

I agreed to accompany Dufrayer, and the following Monday, at an early hour, we started on our journey. Nothing of any moment occurred, except that at one of the large junctions a party of gipsies got into a third-class compartment near our own. Amongst

them I noticed one woman, taller than the rest, who wore a shawl so arranged over her head as to conceal her face. The unusual sight of gipsies travelling by train attracted my attention, and I remarked on it to Dufrayer. Later on I noticed, too, that they were singing, and that one voice was clear, and full, and rich. The circumstance, however, made very little impression on either of us.

At Rokesby Station the gipsies left the train, and each of them carried his or her bundle, disappearing almost immediately into a thick pine forest, which stretched away to the left of the little station.

The peculiar gait of the tall woman attracted me, and I was about to mention it to Dufrayer, when Sherwood's sudden appearance and hurried, hospitable greeting put it out of my head. Sherwood was a true specimen of a country parson; his views were broad-minded, and he was a thorough sportsman.

The vicarage was six miles from the nearest station, but the drive through the bracing air was invigorating, and I felt some of the heaviness and depression which had made my life a burden of late already leaving me.

When we reached the house we saw a slenderly-made girl standing in the porch. She held a lamp in her hand, and its bright light illuminated each feature. She had dark eyes and a pale, somewhat nervous face; she could not have been more than eighteen years of age.

"Here we are, Rosaly," called out her father, "and cold too after our journey. I hope you have seen to the fires."

"Yes, father; the house is warm and comfortable," was the reply.

The girl stepped on to the gravel, and held out her hand to Dufrayer, who was an old friend. Dufrayer turned and introduced me.

"Mr. Head, Rosaly," he said; "you have often heard me talk of him."

"Many times," she answered. "How do you do, Mr. Head? I am very glad indeed to welcome you here—you seem quite like an old friend; but come in both of you, do—you must be frozen."

She led the way into the house, and we found ourselves in a spacious and very lofty

hall. It was lit by one or two standard lamps, and was in all respects on a larger and more massive scale than is usually to be found in a country rectory.

"Ah! you are noticing our hall," said the girl, observing the interest in my face. "It is

to," she said. "With Christmas so near, you may imagine that I am very busy."

When she left the room, the rector looked after her with affection in his eyes.

"What a charming girl!" I could not help saying.

"I am glad you take to her, Mr. Head," was his reply; "I need not say that she is the light of my old eyes. Rosaly's mother died a fortnight after her birth, and the child has been as my one ewe lamb. But I am sorry to say she is sadly delicate, and I have had many hours of anxiety about her."

"Indeed," I replied; "it is true she looks pale, but I should have judged that she was healthy—rather of the wiry make."

"In body she is fairly healthy, but hers is a peculiarly nervous organism. She suffers intensely from all sorts of terrors, and her environment is not the best for her. She had a shock when young. I will tell you about it later on."

Soon afterwards Dufroyer and I went to our respective rooms, and when we met in the drawing-room half an hour later, Miss Sherwood, in a pretty dress, was standing by the hearth. Her manners were very simple and unaffected, and, although thoroughly girlish, were not wanting in dignity. She was evidently well accustomed to receiving her father's guests, and also to making them thoroughly at home. When we entered the dining-room we had already engaged in a brisk conversation, and her young voice and soft, dark-brown eyes added much to the attractiveness of the pleasant scene.

Towards the end of the meal I alluded once again to the old house.

"I suppose it is very old," I said; "it has certainly taken me by surprise—you must tell me its history."

I looked full at my young hostess as I spoke. To my surprise a shadow immediately flitted over her expressive face; she hesitated, then said, slowly:—

"Everyone remarks the house, and little wonder. I believe in parts it is over three hundred years old. Of course, some of the rooms are more modern. Father thinks we were in great luck when it was turned into a rectory, but"—here she



"AH! YOU ARE NOTICING OUR HALL," SAID THE GIRL."

quite one of the features of Rokesby; but the fact is, this is quite an old house, and was not turned into a rectory until the beginning of the present century. I will take you all over it to-morrow. Now, do come into father's smoking-room—I have had tea prepared there for you."

She turned to the left, threw open a heavy oak door, and introduced us into a room lined with cedar from floor to ceiling. Great logs were burning on the hearth, and tea had been prepared. Miss Sherwood attended to our comforts, and presently left us to enjoy our smoke.

"I have a thousand and one things to see

dropped her voice, and a faint sigh escaped her lips.

I looked at her again with curiosity.

"The place was spoiled by the last rector," she went on. "He and his family committed many acts of vandalism, but father has done his best to restore the house to its ancient appearance. You shall see it to-morrow, if you are really interested."

"I take a deep interest in old houses," I answered; "and this, from the little I have seen of it, is quite to my mind. Doubtless you have many old legends in connection with it, and if you have a real ghost it will complete the charm."

I smiled as I spoke, but the next instant the smile died on my lips. A sudden flame of colour had rushed into Miss Sherwood's face, leaving it far paler than was natural. She dropped her napkin, and stooped to pick it up. As she did so, I observed that the rector was looking at her anxiously. He immediately burst into conversation, completely turning the subject into what I considered a trivial channel.

A few moments later the young girl rose and left us to our wine.

As soon as we were alone, Sherwood asked us to draw our chairs to the fire and began to speak.

"I heard what you said to Rosaly, Mr. Head," he began; "and I am sorry now that I did not warn you. There is a painful legend connected with this old house, and the ghost whom you so laughingly alluded to exists, as far as my child is concerned, to a painful degree."

"Indeed," I answered.

"I do not believe in the ghost myself," he continued; "but I do believe in the influence of a very strong, nervous terror over Rosaly. If you like, I will tell you the story."

"Nothing could please me better," I answered.

The rector opened a fresh box of cigars, handed them to us, and began.

"The man who was my predecessor here had a scapegrace son, who got into serious trouble with a peasant girl in this forest. He took the girl to London, and then deserted her. She drowned herself. The boy's father vowed he would never see the lad again, but the mother pleaded for him, and there was a sort of patched-up reconciliation. He came down to spend Christmas in the house, having faithfully promised to turn over a new leaf. There were festivities and high mirth.

"On Christmas night the whole family retired to bed as usual, but soon afterwards a scream was heard issuing from the room where the young man slept—the West Room it is called. By the way, it is the one you are to occupy, Dufrazer. The rector rushed into the room, and, to his horror and surprise, found the unfortunate young man dead, stabbed to the heart. There was, naturally, great excitement and alarm, more particularly when it was discovered that a well-known herb-woman, the mother of the girl whom the young man had decoyed to London, had been seen haunting the place. Rumour went so far as to say that she had entered the house by means of a secret passage known only to herself. Her name was Mother Heriot, and she was regarded by the villagers as a sort of witch. This woman was arrested on suspicion; but nothing was definitely proved against her, and no trial took place. Six weeks later she was found dead in her hut, on Grey Tor, and since then the rumour is that she haunts the rectory on each Christmas night—entering the house through the secret passage which we none of us can discover. This story is rife in the house, and I suppose Rosaly heard it from her old nurse. Certain it is that, when she was about eight years old, she was found on Christmas night screaming violently, and declaring that she had seen the herb-woman, who entered her room and bent down over her. Since then her nerves have never been the same. Each Christmas as it comes round is a time of mental terror to her, although she tries hard to struggle against her fears. On her account I shall be glad when Christmas is over. I do my best to make it cheerful, but I can see that she dreads it terribly."

"What about the secret passage?" I interrupted.

"Ah! I have something curious to tell you about that," said the old rector, rising as he spoke. "There is not the least doubt that it exists. It is said to have been made at the time of the Monmouth Rebellion, and is supposed to be connected with the churchyard, about two hundred yards away; but although we have searched, and have even had experts down to look into the matter, we have never been able to get the slightest clue to its whereabouts. My impression is that it was bricked up long ago, and that whoever committed the murder entered the house by some other means. Be that as it may, the passage cannot be found, and we have long ceased to trouble ourselves about it."

"But have you no clue whatever to its whereabouts?" I asked.

"Nothing which I can call a clue. My belief is that we shall have to pull down the old pile before we find the passage."

"I should like to search for it," I said, impulsively; "these sorts of things interest me immensely."

"I could give you a sort of key, Head, if that would be any use," said Sherwood; "it is in an old black-letter book." As he spoke he crossed the room, took a book bound in vellum, with silver clasps, from a locked book-case, and, opening it, laid it before me.

"This book contains a history of Rokesby," he continued. "Can you read black-letter?"

I replied that I could.

He then turned a page, and pointed to some rhymed words. "More than one expert has puzzled over these lines," he continued. "Read for yourself."

I read aloud, slowly:—

When the Yew and Star combine,  
Draw it twenty cubits line;  
Wait until the saintly lips  
Shall the belfry spire eclipse.  
Cubits eight across the first,  
There shall lie the tomb accurst.



"I READ ALOUD, SLOWLY."

"And you have never succeeded in solving this?" I continued.

"We have often tried, but never with success. The legend runs that the passage goes into the churchyard, and has a connection with one of the old vaults, but I know nothing more. Shall we join Rosaly in the drawing-room?"

"May I copy this old rhyme first?" I asked.

My host looked at me curiously; then he nodded. I took a memorandum-book from my pocket and scribbled down the words. Mr. Sherwood then locked up the book in its accustomed place, and we left the subject of the secret passage and the ghost, to enjoy the rest of the evening in a more everyday manner.

The next morning, Christmas Eve, was damp and chill, for a thaw had set in during the night. Miss Sherwood asked Dufroyer and me to help her with the church decorations, and we spent a busy morning in the very old Norman church just at the back of the vicarage. When we left it, on our way home to lunch, I could not help looking round the churchyard with interest. Where was the

tomb accurst into which the secret passage ran? As I could not talk, however, on the subject with Miss Sherwood, I resolved, at least for the present, to banish it from my mind. A sense of strong depression was still hanging over me, and Mme. Koluchy, herself, seemed to pervade the air. Yet, surely, no place could be farther from her accustomed haunts than this secluded rectory at the base of the Cumberland Hills.

"The day is brightening," said Rosaly, turning her eyes on my face, as we were entering the house; "suppose we go for a walk after lunch? If you like, we could go up Grey Tor and pay a visit to Mother Heriot."

"Mother Heriot?" I repeated, in astonishment.

"Yes—the herb-woman—but do you know about her?"

"Your father spoke about a woman of the name last night."

"Oh, I know," replied Miss Sherwood, hastily;

"but he alluded to the mother—the dreadful ghost which is said to haunt Rokesby. This is the daughter. When the mother died a long time ago, after committing a terrible murder, the daughter took her name and trade. She is a very curious person, and I should like you to see her. She is much looked up to by the neighbours, although they also fear her. She is said to have a panacea against every sort of illness: she knows the property of each herb that grows in the neighbourhood, and has certainly performed marvelous cures."

"Does she deal in witchcraft and fortune-telling?" I asked.

"A little of the latter, beyond doubt," replied the girl, laughing; "she shall tell your fortune this afternoon. What fun it will be! We must hurry with lunch, for the days are so short now."

Soon after the mid-day meal we set off, taking the road for a mile or two, and then, turning sharply to the right, we began to ascend Grey Tor. Our path led through a wood of dark pine and larches, which clothed the side of the summit of the hill. The air was still very chilly, and it struck damp as we entered the pine forest. Wreaths of white mist clung to the dripping branches of the trees, the earth was soft and yielding, with fallen pine leaves and dead fern.

"Mother Heriot's hut is just beyond the wood," said Rosaly; "you will see it as soon as we emerge. Ah! there it is," she cried.

I looked upward and saw a hut made of stone and mud, which seemed to cling to the bare side of the mountain.

We walked quickly up a winding path, that

grew narrower as we proceeded. Suddenly we emerged on to a little plateau on the mountain side. It was grass covered and strewn with grey granite boulders. Here stood the rude hut. From the chimney some smoke was going straight up like a thin, blue ribbon. As we approached close, we saw that the door of the hut was shut. From the eaves under the roof were hanging several small bunches of dried herbs. I stepped forward and struck upon the door with my stick. It was immediately opened by

a thin, middle-aged woman, with a singularly lined and withered face. I asked her if we might come in. She gave me a keen glance from out of her beady-black eyes, then seeing Rosaly, her face brightened, she made a rapid motion with her hand, and then, to my astonishment, began to speak on her fingers.

"She can hear all right, but she is quite dumb—has been so since she was a child," said the rector's daughter to me. "She does not use the ordinary deaf and dumb language, but she taught me her peculiar signs long ago, and I

often run up here to have a chat with her.

"Now, look here, mother," continued the girl, going up close to the dame, "I have brought two gentlemen to see you: we want you to tell us our fortunes. It is lucky to have the fortune told on Christmas Eve, is it not?"

The herb-woman nodded, then pointed inside the hut. She then spoke quickly on her fingers. Rosaly turned to us.

"We are in great luck," said the girl, excitedly. "A curious thing has happened.



"I ASKED HER IF WE MIGHT COME IN."

Mother Heriot has a visitor staying with her, no less a person than the greatest fortune-teller in England, the Queen of the Gipsies; she is spending a couple of nights in the hut. Mother Heriot suggests that the Queen of the Gipsies shall tell us our fortunes. It will be quite magnificent."

"I wonder if the woman she alludes to is one of the gipsies who arrived at Rokesby Station yesterday," I said, turning to Dufrayer.

"Very possibly," he answered, just raising his brows.

Rosaly continued to speak, in great excitement.

"You consent, don't you?" she said to us both.

"Certainly," said Dufrayer, with a smile.

"All right, mother," cried Miss Sherwood, turning once again to the herb-woman; "we will have our fortunes told, and your gipsy friend shall tell them. Will she come out to us here, or shall we go in to her?"

Again there was a quick pantomime of fingers and hands. Rosaly began to interpret.

"Mother Heriot says that she will speak to her first. She seems to stand in considerable awe of her."

The herb-woman vanished inside the hut. We continued to stand on the threshold.

I looked at Dufrayer, who gave me an answering glance of amusement. Our position was ridiculous, and yet, ridiculous as it seemed, there was a curiously tense feeling at my heart, and my depression grew greater than ever. I felt myself to be standing on the brink of a great catastrophe, and could not understand my own sensations.

The herb-woman returned, and Miss Sherwood eagerly interpreted.

"How queer!" she exclaimed. "The gipsy will only see me alone. I am to meet her in the hut. Shall I go?"

"I should advise you to have nothing to do with the matter," said Dufrayer.

"Oh, but I am curious. I should like to," she answered.

"Well, we will wait for you; but don't put faith in her silly words."

The girl's face slightly paled. She entered the hut; we remained outside.

"Knowing her peculiar idiosyncrasy, I wonder if we did right to let her go in?" I said to my friend.

"Why not?" said Dufrayer.

"With such a disposition she ought not to be indulged in ridiculous superstitions," I said.

"She cannot take such nonsense seriously," was his reply. He was leaning up against

the lintel of the little hut, his arms folded, his eyes looking straight before him. I had never seen his face look keener or more matter-of-fact.

A moment later Miss Sherwood re-appeared. There was a marked, and quite terrible, change in her face—it was absolutely white. She avoided our eyes, slipped a piece of silver into Mother Heriot's hand, and said, quickly:—

"Let us hurry home; it is turning very cold."

"Now, what is it?" said Dufrayer, as we began to descend the mountain; "you look as if you had heard bad news."

"The Queen of the Gipsies was very mysterious," said the girl.

"What sort of person was she?" I asked.

"I cannot tell you, Mr. Head; I saw very little of her. She was in a dark part of the hut, and was in complete shadow. She took my hand and looked at it, and said what I am not allowed to repeat."

"I am sorry you saw her," I answered, "but surely you don't believe her? You are too much a girl of the latter end of the nineteenth century to place your faith in fortune-tellers."

"But that is just it," she answered; "I am not a girl of the nineteenth century at all, and I do most fully believe in fortune-telling and all kinds of superstitions. I wish we hadn't gone. What I have heard does affect me strangely, strangely. I wish we had not gone."

We were now descending the hill, but as we walked Miss Sherwood kept glancing behind her as if afraid of someone or something following us. Suddenly she stopped, turned round and clutched my arm.

"Hark! Who is that?" she whispered, pointing her hand towards a dark shadow beneath the trees. "There is someone coming after us, I am certain there is. Don't you see a figure behind that clump? Who can it be? Listen."

We waited and stood silent for a moment, gazing towards the spot which the girl had indicated. The sharp snap of a dead twig followed by the rustling noise of rapidly retreating footsteps sounded through the stillness. I felt Miss Sherwood's hand tremble on my arm.

"There certainly was someone there," said Dufrayer; "but why should not there be?"

"Why, indeed?" I echoed. "There is nothing to be frightened about, Miss Sherwood. It is doubtless one of Mother Heriot's bucolic patients."

"They never venture near her at this hour," she answered. "They believe in her, but they are also a good deal afraid. No one ever goes to see Mother Heriot after dark. Let us get quickly home."

I could see that she was much troubled, and thought it best to humour her. We hurried forward. Just as we entered the pine wood I looked back. On the summit of the little ridge which contained Mother Heriot's hut I saw dimly through the mist a tall figure. The moment my eyes

I laughed at my own nervousness. Surely here at least we were safe from that woman's machinations.

We reached home, and I mentioned my vague suspicion to Dufroyer.

"A wild idea has occurred to me," I said.

"What?" he answered.

"It has flashed through my brain that there is just a remote possibility that the gipsy fortune-teller in Mother Heriot's hut is Madame herself."

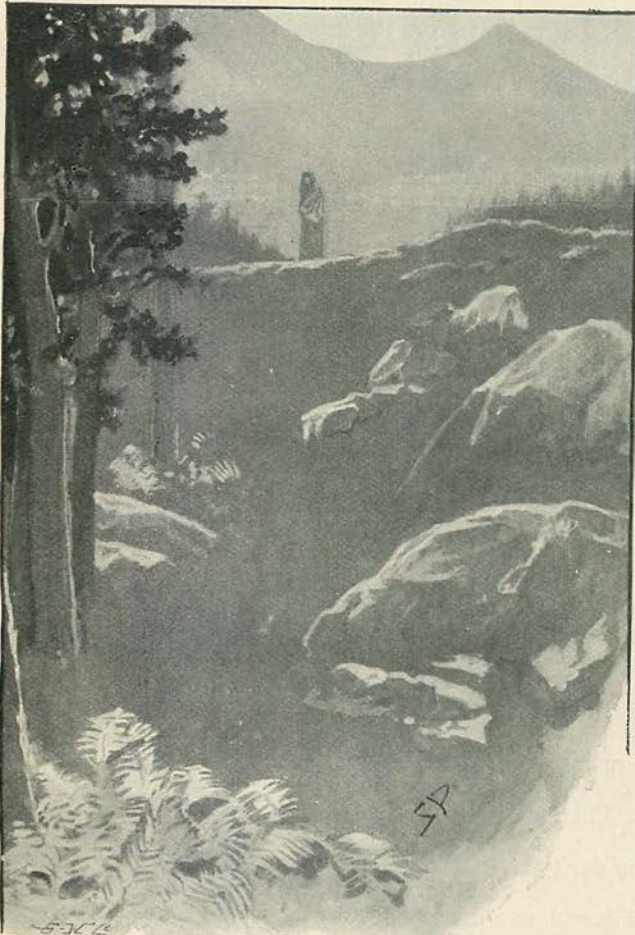
He looked thoughtful for a moment.

"We never can tell where and how Madame may reappear," he said; "but I think in this case, Head, you may banish the suspicion from your mind. Beyond doubt, the woman has left England long ago."

The evening passed away. I noticed that Rosaly was silent and preoccupied; her nervousness was now quite apparent to everyone, and her father, who could not but remark it, was especially tender to her.

Christmas Day went by quietly. In the morning we all attended service in the little church, and at night some guests arrived for the usual festivities. We passed a merry evening, but now and then I glanced with a certain apprehension at Miss Sherwood. She was in white, with holly berries in her belt and dark hair. She was certainly a very pretty girl, but the uneasiness plainly manifested in her watchful eyes and trembling lips marred her beauty. There was a want of quiet about her, too, which infected me uncomfortably. Suddenly I determined to ask for her confidence. What had the mysterious gipsy said to her? This was the night when,

according to old tradition, the ghost of the herb-woman appeared. If Miss Sherwood could relieve her mind before retiring, to rest, it would be all the better for her. We were standing near each other, and as she stooped to pick up a bunch of berries which had fallen from her belt, I bent towards her.



"I SAW DIMLY THROUGH THE MIST A TALL FIGURE."

rested on it, it vanished. There was something in its height and gait which made my heart stand still. It resembled the tall gipsy whom I had noticed yesterday, and it also bore—God in Heaven, yes—an intangible and yet very real resemblance to Mme. Koluchy. Mme. Koluchy here! Impossible! My brain must be playing me a trick.

"You are troubled about something," I said.

"Oh, I am a very silly girl," she replied.

"Will you not tell me about it?" I continued. "I will respect your confidence, and give you my sympathy."

"I ought not to encourage my nervous fears," she replied. "By the way, did father tell you about the legend connected with this house?"

"He did."

"This is the night when the herb-woman appears."

"My dear child, you don't suppose that a spirit from the other world really comes back in that fashion! Dismiss it from your mind—there is nothing in it."

"So you say," she answered, "but you never saw"—she began to tremble, and raising her hand brushed it across her eyes. "I feel a ghostly influence in the air," she said; "I know that something dreadful will happen to-night."

"You think that, because the fortune-teller frightened you yesterday?"

She gave me a startled and wide-awake glance.

"What do you mean?"

"I judge from your face and manner. If you will take courage and unburden your mind, I may, doubtless, be able to dispel your fears."

"But she told me what she did under the promise of secrecy; dare I break my word?"

"Under the circumstances, yes," I answered, quickly.

"Very well, I will tell you. I don't feel as if I could keep it to myself another moment. But you on your part must faithfully promise that it shall go no farther."

"I will make the promise," I said.

She looked me full in the face.

"Come into the conservatory," she said. She took my hand, and led me out of the long, low drawing-room into a great conservatory at the farther end. It was lit with many Chinese lanterns, which gave a dim, and yet bright, effect. We went and stood under a large lemon tree, and Miss Sherwood took one of my hands in both her own.

"I shall never forget that scene yesterday," she said. "I could scarcely see the face of the gipsy, but her great, brilliant eyes pierced the gloom, and the feel of her hand thrilled me when it touched mine. She

asked me to kneel by her, and her voice was very full, and deep, and of great power; it was not like that of an uneducated woman. She spoke very slowly, with a pause between each word.

"I pity you, for you are close to death," she began.

"I felt myself quite incapable of replying, and she continued:—

"Not your own death, nor even that of your father, but all the same you are very close to death. Death will soon touch you, and it will be cold, and mysterious, and awful, and try as

you may, you cannot guard against it, for it will come from a very unlooked-for source, and be instant and swift in its work. Now ask me no more—go!"

"But what about the fortunes of the two gentlemen who are waiting outside?" I said.

"I have told you the fortunes of those men," she answered; "go!"

"She waved me away with her hand, and I went out. That is all, Mr. Head. I do not know what it means, but you can understand



"MISS SHERWOOD TOOK ONE OF MY HANDS IN BOTH HER OWN."



that to a nervous girl like me it has come as a shock."

"I can, truly," I replied; "and now you must make up your mind not to think of it any more. The gipsy saw that you were nervous, and she thought she would heighten the impression by words of awful portent, which doubtless mean nothing at all."

Rosaly tried to smile, and I think my words comforted her. She little guessed the battle I was having with my own heart. The unaccountable depression which had assailed me of late now gathered thick like a pall.

Late that evening I went to Dufroyer's room. I had promised Miss Sherwood that I would not betray her confidence, but the words of the gipsy in the herb-woman's hut kept returning to me again and again.

*"I pity you, for you are close to death. You cannot guard against it, for it will come from an unlooked-for source, and be instant and swift in its work."*

"What is the matter?" said Dufroyer, glancing into my face.

"I am depressed," I replied; "the ghostly legend belonging to this house is affecting me."

He smiled.

"And by the way," I added, "you are sleeping in the room where the murder was committed."

He smiled again, and gave me a glance of amused commiseration.

"Really, Head," he cried, "this sort of thing is unlike you. Surely old wives' fables ought not to give you a moment's serious thought. The fact that an unfortunate lad was murdered in this room cannot affect my nerves some twenty years afterwards. Do go to bed, my dear fellow; you need a long sleep."

He bade me good-night. I had no excuse to linger, and I left him.

Just as I had reached the door, he called after me.

"Good-night, old man; sleep well."

I turned and looked at him. He was standing by the window, his face was towards me, and he still wore that inscrutable smile which was one of his special characteristics. I left him. I little guessed . . . .

I retired to my room; my brain was on fire; it was impossible for me to rest. What was yesterday but a vague suspicion was now assuming the form of a certainty. Only one person could have uttered the words which Miss Sherwood had heard. Beyond doubt, Madame Koluchy had known of our proposed visit to Rokesby. Beyond doubt, she, in company with some gipsies, had joined our train, and when we arrived at Rokesby, she

alighted there also. With her knowledge of the gipsies, an acquaintanceship with Mother Heriot would be easily made. To take refuge in her hut would be a likely contingency. Why had she done so? What mischief could she do to us from such a vantage point? Suddenly, like a vivid flash, the memory of the secret passage, which none of the inmates of the house could discover, returned to me. In all probability this passage was well known to Mother Heriot, for had not her mother committed the murder which had taken place in this very house, and did not the legend say that she had entered the house, and quitted it again, through the secret passage?

I quickly made up my mind. I must act, and act at once. I would go straight to the hut; I would confront Madame; I would meet her alone. In open combat I had nothing to fear. Anything was better than this wearing and agonizing suspense.

I waited in my room until the steps of the old rector retiring for the night were heard, and then went swiftly downstairs. I took the key of the hall door from its hook on the wall, opened it, locked it behind me, went to the stables, secured a lantern, and then began my ascent of Grey Tor.

The night was clear and starlit, the moon had not yet risen, but the stars made sufficient light for me to see my way. After a little over an hour's hard walking, I reached the herb-woman's hut. I thundered on the door with my stick, and in a minute the dame appeared. Suddenly I remembered that she was dumb, but she could hear. I spoke to her.

"I have a word to say to the stranger who was here yesterday," I began. "Is she within? I must see her at once."

The herb-woman shook her head.

"I do not believe you," I said; "stand aside, I must search the hut."

She stood aside, and I entered. There was no one else present. The hut was small, a glance showed me each corner—the herb-woman's guest had departed.

Without even apologizing for my abrupt intrusion, I quickly ran down the mountain, and, as I did so, the queer rhyme which contained the key to the secret passage occurred to my memory. I had my memorandum-book with me; I opened it now, and read the words:—

When the Yew and Star combine,  
Draw it twenty cubits line;  
Wait until the saintly lips  
Shall the belfry spire eclipse.  
Cubits eight across the first,  
There shall lie the tomb accurst.

Gibberish doubtless, and yet gibberish with a possible meaning. I pondered over the enigmatical words.

"There is a yew tree in the churchyard," I said to myself, "but the rest seems unfathomable."

There was a short cut home through the churchyard—I resolved to take it. I went there and walked straight to the yew tree.

"When the Yew and Star combine," I said, speaking aloud. "Surely there is only one star which remains immovable—the Pole, or North Star."

I looked up at the sky—the Pole star was shining down upon me. I became excited and much interested. Moving about, I presently got the trunk of the old yew tree and the star in a line. Then I again examined my key.

"Draw it twenty cubits line."

Twenty cubits meant thirty feet. I walked on in a straight line that distance, and then perceived in the moonlight, for the moon had now risen, that standing here, and looking at the church spire, the lips of the stone carving of

a saint just covered the spire itself from view. Surely the meaning of the second couplet was plain:—

Wait until the saintly lips  
Shall the belfry spire eclipse.

The third and last couplet ran as follows:—

Cubits eight across the first,  
There shall lie the tomb accurst.

My heart beating hard, I quickly measured eight cubits, namely twelve feet, and then started back with a cry of horror, for I had come to a large vault, which stood open. The entrance-stone had been moved aside. Without an instant's hesitation I ran down some steps. The tomb was a large one, and was

quite empty; never coffin of man had lain here, but a passage wound away to the left, a tortuous passage, down which I quickly walked. My lantern threw light on the ghastly place, and the air was sufficiently good to prevent the candle going out.

Why was the tomb open? What was happening? Fear itself seemed to walk by my side. Never before had I so felt its ghastly presence. I hurried my steps, and soon perceived a dim light at the farther end.

The next instant I had entered the hall of the old house. I had done so through a panel which had been slipped aside. Had anyone gone in before me? If so, whom! Who had opened the tomb? Who had traversed the passage? Who had gone into the house by this fearful and long-closed door?

I was just about to rush upstairs, when a piercing scream fell on my ears; it came from just above me. With two or three bounds I cleared the stairs, and the next instant my eyes fell upon a huddled-up heap on the landing. I bent over it; it was

Rosaly. Her features were twitching in a horrible manner, and her dilated eyes stared at me without any recognition. Her lips were murmuring, "Catch her! catch her!"

The next moment the rector appeared hurrying down the passage in his dressing-gown.

"What is wrong?" he cried; "what has happened?"

The girl clung to my arm, and now sent up scream after scream. The entire house was aroused, and the servants with scared faces came running to the spot. Rosaly's terror now found vent in fresh words.



"I STARTED BACK WITH A CRY OF HORROR."

"The herb-woman," she sobbed, "the ghost of the herb-woman. I heard a noise and ran on to the landing. I met her—she was coming from Mr. Dufroyer's room—she was making straight for yours, Mr. Head. Suddenly she saw me, uttered a cry, and fled downstairs. Oh, catch her, the ghost! the ghost!"

"Did you say the woman was coming from Dufroyer's room?" I asked. A sudden maddening fear clutched at my heart. Where was Dufroyer? Surely he must have heard this uproar. I went to his room, opened the door, and dashed in. Inside all was darkness.

"Wake up," I said to him, "something dreadful has happened—did you not hear Rosaly scream? Wake up!"

There was no answer. I returned to the landing to fetch a light. The rector now accompanied me into the room. We both went up to the silent figure in the bed. I bent over him and shook him by the shoulder. Still he did not stir. I bent lower, and observed on his neck, just behind the ear, a slight mark, the mark which a hypodermic syringe would make. Good God! what had happened?

*"You are close to death. You cannot guard against it, try as you may, for it will come from an unlooked for source, and be instant and swift in its work."*

The words echoed mockingly in my ears. I flung down the bed-clothes, and, in an access of agony, laid my hand on the heart of the man I loved best on earth. He was dead!

I staggered back, faint and giddy, against the bed-post.

"See," I said to the old clergyman, "her work, the fiend; she has been in this house. She has entered by the secret passage. Come at once; there is not an instant to lose. As there is a God in Heaven, she shall pay the price for this crime."

Sherwood gazed at me, as if he thought me bereft of my senses. He could not believe that Dufroyer was really dead. I pointed to the small wound on his neck, and asked him to feel where the heart no longer beat.

"But who has done it?" he said. "What fiend do you allude to?"

"Mme. Koluchy; let us follow her."

I rushed from the room and downstairs. The panel in the hall had been slammed to, but my memory could not play me false; I knew its position. I found what had been so long searched for in vain, touched a spring,

and opened it. Sherwood and I hurried down the winding passage. Just at the entrance to the tomb we came upon a gipsy woman's bonnet and cloak. They had been dropped there, doubtless, by Madame when she had flown after committing her deadly work. We entered the empty tomb. On the floor lay a small hypodermic syringe. I picked it up—it was broken. To its sides clung a whitish-grey substance. I guessed what it afterwards proved to be—trinitrin, or nitro-glycerine in strong solution. The effect of such a terrible poison would be instantaneous.

Sherwood and I returned to the house—the place was in an uproar of excitement. The local police were called in. I told my strange tale, and my strong suspicions, to which they listened with breathless interest.

Rosaly was very ill, going from one strong hysterical fit into another. The doctor was summoned to attend her. The fact of Dufroyer's death was carefully kept from the sick girl. Her father was so distracted about her that he could give no attention to anyone else.

Meanwhile I was alone, utterly alone, with my anguish and horror. The friend of my life had fallen by the hand of Mme. Koluchy. A fire was burning in my brain, which grew hotter each instant. Never was man more pursued with a deadly thirst for vengeance. The thought that Madame was moment by moment putting a greater distance between herself and me drove me mad. Towards morning I could stand inaction no longer, and determined to walk to the station. When I got there I learned that no train left before nine o'clock. This was more than I could bear; my restlessness increased. The junction which connected with the main line was a distance of fifteen miles off. There was no carriage to be obtained. Nevertheless, I resolved to walk the distance. I had over-estimated my own strength. I was already faint and giddy. The shock had told on me more than I dared to own. I had not gone half the distance before I was seized with a queer giddiness, my eyes grew dim, the earth seemed to reel away from me, I staggered forward a few steps, and then all was lost in darkness. I must have stumbled and fallen by the wayside, and my fit of unconsciousness must have been long, for when I came to myself the sun was high in the heavens. A rough-looking man, dressed as a workman, was bending over me.

"You have been real bad," he said, the



"A ROUGH-LOOKING MAN WAS BENDING OVER ME."

moment my eyes met his. "The lady said to throw cold water on you and you'd be better."

The man's words roused me as no ordinary restorative could do. I sat up, and the next moment had tottered to my feet.

"The lady?" I said. "Did you mention a lady? What lady?"

"A tall lady," was the reply, "a stranger in these parts. She was bending over you when I come along. She had black eyes, and I thought she was giving you something to bring you round. When she saw me she said, 'You dash cold water over him, and he'll come to.'"

"But where is the lady now?" I gasped.

"There by yonder hill, just going over the brow, don't you see?"

"I do, and I know who she is. I must overtake her. Good-bye, my man, I am all right."

So I was: the sudden stimulus had renewed my faltering strength. I recognised that figure. With that grace, inimitable and perfect, which never at any moment deserted it, it was moving from my view. Yes, I knew it. Mme. Koluchy had doubtless

found me by the wayside, and had meant to complete the work which she had begun last night. Had she still possessed her syringe I should now have been a dead man. Where was she going? Doubtless to catch the very train to which I was hurrying. If so, we should meet almost immediately. I hurried forward. Once again I caught sight of the figure in the far distance. I could not get up to it, and suddenly I felt that I did not want to. I should meet her in London to-night. That was my thought of thoughts.

As I approached the great junction I heard the whistle of a coming train. It was the express. It dashed into the station just as I reached it. I was barely in time. Without waiting for a ticket I stumbled almost in a fainting condition into the first carriage I could reach. The train moved on. I felt a sudden sense of satisfaction. Mme. Koluchy was also on board.

How that awful journey was passed is difficult for me to remember. Beyond the thought of thoughts that Madame and I were rushing to London by the same train, that we should beyond doubt meet soon, I had little feeling of any sort. Her hour was close at hand—my hour of vengeance was nigh.

At the first junction I handed two telegrams to a porter and desired him to send them off immediately. They were to Tyler and Ford.

When between eight and nine o'clock that night we reached Euston, the detectives were waiting for me.

"Mme. Koluchy is in the train," I said to them; "you can apprehend her if you are quick—there is not an instant to lose."

The men in wild excitement began to search along the platform. I followed them. Surely Madame could not have already escaped. She had not the faintest idea that I was in the train; she would take things leisurely when she reached Euston. So I had hoped, but my hopes were falsified. Nowhere could we get even a glimpse of the face for which we sought.

"Never mind," said Ford, "I also have news, and I believe that our success is

near. We will go straight to her house. I learned not an hour ago that a fresh staff of servants had been secured, and the house is brightly lit up. Our detectives who surround the place are under the impression that she will be in her old quarters to-night. I have a carriage in waiting: we will start immediately."

Without a word I entered it, and we drove off. We made no plans beyond the intention in each man's breast that Madame should be taken either alive or dead.

As the carriage drew up at the house I noticed that the hall was brilliantly lighted. The moment Ford touched the bell a flunkey threw the door open, as if he were waiting for us.

"My mistress is in her laboratory," was his reply to our inquiries. "She has just returned after a journey. I think she expects you, gentlemen. Will you go to her there?—you know the way."

We rapidly crossed the hall and began to descend the stone steps. As we did so the muffled hum of machinery in rapid motion fell on our ears. Just as we reached the laboratory door Ford, who had been leading the way, stopped and turned round. His face was very pale, but he spoke firmly and quietly.

"There is not the least doubt," he said, in a semi-whisper, "that we are going into great danger. Madame would not receive us like this if she had not made a plan for our destruction which only she could devise. It is impossible to tell what may happen. That it will be a terrible encounter, and that it will need all our strength and presence of mind, is certain, for we are now about to enter the very sanctuary of her fiendish arts and appliances. I will go first. The moment I see her I shall cover her, and if she stirs will shoot her dead on the spot."

He turned the handle of the door, and we slipped silently into the laboratory.

It was like entering a furnace, the heat was stifling. A single incandescent burner shed a subdued light over the place, revealing the outline of the stone roof and dim recesses in the walls. At the farther end stood Madame. As we entered, she turned slowly and faced us; her face was quiet, her lips closed, her eyes alone expressed emotion.

"Hands up, or I fire!" rang out from Ford, who stepped forward and immediately covered her with his revolver.

She instantly obeyed, raising both her arms; her eyes now met mine, and the faintest of smiles played round her lips.

The next instant, as if wrenched from his grasp by some unseen power, the weapon leapt from Ford's hands, and dashed itself with terrific force against the poles of an enormous electro-magnet beside him. Every loose piece of iron started and sprang towards it with a deafening crash. Madame must have made the current by pressing a key on the floor with her foot. For a moment we stood rooted to the spot, thunder-struck by the sudden and unforeseen method by which we had been disarmed.

Mme. Koluchy still continued to gaze at us, but now her smile grew broader, and soon it rang out in a scornful laugh.

"It is my turn to dictate terms," she said, in a steady, even voice. "Advance one step towards me, and we die together. Norman Head, this is your supposed hour of victory, but know that you will never take me either alive or dead."

As she spoke her hand moved to a small lever on the bench beside her. She drew herself up to her full, majestic height, and stood rigid as a figure carved in marble. I glanced at Ford: his lips were firmly compressed, drops of sweat gleamed upon his face, he began to breathe quickly through distended nostrils, then with a sudden spring he bounded forward, and simultaneously there leapt up, straight before our eyes, what seemed like one huge sheet of white flame. So fearfully bright and dazzling was it that it struck us like a blow, and Tyler and I fell. We were blinded by a heat that seemed to sear our very eyeballs. The next moment all was darkness.

When I came to myself a cool draught of air was blowing upon my face, and Tyler's voice sounded in my ears. I rose, staggering. Before my eyes there still seemed to dance a thousand sparks and whirling wheels of fire. The servants were running about wildly, and one of the men had brought a lamp from the hall—it lit up the wild and haggard face of my companion.

"We dare not go back," he whispered, pointing to the laboratory door, trembling and almost gibbering as he did so.

"But what has happened?" I said.

I made a rush towards the laboratory. Two of the men held me back forcibly.

"It's not safe, sir," one of them said; "the room within is a furnace. You would die if you entered."

By main force I was kept from rushing to my own destruction.

It was an hour later when we entered. Even then the heat was almost past bearing. Slowly and cautiously Tyler and I approached the spot where we had last seen Mme. Koluchy. Upon the stone flags lay the body

vast oxyhydrogen flame to give the intensest heat known, a heat computed by scientists at the enormous temperature of 2,400deg. Centigrade.

It was evident what had happened. As



"HANDS UP, OR I FIRE!"

of the detective, so terribly burnt as to be almost unrecognisable, and a few yards farther was the mouth of a big hole, from which still radiated a fierce heat. By degrees it cooled sufficiently to allow us to examine it. It was about 8ft. deep and circular in shape. From its walls jutted innumerable jets. Their use was evident to me at once, for upon the floor beside us stood an enormous iron cylinder, such as are used for compressed gases. These had presumably been used before to create by means of the jets one

Ford sprang forward Madame must have released the iron trap and descended through a column of this fearful flame, not only causing instantaneous death, but simultaneously also an absolute annihilation.

At the bottom of the well lay a small heap of smouldering ashes. These were all the earthly remains of the brain that had conceived and the body that had executed some of the most malignant designs against mankind that the history of the world has ever shown.