

A Dead Secret

By Fitz-James O'Brien

In what manner I became acquainted with that which follows, and from whom I had it, it serves not to relate here. It is enough that he *was* hanged, and that this is his story.

“And how came you,” I asked, “to be—” I did not like to say hanged, for fear of wounding his delicacy, but I hinted my meaning by an expressive gesture.

“How came I to be hanged!” he echoed, in a tone of strident hoarseness. “You would like to know all about it—wouldn't you!”

He was sitting opposite to me at the end of the walnut-tree table in his shirt and trowsers, his bare feet on the bare polished oak floor. There was a dark bistre ring round each of his eyes; and they—being spherical rather than oval, with the pupils fixed and coldly shining in the centre of the orbits—were more like those of some wild animal than of a man. The hue of his forehead, too, was ghastly and dingy; blue, violet, and yellow, like a bruise that is five days old. There was a clammy sweat on his beard and under the lobes of his ears; and the sea-breeze coming gently through the open Venetians (for the night was very sultry), fanned his long locks of coarse dark hair until you might almost fancy you saw the serpents of the Furies writhing in them. The fingers of his lean hands were slightly crooked inward, owing to some involuntary muscular rigidity, and I noticed that his whole frame was pervaded by a nervous trembling, less spasmodic than regular, and resembling that which shakes a man afflicted with *delirium tremens*.

I had given him a cigar. After moistening the end of it in his mouth, he said, bending his eyes toward me, but still more on the wall behind my chair than on my face: “It's no use. You may torture me, scourge me, flay me alive. You may rasp me with rusty files, and seethe me in vinegar, and rub my eyes with gunpowder—but I can't tell you where the child is. I don't know—I never knew. How am I to make you believe that I don't know—that I never knew!”

“My good friend,” I remarked, “you do not seem to be aware that, so far from wishing you to tell me where the child you allude to is, I am not actuated by the slightest curiosity to know any thing about any child whatever. Permit me to observe that I can not see the smallest connection between a child and your being hanged.”

“No connection!” retorted my companion, with vehemence. “It *is* the connection—the cause. But for that child I should never have been hanged.”

He went on muttering and panting about this child; and I pushed toward him a bottle of thin claret. (Being liable to be called up at all hours of the night, I find it lighter drinking than any other wine.) He filled a large tumbler—which he emptied into himself, rather than drank—and I observed that his lips were so dry and smooth with parchedness, that the liquid formed little globules of moisture on them, like drops of water on an oil-cloth. Then he began:

I had the misery to be born (he said) about seven-and-thirty years ago. I was the offspring of a double misery, for my mother was a newly-made widow when I was born, and she died in giving me birth. What my name was before I assumed the counterfeit that has blasted my life, I shall not tell you. But it was no patrician, high-sounding title, for my father was a petty tradesman, and my mother had been a domestic servant. Two kinsmen succored me in my orphanage. They were both uncles; one by my father's, one by my mother's side. The former was a retired sailor, rich, and a bachelor. The latter was a grocer, still in business. He was a widower, with one daughter,

and not very well to do in the world. They hated each other with the sort of cold, fixed, and watchful aversion that a savage cat has for a dog too large for her to worry.

These two uncles played a miserable game of battledore and shuttlecock with me for nearly fourteen years. I was bandied about from one to the other, and equally maltreated by both. Now, it was my Uncle Collerer who discovered that I was starved by my Uncle Morbus, and took me under his protection. Now, my Uncle Morbus was indignant at my Uncle Collerer for beating me, and insisted that I should return to his roof. I was beaten and starved by one, and starved and beaten by the other. I endeavored—with that cunning which brutal treatment will teach the dullest child—to trim my sails to please both uncles. I could only succeed by ministering to the hatred they mutually had one for the other. I could only propitiate Collerer by abusing Morbus: the only road to Morbus's short-lived favor was by defaming Collerer. Nor do I think I did either of them much injustice; for they were both wicked-minded old men. I believe either of them would have allowed me to starve in the gutter; only each thought that, appearing to protect me, would naturally spite the other.

When I was about fifteen years old, it occurred to me, that I should make an election for good and all between my uncles; else, between these two knotty, crabbed stools I might fall to the ground. Naturally enough I chose the rich uncle—the retired sailor, Collerer; and although I dare say he knew I only clove to him for the sake of his money, he seemed perfectly satisfied with my hearty abuse of my Uncle Morbus, and my total abnegation of his society; for, for three years I never went near his house, and when he met me in the street I gave him the breadth of the pavement, and reeked nothing for his shaking his fist at me, and calling me an ungrateful hound. My Uncle Collerer, although retired from the sea, had not left off making money. He lent it at usury on mortgages, and in numberless other crawling ways. I soon became his right hand, and assisted him in grinding the needy, in selling up poor tradesmen, and in buckling on the spurs of spendthrifts when they started for the race, the end of which was to be the jail. My uncle was pleased with me; and although he was miserably parsimonious in his housekeeping and in his allowance to me, I had hopes and lived on; but very much in the fashion of a rat in a hole.

I had known Mary Morbus, the grocer's daughter, years before. She was a sickly, delicate child, and I had often teased and struck and robbed her of her playthings, in my evil childhood. But she grew up a surpassingly beautiful creature, and I loved her. We met by stealth in the park outside her father's door while he was asleep in church on Sundays; and I fancied she began to love me. There was little in my mind or person, in my white face, elf-locks, and dull speech to captivate a girl; but her heart was full of love, and its brightness gilded my miserable clay. I felt my heart newly opened. I hoped for something more than my uncle's moneybags. We interchanged all the flighty vows of everlasting affection and constancy common to boys and girls; and although we knew the two fierce hatreds that stood betwixt us and happiness, we left the accomplishment of our wishes to time and fortune, and went on hoping and loving.

One evening, at supper-time—for which meal we had the heel of a Dutch cheese, a loaf of seconds bread, and a pint of small beer—I noticed that my Uncle Collerer looked more malignant and sullen than usual. He spoke little, and bit his food as if he had a spite against it. When supper was over, he went to an old worm-eaten bureau in which he was wont to keep documents of value; and, taking out a bundle of papers, untied and began to read them. I took little heed of that; for his favorite course of evening reading was bonds and mortgage deeds; and on every eve of bills of exchange falling due he would spend hours in poring over the acceptances and endorsements, and even in bed he would lie awake half the night moaning and crooning lest the bills should not be paid on the morrow. After carefully reading and sorting

these papers, he tossed them over to me, and left the room without a word. Then I heard him going up stairs to the top of the house, where my room was.

I opened the packet with trembling hands and a beating heart. I found every single letter I had written to Mary Morbus. The room seemed to turn round. The white sheet I held and the black letters dancing on it were all I could see. All beyond—the room, the house, the world—was one black unutterable gulf of darkness. I tried to read a line—a line I had known by heart for months; but, to my scared senses, it might as well have been Chaldee. Then my uncle's heavy step was heard on the stairs.

He entered the room, dragging after him a small black portmanteau in which I kept all that I was able to call my own. "I happened to have a key that opens this," he said, "and I have read every one of the fine love-letters that silly girl has sent you. But I have been much more edified by the perusal of yours, which I only received from your good Uncle Morbus—strangle him!—last night. I'm a covetous hunks, am I? You live in hopes, do you? Hope told a flattering tale, my young friend. I've only two words to say to you," continued my uncle, after a few minutes' composed silence on his part, and of blank consternation on mine. "All your rags are in that trunk. Either give up Mary Morbus—now and forever, and write a letter to her here in my presence to that effect—or turn out into the street and never show your face here again. Make up your mind quickly, and for good." He then filled his pipe and lighted it.

While he sat composedly smoking his pipe, I was employed in making up my wretched mind. Love, fear, interest, avarice-cursed avarice—alternately gained ascendancy within me. At length there came a craven inspiration that I might temporize; that by pretending to renounce Mary, and yet secretly assuring her of my constancy, I might play a double game, and yet live in hopes of succeeding to my uncle's wealth. To my shame and confusion, I caught at this coward expedient, and signified my willingness to do as my uncle desired.

"Write then," he resumed, flinging me a sheet of letter-paper and a pen. "I will dictate."

I took the pen; and following his dictation wrote, I scarcely can tell what now; but I suppose some abject words to Mary, saying that I resigned all claim to her hand.

"That'll do very nicely, nephew," said my uncle, when I had finished. "We needn't fold it, or seal it, or post it, because—he, he, he!—we can deliver it upon the spot." We were in the front parlor, which was separated from the back room by a pair of folding-doors. My uncle got up, opened one of these; and with a mock bow ushered in my Uncle Morbus and my Cousin Mary.

"A letter for you, my dear," grinned the old wretch; "a letter from your *true love*. Though I dare say you'll have no occasion to read it, for you must have heard it. I speak plain enough, though I am asthmatic, and can't last long—can't last long—eh, nephew!" This was a quotation from one of my own letters.

When Mary took the letter from my uncle, her hand shook as with the palsy. But, when I besought her to look at me, and passionately adjured her to believe that I was yet true to her, she turned on me a glance of scornful incredulity; and, crushing the miserable paper in her hand, cast it contemptuously from her.

"*You* marry my daughter," my Uncle Morbus piped forth—"you? Your father couldn't pay two-and-twopence in the pound. He owed me money, he owes me money to this day. Why ain't there laws to make sons pay their fathers' debts? You marry my daughter? Do you think I'd have your father's son—do you think I'd have your uncle's nephew for my son-in-law?" I could see that the temporary bond of union between my two uncles was already beginning to loosen; and a wretched hope sprang up within me.

“Get out of my house, you and your daughter, too!” cried my Uncle Collerer. “You’ve served my turn, and I’ve served yours. Now, go!”

I could hear the two old men fiercely, yet feebly, quarreling in the passage, and Mary weeping piteously without saying a word. Then the great street door was banged to, and my uncle came in, muttering and panting. “I hope you are satisfied now, uncle,” I said.

“Satisfied!” he cried with a sort of shriek, catching up the great earthen jar, with the leaden top, in which he kept his tobacco, as though he meant to fling it at me. “Satisfied!—I’ll satisfy you: go. Go! and never let me see your hang-dog face again!”

“You surely do not intend to turn me out of doors, uncle!” I faltered.

“March, bag and baggage. If you are here a minute longer, I’ll call the police. Go!” And he pointed to the door.

“But where am I to go?” I asked.

“Go and beg,” said my uncle; “go and cringe to your dear Uncle Morbus. Go and rot!”

So saying he opened the door, kicked my trunk into the hall, thrust me out of the room and into the street, and pushed my portmanteau after me, without my making the slightest resistance. He slammed the door in my face, and left me in the open street, at twelve o’clock at night.

I slept that night at a coffee-shop. I had a few shillings in my pocket; and, next morning, I took a lodging at, I think, four shillings a week, in a court, somewhere up a back street between Gray’s Inn and Leather Lane, Holborn. My room was at the top of the house. The court below swarmed with dirty, ragged children. My lodging was a back garret; and, when I opened the window, I could only see a narrow strip of sky, and a foul heap of sooty roofs, chimneypots and leads, with the great dingy brick tower of a church towering above all. Where the body of the church was I never knew.

I wrote letter after letter to my uncles and to Mary, but never received a line in answer. I wandered about the streets all day, feeding on saveloys and penny loaves. I went to my wretched bed by daylight, and groaned for darkness to come; then groaned that it might grow light again. I knew no one to whom I could apply for employment, and knew no means by which I could obtain it. The house I lived in and the neighborhood were full of foreign refugees and street mountebanks, whose jargon I could not understand. My little stock of money slowly dwindled away; and, in ten days, my mind was ripe for suicide. You must serve an apprenticeship to acquire that ripeness. Crowded streets, utter desolation and friendlessness in them, scanty food, and the knowledge that when you have spent all your money and sold your coat and waistcoat you must starve, are the best masters. They produce that frame of mind which coroners’ juries call temporary insanity. I determined to die. I expended my last coin in purchasing laudanum at different chemists’ shops—a pennyworth at each; which, I said, I wanted for the toothache; for I knew they would not supply a large quantity to a stranger. I took my dozen vials home, and poured their contents into a broken mug that stood on my wash-handstand. I locked the door, sat down on my fatal black portmanteau, and tried to pray; but I could not.

It was about nine in the evening, in the summer time, and the room was in that state of semi-obscurity you call “between the lights.” While I sat on my black portmanteau, I heard through my garret window, which was wide open, a loud noise, a confusion of angry voices, in which I could not distinguish one word I could comprehend. The noise was followed by a pistol-shot. I hear it now, as distinctly as I heard it twenty years ago; and then another. As I looked out of the window I saw a pair of hands covered with blood, clutching the sill, and I heard a voice imploring help for God’s sake! Scarcely knowing what I did, I drew up from the leads below and into the room the body of a man, whose face was one mass of blood—like a crimson mask. He

stood upright on the floor when I had helped him in; his face glaring at me like the spot one sees after gazing too long at the sun. Then he began to stagger, and went reeling about the room, catching at the window curtain, the table, the wall, and leaving traces of his blood wherever he went—I following him in an agony—until he fell face-foremost on the bed.

I lit a candle as well as I could. He was quite dead. His features were so scorched and mangled, and drenched, that not one trait was to be distinguished. The pistol must have been discharged full in his face, for some of his long black hair was burnt off. He held, clasped in his left hand, a pistol which evidently had been recently discharged.

I sat by the side of this horrible object twenty minutes or more, waiting for the alarm which I thought must necessarily follow, and resolving what I should do. But all was as silent as the grave. No one in the house seemed to have heard the pistol-shot, and no one without seemed to have heeded it. I looked from the window, but the dingy mass of roofs and chimneys had grown black with night, and I could perceive nothing moving. Only, as I held my candle out of the window it mirrored itself dully in a pool of blood on the leads below.

I began to think I might be accused of the murder of this unknown man. I, who had so lately courted a violent death, began to fear it, and to shake like an aspen at the thought of the gallows. Then I tried to persuade myself that it was all a horrible dream; but there, on the bed, was the dreadful dead man in his blood, and all about the room were the marks of his gory fingers.

I began to examine the body more minutely. The dead man was almost exactly of my height and stoutness. Of his age I could not judge. His hair was long and black like mine. In one of his pockets I found a pocket-book, containing a mass of closely-written sheets of very thin paper, in a character utterly incomprehensible to me; moreover, there was a roll of English bank-notes to a very considerable amount. In his waistcoat pocket was a gold watch; and in a silken girdle round his waist, were two hundred English sovereigns and louis d'ors.

What fiend stood at my elbow while I made this examination I know not. The plan I fixed upon was not long revolved in my mind. It seemed to start up matured, like Minerva, from the head of Jupiter. I was resolved. The dead should be alive, and the live man dead. In less time than it takes to tell, I had stripped the body, dressed it in my own clothes, assumed the dead man's garments, and secured the pocket-book, the watch, and the money about my person. Then I overturned the lighted candle on to the bed, slouched my hat over my eyes, and stole down stairs. No one met me on the stairs, and I emerged into the court. No man pursued me, and I gained the open street. It was only, an hour after perhaps, as I crossed Holborn toward St. Andrew's Church, that I saw fire engines come rattling along; and, asking unconcernedly where the fire was, heard that it was "somewhere off Gray's Inn Lane."

I slept nowhere that night. I scarcely remember what I did; but I have an indistinct remembrance of flinging sovereigns about in blazing gas-lit taverns. It is a marvel to me now that I did not become senseless with liquor, unaccustomed as I was to dissipation. The next morning I read the following paragraph in a newspaper:

AWFUL SUICIDE AND FIRE NEAR GRAY'S INN LANE.

Last night the inhabitants of Cragg's Court, Hustle-street, Gray's Inn Lane, were alarmed by volumes of smoke issuing from the windows of number five in that court, occupied as a lodging-house. On Mr. Plose, the landlord, entering a garret on the third floor, it was found that its tenant, Mr. , had committed suicide by blowing his brains out with a pistol, which was found tightly clenched in the wretched man's hand. Either from the ignition of the wadding, or from some other cause, the fire had communicated to the bedclothes;

all of which, with the bed and a portion of the furniture, were consumed. The engines of the North of England Fire Brigade were promptly on the spot; and the fire was with great difficulty at last successfully extinguished; little beyond the room occupied by the deceased being injured. The body and face of the miserable suicide were frightfully mutilated; but sufficient evidence was afforded from his clothes and papers to establish his identity. No cause is assigned for the rash act; and it is even stated that if he had prolonged his existence a few hours later, he would have come into possession of a fortune of thirty thousand pounds, his uncle, Gripple Collerer, Esq., of Raglan-street, Clerkenwell, having died only two days before, and having constituted him his sole heir and legatee. That active and intelligent parish officer, Mr. Pybus, immediately forwarded the necessary intimation to the Coroner, and the inquest will be held this evening at the Kiddy's Arms, Hustle-street.

I had lost all—name, existence, thirty thousand pounds, every thing—for about four hundred pounds in gold and notes.

“So I suppose,” I said, as he who was hanged paused, “that you gave yourself up with a view of re-establishing your identity; and, failing to do that, you were hanged for murder or arson?”

I waited for a reply. He had lit another cigar, and sat smoking it. Seeing that he was calm, I judged it best not to excite or aggravate him by further questioning, but staid his pleasure. I had not to wait long.

“Not so,” he resumed; “what I became that night I have remained ever since, and am now; that is, if I am any thing at all. The very day on which that paragraph appeared, I set off by the coach. My only wish was to get as far from London and from England as I possibly could; and, in due time, we came to Hull. Hearing that Hamburg was the nearest foreign port, to Hamburg I went. I lived there for six months in an hotel, frugally and in solitude, and endeavoring to learn German; for, on narrower examination of the papers in the pocket-book, I guessed some portions of them to be written in that language. I was a dull scholar; but at the end of six months, I had scraped together enough German to know that the dead man's name was Muller; that he had been in Russia, in France, and in America. I managed to translate portions of a diary he had kept while in this latter country; but they only related to his impressions of the towns he had visited. He often alluded, too, casually to his ‘secret’ and his ‘charge;’ but what that secret and that charge were, I could not discover. There were also hints about a ‘shepherdess,’ and ‘antelope,’ and a ‘blue tiger’—fictitious names, I presumed, for some persons with whom he was connected. The great mass of the documents was in a cipher utterly inexplicable to my most strenuous ingenuity and research. I went by the name of Müller; but I found that there were hundreds more Müllers in Hamburg, and no man sought me out.

I was in the habit of going every evening to a lager-beer house outside the town, to smoke my pipe. There generally sat at the same table with me a little fat man in a gray great-coat, who smoked and drank beer incessantly. I was suspicious and shy of strangers; but, between this little man and me there gradually grew up a quiet kind of tavern acquaintance.

One evening, when we had had a rather liberal potation of pipes and beer, he asked me if I had ever tasted the famous Baierische or Bavarian beer, adding that it threw all other German beers into the shade, and liberally offering to pay for a flask of it. I was in rather merry humor, and assented. We had one bottle of Bavarian beer; then another, and another, till, what with the beer and the pipes and the wrangling of the domino-players, my head swam.

“I tell you what,” said my companion, “we will just have one chopine of brandy. I always take it after Baierischer beer. We will not have it here, but at the *Grüne Gans*, hard by; which is an honest house, kept by Max Rombach, who is a widow's son.

I was in that state when a man having already had too much is sure to want more, and I followed the man in the gray coat. How many chopines of brandy I had at the *Grüne Gans* I

know not; but I found myself in bed next morning with an intolerable thirst and a racking headache. My first action was to spring out of bed, and search in the pocket of my coat for my pocket-book. It was gone. The waiters and the landlord were summoned; but no one knew any thing about it. I had been brought home in a carriage, very inebriated, by a stout man in a gray great-coat, who said he was my friend, helped me up-stairs, and assisted me to undress. The investigation ended with a conviction that the man in the gray coat was the thief. He had, manifestly, been tempted to the robbery by no pecuniary motive; for the whole of my remaining stock of bank-notes, which I always kept in the pocket-book, I found in my waistcoat-pocket neatly rolled up.

That evening I walked down to the beer-house where I usually met my friend—not with the remotest idea of seeing him, but with the hope of eliciting some information as to who and what he was.

To my surprise he was sitting at his accustomed table, smoking and drinking as usual; and, to my stern salutation, replied with a good-humored hope that my head was not any worse for the *branntuein* overnight.

“I want a word with you,” said I.

“With pleasure,” he returned. Whereupon he put on his broad-brimmed hat and followed me into the garden behind the house, with an alacrity that was quite surprising.

“I was drunk last night,” I commenced.

“Zo,” he replied, with an unmoved countenance.

“And while drunk,” I continued, “I was robbed of my pocket-book.”

“Zo,” he repeated with equal composure.

“And I venture to assert that you are the person who stole it.”

“Zo. You are quite right, my son,” he returned, with the most astonishing coolness. “I did take your pocket-book; I have it here. See.”

He tapped the breast of his gray great-coat; and, I could clearly distinguish, through the cloth, the square form of my pocket-book, with its great clasp in the middle. I sprang at him immediately, with the intention of wrenching it from him; but he eluded my grasp nimbly, and, stepping aside, drew forth a small silver whistle, on which he blew a shrill note. In an instant a cloak or sheet was thrown over my head. I felt my hands muffled with soft but strong ligatures; and, before I had time to make one effort in self-defense, I was lifted off my feet and swiftly conveyed away, in total darkness. Presently we stopped, and I was lifted still higher; was placed on a seat; a door was slammed to; and the rumbling motion of wheels convinced me that I was in a carriage.

My journey must have lasted some hours. We stopped from time to time: to change horses, I suppose. At the commencement of the journey I made frantic efforts to disengage myself, and to cry out. But I was so well gagged, and bound, and muffled, that in sheer weariness and despair, I desisted. We halted at last for good. I was lifted out, and again carried swiftly along for upward of ten minutes. Then, from a difficulty of respiration, I concluded that I had entered a house, and was, perhaps, being borne along some underground passage. We ascended and descended stair-cases. I heard doors locked and unlocked. Finally, I was thrown violently down on a hard surface. The gag was removed from my mouth, and the mufflers from my hands; I heard a heavy door clang to, and I was at liberty to speak and to move.

My first care was to disengage myself from the mantle, whose folds still clung around me. I was in total darkness—darkness so black, that at first I concluded some infernal device had been made use of to blind me. But, after straining my eyes in every direction, I was able to discern

high above me a small circular orifice, through which permeated a minute thread of light. Then I became sensible that I was not blind, but in some subterranean dungeon. The surface on which I was lying was hard and cold—a stone pavement. I crawled about, feeling with my hands, endeavoring to define the limits of my prison. Nothing was palpable to the touch, but the bare smooth pavement, and the bare smooth walls. I tried for hours to find the door, but could not. I shouted for help; but no man came near me.

I must have lain in this den two days and two nights—at least the pangs of hunger and thirst made me suppose that length of time to have elapsed. Then the terrible thought possessed me that I was imprisoned there to be starved to death. In the middle of the third day, as it seemed to me, however, I heard a rattling of keys; one grated in the lock; a door opened, a flood of light broke in upon me; and a well-remembered voice cried, “Come out!” as one might do to a beast in a cage.

The light was so dazzling that I could not at first distinguish any thing. But I crawled to the door; and then standing up, found I was in a small court-yard, and that opposite to me was my enemy, the man of the gray coat.

In a gray coat no longer, however. He was dressed in a scarlet jacket, richly laced with gold; which fitted him so tightly with the short tails sticking out behind, that, under any other circumstances, he would have seemed to me inconceivably ridiculous. He took no more notice of me than if he had never seen me before in his life; but, merely motioning to two servants in scarlet liveries to take hold of me under the arms, waddled on before.

We went in and out of half a dozen doors, and traversed as many small court-yards. The buildings surrounding them were all in a handsome style of architecture; and in one of them I could discern, through the open grated windows on the ground floor, several men in white caps and jackets. A distant row of copper stewpans and a delicious odor, made me conjecture that we were close to the kitchen. We stopped some moments in this neighborhood; whether from previous orders, or from pure malignity toward me, I was unable then to tell. He glanced over his shoulder with an expression of such infinite malice, that, what with hunger and rage, I struggled violently but unsuccessfully to burst from my guards. At last we ascended a narrow but handsomely carpeted staircase; and, after traversing a splendid picture gallery, entered an apartment luxuriously furnished; half library and half drawing-room.

A cheerful wood fire crackled on the dogs in the fireplace; and, with his back toward it, stood a tall elderly man, his thin gray hair carefully brushed over his forehead. He was dressed in black, had a stiff white neckcloth, and a parti-colored ribbon at his button-hole. A few feet from him was a table, covered with books and papers; and sitting thereat in a large arm-chair, was an old man, immensely corpulent, swathed in a richly furred dressing-gown, with a sort of jockey cap on his head of black velvet, to which was attached a hideous green shade. The servants brought me to the foot of this table, still holding my arms.

“Monsieur Muller,” said the man in black, politely, and in excellent English. “How do you feel?”

I replied, indignantly, that the state of my health was not the point in question. I demanded to know why I had been trepanned, robbed, and starved.

“Monsieur Muller,” returned the man in black, with immovable politeness. You must excuse the apparently discourteous manner in which you have been treated. The truth is, our house was built, not for a prison, but for a palace; and, for want of proper dungeon accommodation, we were compelled to utilize for the moment an apartment which I believe was formerly a wine-cellar. I hope you did not find it damp.”

The man with the green shade shook his fat shoulders, as if in silent laughter.

“In the first instance, Monsieur,” resumed the other, politely motioning me to be silent; for I was about to speak, “we deemed that the possession of the papers in your pocket-book” (he touched that fatal book as he spoke) “would have been sufficient for the accomplishment of the object we have in view. But, finding that a portion of the correspondence is in a cipher of which you alone have the key, we judged the pleasure of your company absolutely indispensable.”

“I know no more about the cipher and its key than you do,” I ejaculated, “and, before heaven, no secret that can concern you is in my keeping.”

“You must be hungry, Monsieur Müller,” pursued the man in black, taking no more notice of what I had said than if I had not spoken at all. “Carol, bring in lunch.”

He, lately of the gray-coat, now addressed as Carol, bowed, retired, and presently returned with a tray covered with smoking viands and two flasks of wine. The servants half loosened their hold; my heart leaped within me, and I was about to rush toward the viands, when the man in black raised his hand.

“One moment, Monsieur Müller,” he said, “before you recruit your strength. Will you oblige me by answering one question, Where is the child?”

“*Ja*, where is the child!” echoed the man in the green shade.

“I do not know,” I replied, passionately; “on my honor I do not know. If you were to ask me for a hundred years, I could not tell you.”

“Carol,” said the man in black, with an unmoved countenance, “take away the tray. Monsieur Muller has no appetite. Unless,” he added, turning to me, “you will be so good as to answer that little question.”

“I can not,” I repeated; “I don’t know; I never knew.”

“Carol,” said my questioner, taking up a newspaper, and turning his back upon me, “take away the things. Monsieur Muller, good-morning.”

In spite of my cries and struggles, I was dragged away. We traversed the picture gallery; but, instead of descending the staircase, entered another suite of apartments. We were crossing a long vestibule lighted with lamps, and one of my guards had stopped to unlock a door while the other lagged a few paces behind (they had loosened their hold of me, and Carol was not with us), when a panel in the wainscoat opened, and a lady in black—perhaps thirty years of age and beautiful—bent forward through the aperture. “I heard all,” she said, in a rapid whisper. “You have acted nobly. Be proof against their temptations, and Heaven will reward your devotedness.

I had no time to reply, for the door was closed immediately. I was hurried forward through room after room; until at last we entered a small bed-chamber, simply but cleanly furnished. Here I was left, and the door was locked and barred on the outside. On the table were a small loaf of black bread, and a pitcher of water. Both of these I consumed ravenously.

I was left without further food for another entire day and night. From my window, which was heavily grated, I could see that my room overlooked the court-yard where the kitchen was, and the sight of the cooks, and the smell of the hot meat drove me almost mad.

On the second day I was again ushered into the presence of the man in black, and the man with the green shade. Again the infernal drama was played. Again I was tempted with rich food. Again, on my expressing my inability to answer the question, it was ordered to be removed.

“Stop!” I cried desperately, as Carol was about to remove the food, and thinking I might satisfy them with a falsehood; “I will confess. I will tell all.”

“Speak,” said the man in black, eagerly, “where is the child?”

“In Amsterdam,” I replied at random.

“Amsterdam—nonsense!” said the man in the green shade impatiently, “what has Amsterdam to do with the Blue Tiger?”

“I need not remind you,” said the man in black, sarcastically, “that the name of any town or country is no answer to the question. You know as well as I do that the key to the whereabouts of the child is *there*,” and he pointed to the pocket-book.

“Yes; *there*,” echoed the man in the green shade. And he struck it.

“But, sir—” I urged.

The answer was simply, “Good-morning, Monsieur Müller.”

Again was I conducted back to my prison; again I met the lady in black, who administered to me the barren consolation that “Heaven would reward my devotedness.” Again I found the black loaf and the pitcher of water, and again I was left a day and a night in semi-starvation, to be again brought forth, tantalized, questioned, and sent back again.

“Perhaps,” remarked the man in black, at the fifth of these interviews, “it is gold that Monsieur Müller requires. See.” As he spoke, he opened a bureau crammed with bags of money, and bade me help myself.

In vain I protested that all the gold in the world could not extort from me a secret which I did not possess. In vain I exclaimed that my name was not Muller; in vain I disclosed the ghastly deceit I had practiced. The man in black only shook his head, smiled incredulously, and told me—while complimenting me for my powers of invention—that my statement confirmed his conviction that I knew where the child was.

After the next interview, as I was returning to my starvation meal of bread and water, the lady in black again met me.

“Take courage,” she whispered. “Your deliverance is at hand. You are to be removed tonight to a lunatic asylum.” How my translation to a madhouse could accomplish my deliverance, or better my prospects, did not appear very clear to me; but that very night I was gagged, my arms were confined in a strait waistcoat, and placed in a carriage, which immediately set off at a rapid pace. We traveled all night; and, in the early morning, arrived at a large stone building. Here I was stripped, examined, placed in a bath, and dressed in a suit of coarse gray cloth. I asked where I was? I was told in the Alienation-Refuge of the Grand Duchy of Sachs-Pfeiffiger.

“Can I see the head-keeper?” I asked.

The Herr Ober-Direktor was a little man with a shiny bald head and very white teeth. When I entered his cabinet he received me politely, and asked me what he could do for me? I told him my real name, my history, my wrongs; that I was a British subject, and demanded my liberty. He smiled, and simply called—“Where is Kraus?”

“Here, Herr,” answered the keeper.

“What number is Monsieur?”

“Number ninety-two.”

“Ninety-two,” repeated the Herr Direktor, leisurely writing. “Catsplasms on the soles of the feet. Worsted blister behind the ears, a mustard plaster on the chest, and ice on the head. Let it be Baltic ice.”

The abominable inflictions thus ordered were all applied. The villain Kraus tortured me in every imaginable way; and in the midst of his tortures, would repeat, “Tell me where the child is, Muller, and you shall have your liberty in half an hour.”

I was in the madhouse for six months. If I complained to the doctor of Kraus’s ill-treatment and temptations, he immediately began to order catsplasms and Baltic ice. The bruises I had to

show were ascribed to injuries I had myself inflicted in fits of frenzy. The maniacs with whom I was caged declared, like all other maniacs, that I was outrageously mad.

One evening, as I lay groaning on my bed, Kraus entered my cell. "Get up," he said, "you are at liberty. I was bribed, by you know who, with ten thousand Prussian thalers to get your secret from you, if I could; but I have been bribed with twenty thousand Austrian forms (which is really a sum worth having) to set you free. I shall lose my place, and have to fly; but I will open an hotel at Frankfort for the Englishers, and make my fortune. Come!" He led me down-stairs, let me out of a private door in the garden; and, placing a bundle of clothes and a purse in my hand, bade me good-night.

I dressed myself, threw away the madman's livery, and kept walking along until morning, when I came to the custom-house barrier of another Grand Duchy. I had a passport ready provided for me in the pocket of my coat, which was found to be perfectly *en règle*, and I passed unquestioned. I went that morning to the coach-office of the town, and engaged a place in the *Eilwagen* to some German town, the name of which I forget; and, at the end of four days' weary traveling, I reached Brussels.

I was very thin and weak with confinement and privation; but I soon recovered my health and strength. I must say that I made up by good living for my former compulsory abstinence; and both in Brussels and in Paris, to which I next directed my steps, I lived on the best. One evening I entered one of the magnificent restaurants in the Palais Royal to dine. I had ordered my meal from the *carte*, when my attention was roused by a small piece of paper which had been slipped between its leaves. It ran thus:

Feign to eat, but eat no fish. Remain the usual time at your dinner, to disarm suspicion, but immediately afterwards make your way to England. Be sure, in passing through London, to call on Hildeburger.

I had ordered a *sole au gratin*; but when it arrived, managed to throw it piece by piece under the table. When I had discussed the rest of my dinner, I summoned the garçon, and asked for my bill.

"You will pay the head waiter, if you please, Monsieur," said he.

The head waiter came. If he had been a centaur or a sphinx I could not have stared at him with more horror and astonishment than I did; for there, in a waiter's dress, with a napkin over his arm, was Carol, the man of the gray coat.

"Müller," he said, coolly, bending over the table. "Your sole was poisoned. Tell me where the child is, and here is an antidote, and four hundred thousand francs."

For reply I seized the heavy water decanter, and dashed it with all the force I could command, full in the old ruffian's face. He fell like a stone, amid the screams of women, the oaths of men, and cries of *à la Garde! à la Garde!* I slipped out of the restaurant and into one of the passages or outlets which abound in the Palais Royal. Whether the man died or not, or whether I was pursued, I never knew. I gained my lodgings unmolested, packed up my luggage, and started the next morning by the diligence, for Boulogne.

I arrived in due time in London; but I did not call on "Hildeburger" because I did not know who or where Hildeburger was. I started the very evening of my arrival in London for Liverpool, being determined to go to America. I was fearful of remaining in England, not only on account of my persecutors, but because I was pursued every where by the spectre of the real Müller.

I took my passage to New York in a steamer which was to sail from the Docks in a week's time. It was to start on a Monday; and on the Friday preceding I was walking about the Exchange, congratulating myself that I should soon have the Atlantic between myself and my

pursuers. All at once I heard the name of Muller pronounced in a loud tone close behind me. I turned, and met the gaze of a tall thin young man with a downy mustache, who was dressed in the extreme of fashion, and was sucking the end of an ebony stick.

“Monsieur Müller,” he said, nodding to me easily.

“My name is not Müller,” I answered, boldly.

“You have not yet called on Hildeburger,” he added, slightly elevating his eyebrows at my denial.

I felt a cold shiver pass over me, and stammered, “N—n—no!”

“We had considerable difficulty in learning your whereabouts!” he went on with great composure. “The lady was obstinate. The screw and the water were tried in vain; but at length, by a judicious use of the cord and pulleys, we succeeded.”

I shuddered again.

“Will you call on Hildeburger now!” he resumed quickly and sharply. “He is here—close by.”

“Not now, not now.” I faltered. “Some other time.”

“The day after tomorrow!”

“Yes, yes,” I answered eagerly, “the day after tomorrow.”

“Well, Saturday be it. You will meet me here, at four in the afternoon! Good! Do not forget. *Au revoir*, Monsieur Müller.”

He had no sooner uttered these words than he turned and disappeared among the crowd of merchants on 'Change.

I could not doubt, by his naming Saturday, as the day for our meeting, that he had some inkling of my intended departure. Although I had paid my passage to New York, I determined to forfeit it, and to change my course so as to evade my persecutors. I entered a shipping-office, and learned that a good steamer would leave George's Dock at ten that same night, for Glasgow. And to Glasgow for the present I made up my mind to go.

At a quarter before ten I was at the dock with my luggage. It was raining heavily, and there was a dense fog.

“This way for the Glasgow steamer—this way,” cried a man in a Guernsey shirt, “this way, your honor. I'll carry your trunk!”

He took up my trunk as he spoke, and led the way down a ladder, across the decks of two or three steamers, and to the gangway of a fourth, where a man stood with dark bushy whiskers, dressed in a pea-coat, and holding a lighted lantern.

“Is this the Glasgow steamer?” I asked.

“All right!” answered the man with the lantern. “Look sharp, the bell's a-going to ring.”

“Remember poor Jack, your honor,” said the man in the Guernsey, who had carried my trunk. I gave him sixpence and stepped on board. A bell began to ring, and there was great confusion on board with hauling of ropes and stowing of luggage. The steamer seemed to me to be intolerably dirty and crowded with goods; and, to avoid the crush, I stepped aft to the wheel. In due time we had worked out of the dock and were steaming down the Mersey.

“How long will the run to Glasgow take, think you my man?” I asked of the man at the wheel. He stared at me as if he did not understand me, and muttered some unintelligible words. I repeated the question.

“He does not speak English,” said a voice at my elbow, “nor can any soul on board this vessel, except you and I, Monsieur Muller.”

I turned round, and saw to my horror the young man with the ebony cane and the downy mustache.

“I am kidnapped!” I cried. “Let me have a boat. Where is the captain?”

“Here is the captain,” said the young man, as a fiercely bearded man came up the companion-ladder. “Captain Miloschvich of the Imperial Russian ship *Pyroscaphe*, bound to St. Petersburg, M. Müller. As Captain Miloschvich speaks no English you will permit me to act as interpreter.”

Although I feared from his very presence that my case was already hopeless, I entreated him to explain to the captain that there was a mistake; that I was bound for Glasgow, and that I desired to be set on shore directly.

“Captain Miloschvich,” said the young man, when he had translated my speech, and received the captain’s answer, “begs you to understand that there is no mistake; that you are not bound for Glasgow, but for St. Petersburg; and that it is quite impossible for him to set you on shore here, seeing that he has positive instructions to set you on shore in Cronstadt. Furthermore, he feels it his duty to add that should you, by any words or actions, attempt to annoy or disturb the crew or passengers, he will be compelled to put you in irons, and place you in the bottom of the hold.”

The captain frequently nodded during these remarks, as if he perfectly understood their purport, although unable to express them; and, to intimate his entire coincidence, he touched his wrists and ankles.

If I had not been a fool I should have resigned myself to my fate. But I was so maddened with misfortune, that I sprang on the young man, hoping to kill him, or to be killed myself, and to be thrown into the sea. But I was chained, beaten, and thrown into the hold. There, among tarred ropes, the stench of tallow-casks, and the most appalling sea-sickness, I lay for days, fed with mouldy biscuit and putrid water. At length we arrived at Cronstadt.

All I can tell you, or I know of Russia is, that somewhere in it there is a river, and on that river a fortress, and in that fortress a cell, and in that cell a knout. Seven years of my existence were passed in that cell, under the lashes of that knout, with the one horrible question dinning in my ears, “Where is the child?”

How I escaped to incur worse tortures, it is bootless to tell you. I have swept the streets of Palermo as a convict, in a hideous yellow dress. I have pined in the Inquisition at Rome. I have been caged in the madhouse at Constantinople, with the rabble to throw stones and mud at me through the bars. I have been branded in the back in the *bagnes* of Toulon and Rochefort; and every where I have been offered liberty and gold if I would answer the question, “Where is the child?” At last, having been accused of a crime I did not commit, I was condemned to death. Upon the scaffold they asked me, “Where is the child?” Of course there could be no answer, and I was—

Just then, Margery, my servant, who never will have the discrimination to deny me to importunate visitors, knocked at the door, and told me that I was wanted in the surgery. I went down stairs, and found Mrs. Walkingshaw, Johnny Walkingshaw’s wife, who told me that her “master” was “took all over like,” and quite “stroaken of a heap.” Johnny Walkingshaw is a member of the ancient order of Sylvan Brothers; and, as I am club-doctor to the Sylvan Brothers, he has a right to my medical attendance for the sum of four shillings a year. Whenever he has taken an over-dose of rough cider he is apt to be “stroaken all of a heap,” and to send for me. I was the more annoyed at being obliged to walk to Johnny Walkingshaw’s cottage at two in the morning, because the wretched man had been cut short in his story just as he was about to explain the curious surgical problem of how he was resuscitated. When I returned he was gone, and I never saw him more. Whether he was mad and had hanged himself, or whether he was sane and had been hanged according to law, or whether he had ever been hanged, or never been hanged, are points I have never quite adjusted in my mind.