Walnut-Tree House

By Mrs. J. H. Riddell

Chapter One

THE NEW OWNER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, sir; not very far."

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

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

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

"Indeed, sir?"

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

"Yes, sir," agreed the clerk.

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

"No doubt, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why not?"

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

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

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

"What sort of a bad name—unhealthy?" "Oh, no!"

"Haunted?"

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

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

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

"The sooner it gets unhaunted, then, the better," retorted Mr. Stainton. "I shall certainly stop there to-night. You are not disposed to stay and keep me company, I suppose?"

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

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

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

Still, he did not wish to offend the new owner. Messrs. Timpson expected him to be a profitable client; and to that impartial firm the money of a boor would, he knew, seem as good as the money of a count.

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

Mr. Stainton laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Make your mind easy, my friend," said the new owner, quietly.

"I am not going to bid for your company. The child and I can manage, I'll be bound, to get on very comfortably by ourselves."

Chapter Two

THE CHILD

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

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

The long rows of shuttered windows, the silent solemnity of the great trees, remnants of a once goodly avenue that had served to give its name to Walnut-Tree House; the appalling silence of everything within the place, when contrasted with the noise of passing cabs and whistling street boys, and men trudging home with unfurled umbrellas and women scudding along with draggled petticoats, might well have impressed even an unimpressionable man, and Edgar Stain-ton, spite of his hard life and rough exterior, was impressionable and imaginative.

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

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

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

Through the rain he watched the pair advancing and greeted Bill with a glad voice of welcome.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Years previously the gas company, weary of receiving no profit from the house, had taken away their meter and cut off their connections. The water supply was in the same case, as Mr. Stainton, going round the premises before it grew quite dark, had discovered.

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

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

The floor was bare. Once a Turkey carpet had been spread over the centre of the polished oak boards, but it lay in its wonted place no longer; between the windows hung a convex mirror, in which the face of any human being looked horrible and distorted; whilst over the mantle-shelf, indeed, forming a portion of it, was a long, narrow glass, bordered by a frame ornamented with a tracery of leaves and flowers. The ceiling was richly decorated, and, spite of the dust and dirt and neglect of years, all the appointments of the apartment he had selected gave Edgar Stainton the impression that it was a good thing to be the owner of such a mansion, even though it did chance to be situated as much out of the way of fashionable London as the diggings whence he had come.

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

He had eaten his frugal supper, and now, pushing aside the table on which the remains of his repast were spread, he began walking slowly up and down the room, thinking over the past and forming plans for the future.

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

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

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

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

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

He was not alarmed; he was too much accustomed to solitude and danger for that; but he rose from his stooping position and instinctively seized his revolver, which he had chanced, while unpacking some of his effects, to place on the top of the bureau.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The child turned slowly away.

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

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

Mr. Stainton could see every detail of the boy's attire—his little plaid frock, which he had outgrown, the hooks which fastened it; the pinafore, soiled and crumpled, tied behind with strings broken and knotted; in one place the skirt had given from the body, and a piece of thin, poor flannel showed that the child's under habiliments matched in shabbiness his exterior garments.

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

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

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

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

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

“I have run you to earth at last,” he said, entering and closing the door. “Why, where has the boy gone?” he added, holding the candle above his head and gazing round the dingy garret in which he found himself.

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

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

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

“IT IS THE CHILD!” he exclaimed aloud, and the sound of his own voice woke strange echoes through the silence of that desolate house.

“IT IS THE CHILD!” And he descended the principal staircase very slowly, with bowed head, and his grave, thoughtful face graver and more thoughtful than ever.

Chapter Three

SEEKING FOR INFORMATION

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

Never after the first horror was over did Mr. Stainton think of leaving the house in consequence of that haunting presence which had kept the house tenantless. It would have been worse than useless, he felt. With the ocean stretching between, his spirit would still be in the old mansion at Lambeth—his mental vision would always be watching the child engaged in the weary search to which there seemed no end—that never appeared to produce any result.

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Timpson took off his spectacles and wiped them.

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

"In that house?"

"In that house. They survived him."

"And what became of them?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Alfred Stainton?"

"Yes; the unhappy man who became insane. His uncle died intestate, and he consequently succeeded to everything but the personalty, which was very small, and of which these children had a share."

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

"Dear, dear No; quite the contrary."

"Then can you throw the least light on the mystery?"

"Not the least; I wish I could."

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

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

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

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

But Mr. Stainton shook his head.

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

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

But the local tradespeople for the most part were newcomers—or else had not supplied “the house.”

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

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

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

The new owner told him; and while he counted out the money to pay for it Mr. Parker remarked:

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

“And that is?”

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

Following the advice, the new owner repaired to the “Pedlar’s Dog,” where (having on his first arrival at Walnut-Tree House ordered some creature comforts from that well-known public) he experienced a better reception than had been accorded to him by Mr. Parker.

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

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

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

"There was talk about him, then?"

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

"Why?" enquired the new owner.

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

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

"Who made the will?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes; and then?"

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

"How very strange."

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

"And the child—the boy, I mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Four

BROTHER AND SISTER

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

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

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

"And so the house has come to you, sir? Well, I wish you joy. I hope you may have peace, and health, and happiness, and prosperity in it. And I don't see why you should not—no, indeed, sir."

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

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

The old woman covered her face with her hands, and he could see that she trembled violently. "You need not be afraid to speak openly to me," he went on. "I am quite satisfied there was some great wrong done in the house, and I want to put it right, if it lies in my power to do so. I am a rich man. I was rich when the news of this inheritance reached me, and I would gladly give up the property to-morrow if I could only undo whatever may have been done amiss. Mrs. Toplis shook her head. "Ah, sir; you can't do that," she said. "Money can't bring back the dead to life; and, if it could, I doubt if even you could prove as good a friend to the poor child sleeping in the churchyard yonder as his Maker did when He took him out of this troublesome world. It was just soul rending to see the boy the last few months of his life. I can't bear to think of it, sir! Often at night I wake in a fright, fancying I still hear the patter, patter of his poor little feet upon the stair."

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, sir—well, they were poor Miss Mary’s son and daughter. She ran away, you know, with a Mr. Fenton—made a very poor match; but I believe he was kind to her. When they were brought to us, a shivering little pair, my master was for sending them here. Ay, and he would have done it, too, if somebody had not said he could be made to pay for their keep. You never saw brother and sister so fond of one another—never. They were twins. But, Lor’! the boy was more like a father to the little girl than aught else. He’d have kept an apple a month rather than eat it unless she had half; and the same with everything. I think it was seeing that—watching the love they had, he for her and she for him, coming upon them unsuspected, with their little arms round one another’s necks, made the old gentleman alter his mind about leaving the place to Mr. Alfred; for he said to me, one day, thoughtful like, pointing to them, ‘Wonderful fond, Toplis!‘ and I answered, ‘Yes, sir; for all the world like the Babes in the Wood;’ not thinking of how lonely that meant—

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

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

“That will never was found,” suggested Mr. Stainton, anxious to get at another portion of the narrative.

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

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

“Well, sir, at last, when the little girl was about six years old, she fell sick, and we didn’t think she would get over the illness. While she was about at her worst, Mrs. May, her father’s sister, chanced to be stopping up in London, and, as Mr. Alfred refused to let a doctor inside his doors, she made no more ado but wrapped the child up in blankets, sent for a cab, and carried her off to her own lodgings. Mr. Alfred made no objection to that. All he said as she went through the hall was:

“ ‘If you take her now, remember, you must keep her.’

“ ‘Very well,’ she replied, ‘I will keep her.’”

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

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

“What did he die of?”

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

"Yes; and when he was dead—"

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

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

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

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

Chapter Five

THE NEXT AFTERNOON

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

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

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

At this juncture the new owner emerged from amongst the bushes, and, opening the gate, asked if the ladies would like to look over the place.

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

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

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

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

"Something of that sort," he answered.

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

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

“Mr. Stainton himself.”

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

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

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

“Pray do not mention it,” he said.

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

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

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

“Yes, certainly,” was the answer; “and you are—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And when he fell to thinking of the long, long years during which the dead child had kept faithful and weary watch for his sister, searching through the empty rooms for one who never came, and then bethought him of the sister to whom her dead brother had become but the vaguest of memories, of the summers and winters during the course of which she had probably forgotten

him altogether, he sighed deeply; and heard his sigh echoed behind him in the merest faintest whisper.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Six

THE MISSING WILL

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

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

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

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

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

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

His business was simple, but important. Once again he was the bearer of a letter from Timpson and Co., this time announcing to Miss Fenton that the will of Mr. Felix Stainton had been found,

and that under it she was entitled to the interest of ten thousand pounds, secured upon the houses in Stainton Street.

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

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

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

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

He went straight up to her, and said:

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

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

He took the flower, and with it her fingers.

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

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

Once, when he was standing close beside her in the familiar room, hand clasped in hand, Edgar Stainton saw the child looking at them.

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