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significance there lies in a noble, prodigal, unstinted abundance. Books, for example—can we have too many of them, provided always they are well selected? Dogs—can they be too populous in our court-yards? or horses in our stables? or friends—at convenient distances? or children—in the nursery? or creditors?—no, not creditors, except in a general catastrophe or cataclysm. In a world, is not abundance in and for itself a grand advantage? Painfully this obtrudes itself upon me as I sit eyeing the solitary anemone which mopes in a single vase upon my table, the last rose of summer, all its blooming companions having been dissected long ago; and my thoughts take wing to Ilfracombe and Tenby, where footpans, pie-dishes, soup-plates and vases were crowded with specimens of every variety of form and colour. I think of that paradisaic abundance, and sigh over this one unhappy animal, the mere pennyworth in Mesopotamia, not simply because I love a liberal prodigality in all things, and fret against niggardly limitations, but also because only with abundance can one hope to get at more "New Facts about Sea Anemones."

A CHRISTMAS TALE.

How to account for this strange adventure, or what explanation to put upon it, I cannot tell, but it began after a very prosaic fashion—rather more commonplace even that the circumstances under which the Laureate meditated his *Legend of Godiva*. After a long drive to a little country station, I found to my dismay, that I had missed the train.

Missed the train! There was not another till twelve o'clock at noon of the next day, and it was then the afternoon between two and three o'clock; for the place in which I was so fortunate as to find myself, was one of the smallest of country stations on a "branch line." It seems extremely odd, looking back upon it, that there should have been such an unreasonable time to wait; but it did not puzzle, it only discomfited me at the time.

And there was not even a single house, save the half-built little railway house itself, where dwelt the station-master, at this inhospitable station; so I had to be directed by that functionary, and by his solitary porter, how to get to Witcherley village, which lay a mile and a half off across the fields. It was summer, but there had been a great deal of rain, and the roads, as I knew by my morning's experience, were "heavy"—yet I set off with singular equanimity on my journey across the fields. Altogether I took the business very coolly, and made up my mind to it. It is astonishing how easily one can manage this in a certain frame of mind.

It was rather a pretty country—especially when the sun came glancing down over it, finding out all the rain upon the leaves—when it was only *I* that found them out instead of the sun. When pushing down a deep lane, my hat caught the great overhanging bough of a hawthorn, and shook over me a sparkling shower of water-drops, big and cool like so many diamonds. I cannot say that I entirely enjoyed the impromptu baptism, and the wet matted brambles underfoot were full of treacherous surprises, and the damp path under that magnificent seam of red-brown earth, which had caught my eye half a mile off, caught my foot now with unexampled tenacity. Notwithstanding, the road was pretty; a busy little husbandman of a breeze began to rustle out the young corn, and raise the feeble stalks which had been "laid" by the rain; and everything grew lustily in the refreshed and sweetened atmosphere, through which the birds raised their universal twitter. There appeared white gable-ends, bits of orchard closely planted, a church-spire rising through the trees, and over the next stile I leaped into the extreme end of the little village street of Witcherley—a very rural little village indeed, lying, though within a mile and a half of a railway station, secure and quiet among the old Arcadian fields.

Facing me was a great iron gate-

extremely ornamental, as things were made a hundred years ago, with a minute porter's-lodge shut up, plainly intimating that few carriages rolled up that twilight avenue, to which entrance was given by a little postern-door at the side. The avenue was narrow, but the trees were great and old, and hid all appearance of the house to which they led. Then came three thatched cottages flanking at a little distance the moss-grown wall which extended down the road from the manor-house gates; and then the path made a sharp turn round the abrupt corner of a gable which projected into it, the grey wall of which was lightened by one homely bow-window in the upper story, but nothing more. This being the Witcherley Arms, I went no further, though some distant cottages, grey, silent, and rude, caught my eye a little way on. The Witcherley Arms, indeed, *was* the hamlet of Witcherley—it was something between an inn and a farmhouse, with long low rooms, small windows, and an irregular and rambling extent of building, which it was hard to assign any use for, and which seemed principally filled up with long passages leading to closets and cupboards and laundries in a prodigal and strange profusion. A few rude steps led to the door, within which, on one side, was a little bar, and on the other the common room of the inn. Just in front of the house, surrounded by a little plot of grass, stood a large old elm-tree, with the sign swung high among its branches; opposite was the gate of a farmyard, and the dull walls of a half square of barns and offices; behind, the country seemed to swell into a bit of rising-ground, covered with the woods of the manor-house; but the prospect before was of a rude district broken up by solitary roads, crossing the moorland, and apparently leading nowhere. One leisurely country-cart stood near the door, the horse standing still with dull patience, and that indescribable quiet consciousness that it matters nothing to any one how long the bumpkin stays inside, or the peaceable brute without, which is only to be found in the extreme and undisturbed seclusion of very rural districts. I confess I entered the Witcherley Arms with a little dismay, and no great expectations of its comfort or good cheer. The public room was large enough, lighted with two casement windows, with a low unequal ceiling and a sanded floor. Two small tables in the windows, and one long one placed across the room behind, with a bristly supply of hard high-backed wooden chairs, were all the furniture. A slow country fellow in a smock frock, the driver of the cart, drank his beer sullenly at one of the smaller tables. The landlord loitered about between the open outer door and the "coffee-room," and I took my seat at the head of the big table, and suggested dinner to the open-eyed country maid.

She was more startled than I expected by the idea. Dinner! there was boiled bacon in the house, she knew, and ham and eggs were practicable. I was not disposed to be fastidious under present circumstances, so the cloth was spread, and the boiled bacon set before me, preparatory to the production of the more savoury dish. To have a better look at me, the landlord came in and established himself beside the bumpkin in the window. These worthies were not at all of the ruffian kind, but, on the contrary, perfectly honest-looking, obtuse, and leisurely: their dialect was strange to my ear, and their voices confused; but I could make out that what they did talk about was the "Squire."

Of course, the most natural topic in the world in a place so primitive; and I, examining my bacon, which was not inviting, paid little attention to them. By-and-by, however, the landlord loitered out again to the door; and there my attention was attracted at once by a voice without, as different as possible from their mumbling rural voices. This was followed immediately by a quick alert footstep, and then entered the room an old gentleman, little, carefully dressed, precise and particular, in a blue coat with gilt buttons, a spotless white cravat, Hessian boots, and hair of which I could not say with certainty whether it was grey or powdered. He came in as a

monarch comes into a humble corner of his dominions. There could be no doubt about his identity—this was the Squire.

Hodge at the window pulled his forelock reverentially; the old gentleman nodded to him, but turned his quick eye upon me—strangers were somewhat unusual at the Witcherley Arms—and then my boiled bacon, which I still only looked at! The Squire drew near with suave and compassionating courtesy: I told him my story—I had missed the train. The train was entirely a new institution in this primitive corner of the country. The old gentleman evidently did not half approve of it, and treated my detention something in the light of a piece of retributive justice. "Ah, haste, haste! nothing else will please us nowadays," he said, shaking his head with dignity; "the good old coach, now, would have carried you comfortably, without the risk of a day's waiting or a broken limb; but novelty carries the day."

I did not say that the railway was, after all, not so extreme a novelty in other parts of the world as in Witcherley, and I was rewarded for my forbearance. "If you do not mind waiting half an hour, and walking half a mile," added the Squire immediately, "I think I can promise you a better dinner than anything you have here—a plain country table, sir, nothing more, and a house of the old style; but better than honest Giles's bacon, to which I see you don't take very kindly. He will give you a good bed, though—a clean, comfortable bed. I have slept myself, sir, on occasion, at the Witcherley Arms."

When he said this, some recollection or consciousness came for an instant across the old gentleman's countenance; and the landlord, who stood behind him, and who was also an old man, uttered what seemed to me a kind of suppressed groan. The Squire heard it, and turned around upon him quickly.

"If your gable-room is not otherwise occupied to-night," said the old gentleman—"mind I do not say it will, or is likely to be—put the gentleman into it, Giles."

The landlord groaned again a singular affirmative, which roused my curiosity at once. Was it haunted? or what could there be of tragical or mysterious connected with the gable-room?

However, I had only to make my acknowledgements, and accept with thanks the Squire's proposal, and we set out immediately for the manor-house. My companion looked hale, active, and light of foot—scarcely sixty—a comely, well-preserved old gentleman, with a clear frosty complexion, blue eyes without a cloud, features somewhat high and delicate, and altogether, in his refined and particular way, looked like the head of a long-lived patriarchal race, who might live a hundred years. He paused, however, when we got to the corner, to look to the north over the broken country on which the sunshine slanted as the day began to wane. It was a wild solitary prospect, as different as possible from the softer scenes through which I had come to Witcherley. Those broken bits of road, rough cart-tracks over the moor, with heaps of stones piled here and there, the intention of which one could not decide upon; fir-trees, all alone and by themselves, growing singly at the angles of the road—sometimes the long horizontal gleam of water in a deep cutting—sometimes a green bit of moss, prophetic of pitfall and quagmire—and no visible moving thing upon the whole scene. The picture to me was somewhat desolate. My new friend, however, gazed upon it with a lingering eye, sighed, did not say anything—but, turning round with a little vehemence, took some highly-flavoured snuff from a small gold box, and seemed, under cover of this innocent stimulant, to shake off some emotion. As he did so, looking back I saw the inmates of the Witcherley Arms at the door, in a little crowd gazing at *him*. The landscape must have been as familiar to him as he was to these good people. I began to grow very curious. Was anything going to happen to the old Squire?

The old Squire, however, was of the class of men who enjoy conversation, and relish a good listener. He led me down through the noiseless

road, past the three cottages, to the manorial gates, with a pleasant little stream of remark and explanation, a little jaunty wit, a little caustic observation, great natural shrewdness, and some little knowledge of the world. Entering in by that little side-door to the avenue, was like coming out of daylight into sudden night. The road was narrow—the trees tall, old, and of luxuriant growth. I did not wonder that his worship was proud of them, but, for myself, should have preferred something less gloomy. The line was long, too, and wound upwards by an irregular ascent; and the thick dark foliage concealed, till we had almost reached it, the manor-house, which turned its turreted gable-end towards us, by no means unlike the Witcherley Arms.

It was a house of no particular date or character—old, irregular, and somewhat picturesque—built of the grey limestone of the district, spotted over with lichens, and covering here and there the angle of a wall with an old growth of exuberant ivy—ivy so old, thick, and luxuriant, that there was no longer any shapeliness or distinctive character in the big, blunt, glossy leaves. A small lawn before the door, graced with one clipped yew-tree, was the only glimpse of air or daylight, so far as I could see, about the house; for the trees closed in on every side, as if to shut it out entirely from all chance of seeing or being seen. The big hall-door opened from without, and I followed the Squire with no small curiosity into the noiseless house, in which I could not hear a single domestic sound. Perhaps drawing-rooms were not in common use at Witcherley—at all events we went at once to the dining-room, a large long apartment, with an ample fireplace at the upper end—three long windows on one side, and a curious embayed alcove in the corner, projecting from the room like an afterthought of the builder. To this pretty recess you descended by a single step from the level of the dining-room, and it was lighted by a broad, Elizabethan oriel window, with a cushioned seat all round, fastened to the wall. We went here, naturally passing by the long dining-table, which occupied the almost entire mid-space of the apartment. These three long dining-room windows looked out upon the lawn and the clipped yew-tree—the oriel looked upon nothing, but was closely overshadowed by a group of lime-trees casting down a tender, cold, green light through their delicate wavering leaves. There were old panel portraits on the walls, old crimson hangings,—a carpet, of which all the colours were blended and indistinguishable with old age. The chairs in the recess were covered with embroidery as faded as the carpet; everything bore the same tone of antiquity. At the same time, everything appeared in the most exemplary order, well-preserved and graceful—without a trace of wealth, and with many traces of frugality, yet undebased by any touch of shabbiness. And as the Squire placed himself in the stiff elbow-chair in this pleasant little alcove, and cast his eye with becoming dignity down the long line of the room, I could not but recognise a pleasant and suitable congeniality between my host and his house.

Presently a grave middle-aged man-servant entered the room, and busied himself very quietly spreading the table—the Squire in the mean time entering upon a polite and good-humoured catechetical examination of myself; but pausing now and then to address a word to Joseph, which Joseph answered with extreme brevity and great respectfulness. There was nothing inquisitive or disagreeable in the Squire's inquiries; on the contrary, they were pleasant indications of the kindly interest which an old man often shows in a young one unexpectedly thrown into his path. I was by no means uninterested, meanwhile, in the slowly-completed arrangements of the dinner-table, all accomplished so quietly. When Joseph had nearly finished his operations, a tall young fellow in a shooting-coat, sullen, loutish, and down-looking, lounged into the room, and threw himself into an easy-chair. He did not bear a single feature of resemblance to the courtly old beau beside me, yet was his son notwithstand-

ing beyond all controversy—the heir of the house. Then came the earlier instalments of the dinner; and simultaneously with the silver tureen appeared an old lady, who dropped me a noiseless curtsey, and took her seat at the head of the table, without a word. I could make nothing whatever of this mistress of the house. She was dressed in some faded rich brocaded dress, entirely harmonising with the carpets and the embroidered chairs, and wore a large faint brooch at her neck, with a half-obliterated miniature, set round with dull yellow pearls. She sent me soup, and carved the dishes placed before her in a noiseless, seemingly motionless way, which there was no comprehending; and was either the most mechanical automaton in existence, or a person stunned and petrified. The young Squire sat opposite myself, one person only at the long vacant side of the table, with his back to the three windows. An uneasy air of shame, sullenness, and half-resentment hung about him, and he, too, never spoke. In spite, however, of this uncomfortable companionship, the Squire, in his place at the foot of the table, kept up his pleasant, lively, vivacious stream of conversation without the slightest damp or restraint,—gave forth his old-fashioned formal witticisms—his maxims of the old world, his dignified country-gentleman reflections upon the errors of the new. Silent sat the presiding shadow at the head—silent the lout in the middle. The old servant, grave, solemn, and almost awe-stricken, moved silently about behind; yet, little assisted by my own discomposed and embarrassed responses, there was quite a lively sound of conversation at the table, kept up by the brave old Squire.

With the conclusion of the dinner, and with another little noiseless curtsey, the old lady disappeared as she came. I had not heard the faintest whisper of her voice during the whole time, nor observed her looking at any one; and it was almost a relief to hear her dress rustle softly as she glided out of the room. It seemed to me, however, that our attendant took an unnecessarily long time in arranging the few plates of fruit and placing the wine upon the table; and lingered with visible anxiety, casting stealthy looks of mingled awe and sympathy at his master, and exercising a watchful and jealous observation of the young Squire. The old Squire, however, took no notice, for his part, of the sullenness of his heir, or the watch of Joseph, but pared his apple briskly, and went on with his description of a celebrated old house in the neighbourhood, which, if I had another day to spare, I would find it very much worth my while to see. "At another time," said the old gentleman, "I might have offered you my own services as guide and cicerone; but present circumstances make that impracticable; however, I advise you sincerely, go yourself and see."

As he said these words, there seemed a simultaneous start of consciousness on the part of the young man and of the servant. Joseph's napkin fell out of his hands, and he hurried from the room without picking it up; while the young Squire, with an evidently irrestrainable motion, pushed back his chair from the table, grew violently red, drank half-a-dozen glasses of wine in rapid succession, and cast a furtive and rapid glance at his father, who, perfectly lively and at his ease, talked on without a moment's discomposure. Then the young man rose up suddenly, walked away from the table, tossed the fallen napkin into the fireplace with his foot, came back again, grasped the back of his chair, cleared his throat, and, turning his flushed face towards his father without lifting his eyes, seemed trying in vain to invent words for something which he had to say.

Whatever it was, it would not bear words. The young Hercules, a fine, manly, full-grown figure, stood exactly opposite me, with his down-looking eyes; but all that he seemed able to articulate was a beginning—"I say, father; father, I say."

"No occasion for saying another word about the matter, my boy," said the old gentleman. "I understand you perfectly—come back as early as you please to morrow, and you'll find

all right, and everything prepared for you. You may rely upon me."

Not another word was exchanged between them; the lout plunged his hands into his pockets, and left the room as resentful, sullen, and ashamed as ever, yet with an air of relief. The Squire leaned back in his chair for an instant, and sighed—but whether it was over a household mystery, or the excellence of the wine which he held up to the light, it was impossible to tell, for he resumed what he was saying immediately, and rounded off a handsome little sentence about the advantages of travel to young men.

At this point Joseph entered once more, with looks still more awe-stricken and anxious, on pretence of finding his napkin. "And now that we are alone," said the Squire, calling him, "we may as well be comfortable. Take the wine, Joseph, into the oriel. We call it the oriel, though the word is a misnomer; but family customs, sir, family customs, grow strong and flourish in an old house. It has been named so since my earliest recollection, and for generations before that."

"And for generations after, no doubt," said I. "Your grandchildren—"

"*My* grandchildren!" exclaimed the old man with a look of dismay; "but, my good sir, you are perfectly excusable—perfectly excusable," he continued, recovering himself; "you are not aware of my family history, and the traditions of the house. But I observe that you have shown some surprise at various little incidents—understand me, I beg—shown surprise in the most decorous and natural manner consistent with perfect good-breeding. I should be uneasy did you suppose I implied anything more. The fact is, you have come among us at a family crisis. Be seated—and to understand it, you ought to know the history of the house."

I took my seat immediately, with haste and a little excitement. The Squire's elbow-chair had already been placed by Joseph on the other side of the small carved oak table—the wine with its dull ruby glow, and the old-fashioned tall glasses, small goblets, long-stalked and ornamented, stood between us; and overhead a morsel of inquisitive blue sky, looked into through the close interlacing of those tremulous delicate lime-tree leaves.

The Squire took his seat, paused again, sighed; and then turning round towards the dining-room proper, which began to grow dim as twilight came on, cast a look somewhat melancholy, yet full of dignified satisfaction, upon the array of family portraits, and began his tale.

"We are an old family," said the old gentleman; "I do not need to say to any one acquainted with this district, or with the untitled gentry of the North of England, how long and how unbroken has been our lineal succession. Witcherley Manor-house has descended for centuries, without a single lapse, from father to son; and you will observe, sir, one of the distinguishing peculiarities of our race, and the reason of my amazement when you spoke unguardedly of grandchildren, the offspring of every marriage in this house is one son."

The words were said so solemnly that I started—"One son!"

"One son," continued the Squire with dignity, "enough to carry on the race and preserve its honours—nothing to divide or encumber. In fact, I feel that the existence of the family depends on this wise and benevolent arrangement of nature. If I have a regret," said the old man mildly, with a natural sigh, "regarding the approaching marriage of my boy, it is because, he has chosen his wife, contrary to the usage of our house, out of a neighbouring and very large family—yet I ought to have more confidence in the fortunes of the race."

Being somewhat surprised, not to say dumbfoundered, by these reflections, I thought it better to make no remark upon them, and prudently held my peace.

"We were once rich, sir," continued the Squire, with a smile, "but that is a period beyond the memory of man. Three centuries ago, an ancestor of mine, a man of curious erudition, a disciple of the Rosy Cross, lost a large amount of the gold he had in search of the mysterious power of making the baser metals into gold. There he hangs, sir, looking down upon us, a most remarkable man. I would cal-

him the founder of our race, but that such a statement would be untrue, and would abridge our ascertained genealogy by many generations; he was, however, the founder of everything remarkable in our history. In the pursuit of science he was so unfortunate as to risk and lose a large portion of his family inheritance—everything, in short, but the Manor-house and lands of Witcherley—I am not ashamed to say a *small* estate."

I bent my head to the old man with involuntary respect, as he bowed to me over his wine in his stately old pride and truthfulness; but I made no other interruption, and he immediately resumed his tale.

"In the ordinary course of nature, as people call it, with younger children to be provided for, and daughters to be portioned, the house of Witcherley, sir, must long ago have come to a conclusion. But my ancestor was a wise man; he had purchased his wisdom at no small cost, and knew how to make use of it, and he left to us who came after him the most solemn heirloom of the house, a family vow—a vow which each successive father among us is pledged to administer to his son, and which, I am proud to say, has never been broken in the entire known history of the race."

"I beg your pardon. I should be grieved to make any impertinent inquiries," said I—for the Squire came to a sudden pause, and my curiosity was strongly excited—"but might I ask what that was?"

The old gentleman filled his glass and sipped it slowly. The daylight had gradually faded through the soft green lime-leaves; but still the waning rays were cooled and tinted by the verdant medium through which they came. I thought there was a tinge of pallor on my companion's face; but he sat opposite, in his elbow-chair, with the most perfect calmness, sipping his wine.

"It depends entirely," he said with deliberation, "upon the providential natural arrangement of succession, which I have already told you of. The family vow is no longer binding upon that Squire of Witcherley who has more than one child—one son."

"And that contingency, has it never happened?" cried I, with eagerness.

"It threatened to happen, sir, on one occasion," said the Squire. "My own grandfather married a wife with some fortune, who brought him a daughter. I am grieved to say of so near a relation that his mind was degenerate. Instead of showing any disappointment, he made an exhibition of unseemly satisfaction at the thought of escaping the fate of his race. He took down the old gateway, sir, and erected the piece of foolishness in iron which disfigures my avenue. But it was shortlived—shortlived. Providence stepped in, and withdrew from him both wife and child; and it was only by a second marriage late in life that he escaped the terrible calamity of being the last of his line. No, I am proud to say that contingency has never occurred, nor that vow been broken, for three hundred years."

"And the vow?" I grew quite excited, and leaned over the little table to listen, with a thrill of expectation. The Squire cleared his throat, kept his eyes fixed upon the table, and answered me slowly. It was not nervousness, but pure solemnity; and it impressed me accordingly.

"Sir," he said, at last raising his head, "the lands of Witcherley are insufficient to support two households. When the heir is of age, and is disposed to marry, according to the regulation of the family the father ceases; one generation passes away, and another begins. Sir, my son is on the eve of marriage; *he* will be Squire of Witcherley to-morrow."

I started to my feet in sudden alarm; then seated myself again, half subdued, half appalled by the composure of the old man. "I beg your pardon," I said, faltering; "I have misunderstood you, of course. You give up a portion of your authority—a share of your throne. Oh, by no means unusual, I understand."

"You do not understand *me*," said the Squire, "nor the ways of this house. I spoke nothing of share or portion; there is no such thing possible at Witcherley. I said, simply, the father ceased and the son suc-

ceeded. These were my words. On these lands there can be but one Squire."

I could not listen in quietness. I rose from my chair again in dismay and apprehension. "You mean to withdraw—to leave the house—to abdicate?" I gasped, scarcely knowing what I said.

"Sir," said the Squire, looking up with authority, "I mean to *cease*."

It is impossible to give the smallest idea of the horror of these words, spoken in this strange silent house in the dark room, with its line of long dull windows letting in a colourless ghostly twilight, and the tremulous limes quivering at the oriel. I cried aloud, yet it was only in a whisper: "Why—what—how is this! Murder—suicide! Good heaven, what do you mean?"

"Be seated, sir," said my companion, authoritatively. "I trust I speak to a gentleman, and a man of honour. Do *I* betray any unseemly agitation? The means are our secret—the fact is as I tell you. To-morrow, sir, my son will be Squire of Witcherley, and I shall have fulfilled the vow and the destiny of my race."

How I managed to sit down quietly again in this ghastly half-light at the domestic table of a man who had just made a statement so astounding, and under a roof where the implements of murder might be waiting, or the draught of the suicide prepared, I cannot tell: yet I did so, overawed by the quietness of my companion, in presence of whom, though my head throbbed and my veins swelled, it seemed impossible to say a word. I sat looking at him in silence, revolving a hundred wild schemes of rescue. In England, and the nineteenth century! It was not possible; yet I could not help the shuddering sense of reality which crept upon me. "And your son?" I exclaimed, abruptly, with a renewed sense of horror—the son's sullen and guilty shame returning in strong confirmation before my eyes.

"My son," said the Squire, with again a natural sigh—"yes. I confess it has hitherto been the father who has taken the initiative in this matter; but my boy knew his rights. I was perhaps dilatory. Yes—yes, it is all perfectly right, and I have not the smallest reason to complain."

"But what—what?—for heaven's sake, tell me! You are not about to do anything?—what are you about to do?" cried I.

"Sir, you are excited," said the Squire. "I am about to do nothing which I am not quite prepared for. Pardon me for reminding you. You are a stranger—you are in the country—and in this quiet district we keep early hours. Do me the favour to ring for lights; the bell is close to your hand; and as our avenue is of the darkest, Joseph will guide to the postern."

I rang the bell, as I was desired, with passive obedience. I was struck dumb with amaze and bewilderment, half angry at this sudden dismissal, and half disposed to remain in spite of it; but I *was* a stranger, indebted to my companion's courtesy for my introduction here, and without the slightest claim upon him. Lights appeared, as if by magic, in an instant, and Joseph lingered waiting for orders. "Take your lantern and light the gentleman to the end of the avenue," said the Squire, coming briskly out of the recess, and arranging for himself a chair and a newspaper at the table. Then he held out his hand to me, shook mine heartily, and dismissed me with the condescending but authoritative bow of a monarch. I muttered something about remaining—about service and assistance—but the old gentleman took no further notice of me, and sat down to his newspaper with dignified impenetrability. Having no resource but to follow Joseph, I went out with no small amount of discomposure. And looking back to the placid old figure at the table, with his lamp and his paper, and struck with the overwhelming incongruity of ideas, the mysterious horror of the story, and the composed serenity of the scene, went out after my guide in perfect bewilderment, ready to believe that my senses had deceived me—that my host laboured under some extraordinary delusion—anything rather than that this was true.

The avenue was black as mid-

night; darkness was no description of the pitchy gloom of this narrow path, with its crowd of overshadowing trees; and not even the wavering light of Joseph's lantern, cast upon the ground at my feet, secured me from frequent collisions with the big boles of those gigantic elms. The wind too, unlike a summer breeze, came chill and ghostly up the confined road, and rain was beginning to fall. I presume the old servant scarcely heard my questions, amid the universal rustle of the leaves and patter of the rain. He did not answer, at all events, except by directions and injunctions to take care. I caught him by the arm at last, when we came to the door. "Do you know of anything that is about to happen—quick—tell me!" I cried, my excitement coming to a climax. The lantern almost fell from Joseph's hand, but I could not see his face.

"A many things happen nowadays," said Joseph, "but I reckon master wants me more nor you, sir, if that be all."

"Your master! it is your master I am concerned about," cried I. "You look like an old servant—do you know what all this means? Is the old man safe? If there's any danger, tell me, and I'll go back with you and watch all night."

"Danger! the Squire's in his own house," said Joseph, "and not a servant in it but's been there for twenty years. Thank you all the same; but mind your own business, young gentleman, and ride betimes in the morning, and never think on't again, whate'er ye may have heard to-night."

Saying which, Joseph closed abruptly in my face the postern-door, at which we had been standing, and through the open ironwork of the closed gates I saw his light gleam hastily, as he hurried up the avenue. His manner and words excited instead of subduing my agitated curiosity. I stood irresolute in the rain and the darkness, gazing through the iron gate, which now I could distinguish only by touch, and could not see, though I was close to it. What was to be done? What could I do? Just then I heard a horse's hoofs upon the road, and turned round eagerly, with the intention of addressing the passenger, whoever it might be. Raising my eyes, though it was impossible to see anything, I cried, "Hold—wait—let me speak to you!" when, with an effect, like a suddenly displayed lantern, the moon broke out through the clouds. My eyes had been straining, in the darkness, to the unseen face; now, when this fitful illumination revealed it, I started back in confusion. It was the same ashamed sullen resentful face which had lowered upon me at the Squire's table—his son—and instead of pausing when he perceived me, the young man touched his horse smartly with his whip, and plunged away, at a heavy gallop, into the night. I think this last incident filled up the measure of my confused and bewildering excitement. I turned from the gate at once, and pushed back towards the Witcherley Arms.

Reaching them, I went in with the full intention of rousing the country, and returning in force, to gain an entrance to the manor-house, and save the old man in his own despite. But when I went into the dull public room, with its two flaring melancholy candles, its well-worn country paper, which one clown was spelling over, and another listening to—when, in my haste and heat, I came within this cheerless, lifeless atmosphere, heard the fall of the monotonous slow voices, and saw the universal stagnation of life, my excitement relaxed in spite of myself. In this scene, so coldly, dully commonplace—in this ordinary, unvaried stream of existence, it was impossible: there was no room for mysteries and horrors here.

Yet within the little bar on the other side of the passage, the landlord and his wife were peering out at me with a half-scared curiosity, and holding consultations together in an excited and uneasy restlessness, something like my own. Stimulated once more by seeing this, I hastened up to them, and though they both retreated before me, and made vain attempts to conceal their curiosity and eagerness, my own mind was too much roused to be easily deceived. I asked

hastily if there was any constabulary force in the neighbourhood—soldiers, county police, protectors of the peace.

The woman uttered a faint exclamation of terror; but the landlord, with a certain stupid adroitness, which I could not help remarking, took up my question. "Polis! Lord a' mercy! the gentleman's been robbed. I'se a constable mysel'."

"I have not been robbed; but I suspect you know more than I do," cried I, impatiently. "Your old Squire is in some mysterious danger. If you're a constable, rouse half-a-dozen men in the neighbourhood, and come up with me to the manor-house—if you're a constable! I should say, if you're a man, make haste and follow me. Do you hear? At this very moment the old man may be in peril of his life."

"What's wrong, sir? what's wrong? It cannot be rubbers, for rubbers could ne'er reach to the manor-house," said the wife, interposing. "Bless and preserve us! is't the Russians or the French, or the pitmen, or what's wrong? and if he's off and away to the manor, who'll mind his own house?"

"I am sure you know what I mean," cried I. "Your old master is in danger. I cannot tell you what danger. You know better than I do. Can you look on quietly, and see the Squire lose his life?"

"I know nought about the Squire's life," said Giles sullenly, after a pause; "and no more do you, sir, that's a stranger to Witcherley ways. The Squire's got his own about him that won't see wrong to him. It's no ado o' mine, and it's no ado o' yours; and I'm not agoing on a fool's errand for any man, let alone a strange gentleman I never set eyes on afore. Do you think I'd go and anger the Squire in his own house, because summat skeared a traveller? I'm not agoing to do no such foolishness. If the Squire takes notions, what's that to a stranger like you, that'll may be never see him again?"

"Takes notions?" I caught at this new idea with infinite relief. "What do you mean? *Does* the Squire take notions? Is it all a delusion of his? Is that what you mean?"

"Sir, it's in the family; they're queer, that's what they are," said the woman, answering me eagerly, while her husband hung back, and made no response. "It comes strange to the likes of you; for it takes a deal of studyin' to larn Witcherley ways."

"Witcherley ways—in the family—a delusion—a monomania," said I to myself. Certainly this looked the most reasonable explanation. Yes, to be sure; everybody had heard of such. I received the idea eagerly, and calmed down at once. After all, the wonder was, that it had never struck me before; and then the confusion of the young man—the anxiety of Joseph. No doubt, they trembled for the exhibition of this incipient madness—no doubt, they were afraid of the narrative with which the unfortunate old gentleman was sure to horrify a new listener. I became quite "easy in my mind" as I revolved all this. Monomaniacs, too, are so gravely reasonable in most cases, and have so much method in their madness. I returned to the dull public-room with restored composure, and thinking it all over, in the lifeless silence, in this place where it seemed impossible that anything could happen, could almost have laughed at myself for my own fears. By-and-by the house was shut up, and I transferred my quarters to the gable-room, which I was to occupy for the night. It was a well-sized apartment, somewhat bare, but very clean, and sufficiently comfortable, very much like the best bedroom of a humble country inn, which it was. The bow-window—the only window in the room—looked out into sheer darkness, a heavy visible gloom; the night was somewhat wild, and dismal with wind and rain, and, in spite of the homely comfort of my surroundings, I have seldom spent a more miserable night. Dreary old stories revived out of the oblivion of childhood; tales of the creeping stream of blood from some closed door, the appalling pistol-shot, the horror of the death-gasp and cry, forced themselves on my memory; and when I slept, it was only to see visions of the Squire, or of some one better known to me in his place, standing in ghastly solitude with the knife or the poison, struggling with assassins, or stretched

upon a horrible deathbed, red with murder. Through these feverish fancies came the rounds of the night; the creeping silence, which, like the darkness, was not negative, but positive; the dismal creaking of the sign among the great boughs of the elm-tree; the rush of rain against the window; the moaning and sobbing echoes of the wind. These terrors, however, waking and sleeping, did not make me watch for and start up to meet the earliest dawn, as might have been supposed; on the contrary, I fell into a heavy slumber as the morning broke, and slept late and long, undisturbed by the early sounds of rustical awakening. When I roused myself at last, it was ten o'clock—a pale, wet, melancholy morning, the very ghost and shadow of the more dismal night.

I cannot tell whether the story of the evening was the first thing which occurred to my mind when I awoke. Indeed, I rather think not, but that a more everyday and familiar apprehension, the dread of once more losing the train, was the earliest thought which occupied me, despite all the horrors of the night. But my mind immediately rebounded with excitement and eagerness into the former channel, when I looked out from my window. Immediately under it, in the pale drizzle of rain, stood the Squire's son, dressed as his father had been, in a blue coat with gilt buttons, but new, and of the latest fashion, and with a white favour on the breast. His face was flushed with rude half-concealed exultation; his manner seemed arrogant and authoritative, but still he had not lost the downlooking, sullen, resentful shame of the previous night. He was putting money in the hand of Giles, who stood by with a scowl upon his face, and touched his hat with a still more sullen unwillingness. Several other men, a heaving little rustic crowd, lingered around, eyeing the young man askance with looks of scared and unfriendly curiosity. "Let them drink our health, and see that the bells are rung." I heard only these words distinctly, and the young squire strode away towards the manor-house. When he was out of sight, my phlegmatic landlord threw his money vehemently on the ground with an expression of disgust, and shook his clenched hand after the disappearing figure; but thinking better of it by-and-by, and relenting towards the honest coin, picked it up deliberately, piece by piece, and hastily disappeared within the house. My toilette did not occupy me much after this incident, and as soon as I had hastily completed it, I hurried down stairs. Giles was in the passage, giving directions, intermixed with a low growl of half-spoken curses. When he saw me, he suddenly stopped, and retreated within his little bar. I followed him anxiously. "What has happened?—what of the Squire?"

"The Squire?—it's none o' my business—nor yours neither. Mind your breakfast and your train, young gentleman, and don't you bother about Witcherley—Missus, you're wanted!—I've enow on my own hands."

Saying which Giles fled, and left me unanswered and unsatisfied. Turning to his wife, who appeared immediately with my breakfast, I found her equally impracticable. She, poor woman, seemed able for nothing but to wring her hands, wipe her eyes with an apron, and answer to my eager inquiries, "Don't you meddle in it—don't you, then! O Lord! it's Witcherley ways."

It was impossible to bear this tantalising bewilderment. I took my hat, and rushed out, equally indifferent to train and breakfast. The same bumpkins stood still loitering in the high-road, in the rain; and, scared and awe-stricken as they seemed, were still able to divert the main subject of their slow thoughts, with some dull observation of myself, as I rushed past. I did not pause, however, to ask any fruitless questions of this mazed chorus of spectators, but hurried along the road to the little posterngate. To my surprise, I found the great gates open, and another little circle of bystanders, children and women, standing by. I hastened up the dark avenue, when the rain pattered and the leaves rustled in the pallid daylight, as they had done in the blank night. Everything remained exactly as it was yesterday, when I passed up this same tortuous

road with the Squire. I rushed on with growing excitement, unable to restrain myself. The hall-door stood slightly ajar. I pushed it open, and entered with a hasty step, which echoed upon the paved hall as though the house were vacant. Roused from a corner by the sound, Joseph rose and came forward to meet me. The poor fellow looked very grave and solemn, and had been sitting in forlorn solitude, reading in this chilly uninhabited hall. But at sight of me the cautiousness of suspicion seemed to inspire Joseph. He quickened his pace, and came forward resolutely, keeping himself between me and the dining-room door.

"I want to see your master—your master—beg him to see me for a moment; I will not detain him," said I.

"My master?" Joseph paused and looked at me earnestly, as if to ascertain how much or how little I knew.

"My master, sir, was married this morning. I couldn't make so bold as to disturb him; perhaps you could call another day."

"Married! Now, Joseph," said I, trying what an appeal would do, "you know it is in vain to attempt deceiving me; your master's son is married, but I do not want *him:* I want to see the old Squire."

"There's no old Squire, sir," said Joseph, with a husky voice, "there ain't. I tell you true; you're dreaming. My master's a young gentleman, and married this morning. It's no good coming here," cried the old servant, growing excited, "to make trouble, and disturb a quiet house. My master's a young gentleman—younger than yourself; there can be but one Squire."

"Joseph, what do you mean?" cried I. "Do you forget what I saw and heard—do you forget that I was here and dined with your old master last night? Where is he? What have you done with him? I'll rouse the country. I'll have you all indicted for murder, every soul in the house. Where is the old Squire?"

He laid his hand upon my shoulder fiercely, trembling himself, however, as he did so, with the tremor of weakness. "Will you hold your tongue—will you be quiet—will you leave this house?"

"No," cried I, raising my voice, and shaking the old man off—"No, I'll ascertain the truth before I move a step. I will not leave the house. Here, go call your new master; I'll wait for him where I sate with his father yesterday. His father, poor old man, what have you done with him? I will not move a step till I search this mystery out."

I pushed my way as I spoke into the dining-room, Joseph following and opposing me feebly. The appearance of the silent untenanted room moved me with a new and mysterious thrill of horror. There it lay unaltered, undisturbed, in the very same formal arrangement as when I left it last night; the portraits looking darkly from the walls, the tender lime-leaves flickering round the oriel, the long vacant dining-table shining dully in the subdued light. Every chair stood as it had stood yesterday—the very newspaper lay upon the table. But where was the old Squire?

I turned round upon Joseph suddenly—"He sat there, just there, last night. You are as conscious of it as I am. I want to know where he is now."

A kind of hysteric sob of terror escaped from the old servant's breast. He retreated hastily, covering his eyes with his hand, yet casting looks of horror at the vacant elbow-chair. "I'll go, sir—I'll go—I'll call my master," he said, with a cracked unsteady voice; and he went out of the room, not daring, as I fancied, to turn his back upon the ghostly empty seat. I, in my excitement, paced up and down the room, with all my private sense of wrong and horror, and all my public sentiment of justice, giving authority to my step. It did not occur to me that I had no right to enter another man's house after this fashion, or that I ran any risk in doing so. I was excited beyond the reach of all personal consideration. I thought of nothing but the old Squire; here only last night I had sat at his table, joined him in conversation, and listened to his story, and where—where—ghastly confirmation to that tale of horror—where was he now?

I had heard Joseph's step, timid

and yet hasty, shuffle up the great echoing staircase; but as I stood still to listen, now the silence crept and stagnated around me without a human sound to break it. Nothing but the rain outside, the wet leaves against the window, not even the familiar pulse of a clock to soften the painful stillness. My thoughts were of the blackest. I concluded no better than that murder, cowardly and base, was in this house, which I, alone and unsupported, had come to beard, accuse, and defy in its own stronghold. But, fired with excitement, I feared nothing—thought of nothing but a possible spectacle of horror concealed within one of these unknown rooms, and of the question perpetually on my lips, Where is the Squire?

At length, as I listened, a foot sounded upon the stair, heavy, sometimes rapid, sometimes hesitating, the true step of guilt. I felt assured it was the son, the parricide! My heart beat with choking rapidity, a cold dew rose upon my forehead, and I turned to the door to face the newcomer with the fervour and zeal of an avenger. Now for the solution of this horrible mystery! And now a suspicious uncertain hand tries the door doubtfully—now it creaks upon its hinges—now——

My dearest friend! you cannot be half or a hundredth part so much disappointed as I was; for as the door creaked, and the guilty step advanced, and my heart beat with wild expectation, I awoke—

I am ashamed to confess the humiliating truth—awoke to find myself in my own crimson easy-chair, after dinner, with the fire glowing into the cosy twilight, and no dark avenue or lonely manor-house within a score of miles. Under the circumstances, I am grieved to add that the deepest mystery, a gloom which I fear I may never be able to penetrate, still hangs darkly over the ways of Witcherley, and the fate of the old Squire.

Had Joseph's young master come only five minutes sooner—but fate is inexorable; and though I have made investigations through a primitive nook of country, and missed a train with resignation in the pursuit of knowledge, I have never fallen upon that rainy pathway across the field, nor come to the Witcherley Arms again.

ROUTINE.

Periods occur in British history when there is no public grievance. Weary times these are when Bull lies on his back greatly disordered because nothing particular disagrees with him, and repels all attempts to rouse him with wrathful suspicion, as Mr. Weller, in his second widowhood, refused the proffered consolation of his handmaiden. The most temptingly bedizened wrong cannot entice him from his torpor. Agitators rack their brains in vain, and contemplate the horrid prospect of being driven to honest courses. O for a good, palpable, working grievance! It were worth more than a new pleasure was to the Persian.

Other periods happen when grievances are as plentiful as blackberries; when a man finds them out without leaving his fireside; when he stumbles over them as he walks abroad; when he sees them in the dishes with his beef and pudding. These are likewise bad times for agitators. The business is so brisk that the intervention of brokers or middlemen is impossible. Every man does his own grievance-work, and a dreadful Babel there is. They are glorious times nevertheless. Besides the great trunk grievances, there are ramifications and sidings to suit all tastes and capacities. A man may not only feast at the great public ordinaries of grievances, but he may discuss select grievances at his symposium, or pick his own morsel grievance in his chamber, if he be of unsocial temperament. The air is thick with grievances; they fly about like bats. Anon, they begin to arrange themselves in sections, each section being still independent and erratic. The big grievance attracts