

Victorian Secrets

The Box with the Iron Clamps by Florence Marryat

MOLTON CHASE is a charming, old-fashioned country house, which has been in the possession of the Clayton family for centuries past; and as Harry Clayton, its present owner, has plenty of money, and (having tasted the pleasures of matrimony for only five years) has no knowledge (as yet) of the delights of college and school bills coming in at Christmas-time, it is his will to fill the Chase at that season with guests, to each of whom he extends a welcome as hearty as it is sincere.

“Bella! are you not going to join the riding-party this afternoon?” he said across the luncheon-table to his wife, one day in a December not long ago.

“Bella” was a dimpled little woman, whose artless expression of countenance would well bear comparison with the honest, genial face opposite to her, and who replied at once—

“No! not this afternoon, Harry, dear. You know the Damers may come at any time between this and seven o’clock, and I should not like to be out when they arrive.”

“And may I ask Mrs. Clayton who *are* the Damers,” inquired a friend of her husband, who, on account of being handsome, considered himself licensed to be pert, “that their advent should be the cause of our losing the pleasure of your company this afternoon?”

But the last thing Bella Clayton ever did was to take offence.

“The Damers are my cousins, Captain Moss,” she replied; “at least Blanche Damer is.”

At this juncture a dark-eyed man who was sitting at the other end of the table dropped the flirting converse he had been maintaining with a younger sister of Mrs. Clayton’s, and appeared to become interested in what his hostess was saying.

“Colonel Damer,” she continued, “has been in India for the last twelve years, and only returned to England a month ago; therefore it would seem unkind on the first visit he has paid to his relatives that there should be no one at home to welcome him.”

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“Has Mrs. Damer been abroad for as long a time?” resumed her questioner, a vision arising on his mental faculties of a lemon-colored woman with shoes down at heel.

“Oh dear no!” replied his hostess. “Blanche came to England about five years ago, but her health has been too delicate to rejoin her husband in India since. Have we all finished, Harry, dear?”—and in another minute the luncheon-table was cleared.

As Mrs. Clayton crossed the hall soon afterwards to visit her nursery, the same dark-eyed man who had regarded her fixedly when she mentioned the name of Blanche Damer followed and accosted her.

“Is it long since you have seen your cousin Mrs. Damer, Mrs. Clayton?”

“I saw her about three years ago, Mr. Laurence; but she had a severe illness soon after that, and has been living on the Continent ever since. Why do you ask?”

“For no especial reason,” he answered smiling. “Perhaps I am a little jealous lest this new-comer to whose arrival you look forward with so much interest should usurp more of your time and attention than we less-favored ones can spare.”

He spoke with a degree of sarcasm, real or feigned, which Mrs. Clayton immediately resented.

“I am not aware that I have been in the habit of neglecting my guests, Mr. Laurence,” she replied; “but my cousin Blanche is more likely to remind me of my duties, than to tempt me to forget them.”

“Forgive me,” he said, earnestly. “You have mistaken my meaning altogether. But are you very intimate with this lady?”

“Very much so,” was the answer. “We were brought up together, and loved each other as sisters until she married and went to India. For some years after her return home our intercourse was renewed, and only broken, on the occasion of her being ill and going abroad, as I have described to you. Her husband, I have, of course, seen less of, but I like what I know of him, and am anxious to show them both all the hospitality in my power. She is a charming creature, and I am sure you will admire her.”

“Doubtless I shall,” he replied; “that is if she does not lay claim to all Mrs. Clayton’s interest in the affairs of Molton Chase.”

“No fear of that,” laughed the cheery little lady as she ascended the stairs, and left Mr. Laurence standing in the hall beneath.

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“Clayton,” observed that gentleman, as he re-entered the luncheon-room and drew his host into the privacy of a bay-window, “I really am afraid I shall have to leave you this evening—if you won’t think it rude of me to go so suddenly.”

“But *why*, my dear fellow?” exclaimed Harry Clayton, as his blue eyes searched into the other’s soul. “What earthly reason can you have for going, when your fixed plan was to stay with us over Christmas Day?”

“Well! there is lots of work waiting for you to do, you know; and really the time slips away so, and time is money to a slave like myself—that—”

“Now, my dear Laurence,” said Harry Clayton, conclusively, “you know you are only making excuses. All the work that was absolutely necessary for you to do before Christmas was finished before you came here, and you said you felt yourself licensed to take a whole month’s holiday. Now, was not that the case?”

Mr. Laurence could not deny the fact, and so he looked undecided, and was silent.

“Don’t let me hear any more about your going before Christmas Day,” said his host, “or I shall be offended, and so will Bella; to say nothing of Bella’s sister—eh, Laurence?”

Whereupon Mr. Laurence felt himself bound to remain; and saying in his own mind that fate was against him, dropped the subject of his departure altogether.

One hour later, the riding party being then some miles from Molton Chase, a travelling carriage laden with trunks drove up to the house, and Mrs. Clayton, all blushes and smiles, stood on the hall-steps to welcome her expected guests.

Colonel Damer was the first to alight. He was a middle-aged man, but with, a fine soldierly bearing. Which took off from his years; and he was so eager to see to the safe exit of his wife from the carriage-door that he had not time to do more than take off his hat to blooming Bella on the steps.

“Now, my love,” he exclaimed as the lady’s form appeared, “pray take care; two steps; that’s right—here you are, safe.”

And then Mrs. Damer, being securely landed, was permitted to fly into the cousinly arms which were opened to receive her.

“My dear Bella!”

“My dearest Blanche—I am so delighted to see you again. Why, you are positively frozen! Pray come in at once to the fire. Colonel Damer, my servants will see to the luggage—do leave it to them, and come and warm yourselves.”

A couple of men-servants now came forward and offered to see to the unloading of the carriage—but Mrs. Damer did not move.

“Will you not go in, my love, as your cousin proposes?” said her husband. “I can see to the boxes if you should wish me to do so.”

“No, thank you,” was the low reply; and there was such a ring of melancholy in the voice of Mrs. Damer that a stranger would have been attracted by it. “I prefer waiting until the carriage is unpacked.”

“Never mind the luggage, Blanche,” whispered Mrs. Clayton, in her coaxing manner. “Come in to the fire, dear—I have so much to tell you.”

“Wait a minute, Bella,” said her cousin; and the entreaty was so firm that it met with no further opposition.

“One—two—three—four,” exclaimed Colonel Damer, as the boxes successively came to the ground. “I am afraid you will think we are going to take you by storm, Mrs. Clayton; but perhaps you know my wife’s fancy for a large travelling *kit* of old. Is that all, Blanche?”

“That is all—thank you,” in the same low melancholy tones in which she had spoken before. “Now, Bella, dear, which is to be my room?”

“You would rather go there first, Blanche?”

“Yes, please—I’m tired. Will you carry up that box for me?” she continued, pointing out one of the trunks to the servant.

“Directly, ma’am,” he returned, as he was looking for change for a sovereign wherewith to accommodate Colonel Damer—but the lady lingered until he was at leisure.

Then he shouldered the box next to the one she had indicated, and she directed his attention to the fact, and made him change his burden.

“They’ll all go up in time, ma’am,” the man remarked; but Mrs. Damer, answering nothing, did not set her foot upon the stairs until he was half-way up them, with the trunk she had desired him to take first.

Then she leaned wearily upon Bella Clayton’s arm, pressing it fondly to her side, and so the two went together to the bedroom which had been appointed for the reception of the new guests. It was a large and cosily-furnished apartment, with a dressing room opening from it. When the ladies arrived there they found the servant awaiting them with the box in question.

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“Where will you have it placed, ma’am?” he demanded of Mrs. Damer.

“Under the bed, please.”

But the bedstead was a French one, and the mahogany sides were so deep that nothing could get beneath them but dust; and the trunk, although small, was heavy and strong and clamped with iron, not at all the sort of trunk that would go *anywhere*.

“Nothing will go under the bed, ma’am!” said the servant in reply.

Mrs. Damer slightly changed color.

“Never mind then: leave it there. Oh! what a comfort a good fire is,” she continued, turning to the hearth-rug, and throwing herself into an arm chair. “We have had such a cold drive from the station.”

“But about your box, Blanche?” said Mrs. Clayton, who had no idea of her friends being put to any inconvenience.

“It can’t stand there; you’ll unpack it, won’t you? or shall I have it moved into the passage?”

“Oh, no, thank you, Bella—please let it stand where it is: it will do very well indeed.”

“What will do very well?” exclaimed Colonel Damer, who now entered the bedroom, followed by a servant with another trunk.

“Only Blanche’s box, Colonel Damer,” said Bella Clayton. “She doesn’t wish to unpack it, and it will be in her way here, I’m afraid. It *might* stand in your dressing-room.”—This she said as a “feeler,” knowing that some gentlemen do not like to be inconvenienced, even in their dressing-rooms.

But Colonel Damer was as unselfish as it was possible for an old Indian to be.

“Of course it can,” he replied. “Here (to the servant), just shoulder that box, will you, and move it into the next room.”

The man took up the article in question rather carelessly, and nearly let it fall again. Mrs. Damer darted forward as if to save it.

“Pray put it down,” she said, nervously. “I have no wish to have it moved—I shall require it by and by; it will be no inconvenience——”

“Just as you like, dear,” said Mrs. Clayton, who was becoming rather tired of the little discussion. “And now take off your things, dear Blanche, and let me ring for some tea.”

Colonel Damer walked into his dressing-room and left the two ladies alone. The remainder of the luggage was brought upstairs; the tea was ordered and served, and

whilst Mrs. Clayton busied herself in pouring it out, Mrs. Damer sank back upon a sofa which stood by the fire, and conversed with her cousin.

She had been beautiful, this woman, in her earlier youth, though no one would have thought it to see her now. As Bella handed her the tea she glanced towards the thin hand stretched out to receive it, and from thence to the worn face and hollow eyes, and could scarcely believe she saw the same person she had parted from three years before.

But she had not been so intimate with her of late, and she was almost afraid of commenting upon her cousin's altered appearance, for fear it might wound her; all she said was:

“You look very delicate still, dear Blanche; I was in hopes the change to the Continent would have set you up and made you stronger than you were when you left England.”

“Oh, no; I never shall be well again, was Mrs. Damer's careless reply: “its an old story now, Bella, and it's no use talking about it. Who have you staying in the house at present, dear?”

“Well, we are nearly full,” rejoined Mrs. Clayton. “There is my old godfather, General Knox—you remember him, I know—and his son and daughter; and the Ainsleys and their family; ditto, the Bayleys and the Armstrongs, and then, for single men, we have young Brooke, and Harry's old friend, Charley Moss, and Herbert Laurence, and—are you ill, Blanche?”

An exclamation had burst from Mrs. Damer—hardly an exclamation so much as a half-smothered cry—but whether of pain or fear, it was hard to determine.

“Are you ill?” reiterated Mrs. Clayton, full of anxiety for her fragile-looking cousin.

“No,” replied Blanche Damer, pressing her hand to her side, but still deadly pale from the effect of whatever emotion she had gone through; “it is nothing; I feel faint after our long journey.”

Colonel Damer had also heard the sound, and now appeared upon the threshold of his dressing-room. He was one of those well-meaning, but fussy men, who can never leave two women alone for a quarter of an hour without intruding on their privacy.

“Did you call, my dearest?” he asked of his wife. “Do you want anything?”

“Nothing, thank you,” replied Bella for her cousin; “Blanche is only a little tired and overcome by her travelling.”

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“I think, after all, that I will move that trunk away for you into my room,” he said, advancing towards the box which had already been the subject of discussion. Mrs. Darner started from the sofa with a face of crimson.

“I *beg* you will leave my boxes alone,” she said. With an imploring tone in her voice which was quite unfitted to the occasion. “I have not brought one more than I need, and I wish them to remain under my own eye.”

“There must be something very valuable in that receptacle,” said Colonel Damer, facetiously, as he beat a retreat to his own quarters.

“Is it your linen box?” demanded Mrs. Clayton of her cousin.

“Yes,” in a hesitating manner; “that is, it contains several things that I have in daily use; but go on about your visitors, Bella: are there any more?”

“I don’t think so: where had I got to?—oh! to the bachelors; well, there are Mr. Brooke and Captain Moss, and Mr. Laurence (the poet, you know; Harry was introduced to him last season by Captain Moss), and my brother Alfred; and that’s all.”

“A very respectable list,” said Mrs. Damer, languidly.

“What kind of a man is the—the poet you spoke of?”

“Laurence?—oh, he seems a very pleasant man; but he is very silent and abstracted, as I suppose a poet should be. My sister Carrie is here, and they have quite got up a flirtation together; however, I don’t suppose it will come to anything.”

“And your nursery department?”

“Thriving, thank you; I think you *will* be astonished to see my boy. Old Mrs. Clayton says he is twice the size that Harry was at that age; and the little girls can run about and talk almost as well as I can. But I must not expect you, Blanche, to take the same interest in babies that I do.”

This she added, remembering that the woman before her was childless. Mrs. Damer moved uneasily on her couch but she said nothing; and soon after the sound of a gong reverberating through the hall warned Mrs. Clayton that the dinner was not far off and the riding-party must have returned; so, leaving her friend to her toilet, she took her departure.

As she left the room, Mrs. Damer was alone. She had no maid of her own, and she had refused the offices of Mrs. Clayton, assuring her that she was used to dress herself; but she made little progress in that department, as she lay on the couch in the firelight,

with her face buried in her hands, and thoughts coursing through her mind of which heaven alone knew the tendency.

“Come, my darling,” said the kind, coaxing voice of her husband, as, after knocking more than once without receiving any answer, he entered her room, fully dressed, and found her still arrayed in her travelling things, and none of her boxes unpacked. “You will never be ready for dinner at this rate. Shall I make an excuse for your not appearing at table this evening? I am sure Mrs. Clayton would wish you to keep your room if you are too tired to dress.”

“I am not too tired, Harry,” said Mrs. Damer, rising from the couch, “and I shall be ready in ten minutes,” unlocking and turning over the contents of a box as she spoke.

“Better not, perhaps, my love,” interposed the colonel, in mild expostulation; “you will be better in bed, and can see your kind friends to-morrow morning.”

“I am going down to dinner to-night,” she answered, gently, but decisively. She was a graceful woman now she stood on her feet, and threw off the heavy wraps in which she had travelled, with a slight, willowy figure, and a complexion which was almost transparent in its delicacy; but her face was very thin, and her large blue eyes had a scared and haggard look in them, which was scarcely less painful to witness than the appearance of anxiety which was expressed by the knitted brows by which they were surmounted. As she now raised her fair attenuated hands to rearrange her hair, which had once been abundant and glossy, her husband could not avoid remarking upon the change which had passed over it.

“I had no idea you had lost your hair so much, darling,” he said; “have not seen it down before to-night. Why, where is it all gone to?” he continued, as he lifted the light mass in his hands, and remembered of what a length and weight it used to be, when he last parted from her.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she rejoined, sadly; “gone, with my youth, I suppose, Henry.”

“My poor girl!” he said, gently, “you have suffered very much in this separation. I had no right to leave you alone for so many years. But it is all over now, dearest, and I will take such good care of you that you will be obliged to get well and strong again.”

She turned round suddenly from the glass, and pressed her lips upon the hand which held her hair.

“Don’t,” she murmured; “pray don’t speak to me so, Henry! I can’t bear it; I can’t indeed!”

He thought it was from excess of feeling that she spoke; and so it was, though not as he imagined. So he changed the subject lightly, and bade her be lazy no longer, but put on her dress, if she was really determined to make one of the party at dinner that evening.

In another minute, Mrs. Damer had brushed her diminished hair into the fashion in which she ordinarily wore it; thrown on an evening robe of black, which, while it contrasted well with her fairness, showed the falling away of her figure in a painful degree; and was ready to accompany her husband downstairs.

They were met at the door of the drawing-room by their host, who was eager to show cordiality towards guests of whom his wife thought so much, and having also been acquainted himself with Mrs. Damer since her return to England. He led her up to the sofa whereon Bella sat; and, dinner being almost immediately announced, the little hostess was busy pairing off her couples.

“Mr. Laurence!” she exclaimed; and then looking around the room, “where *is* Mr. Laurence?” So that that gentleman was forced to leave the window curtains, behind which he had ensconced himself, and advance into the centre of the room. “Oh, here you are at last; will you take Mrs. Damer down to dinner?” and proceeding immediately with the usual form of introduction—“Mr. Laurence— Mrs. Damer.”

They bowed to each other; but over the lady’s face, as she went through her share of the introduction, there passed so indescribable, and yet so unmistakable a change, that Mrs. Clayton, although not very quick, could not help observing it, and she said, involuntarily—

“Have you met Mr. Laurence before, Blanche?”

“I believe I have had that pleasure—in London—many years ago.”

The last words came out so faintly that they were almost indistinguishable.

“Why didn’t you tell me so?” said Bella Clayton, reproachfully, to Mr. Laurence.

He was beginning to stammer out some excuse about its having been so long ago, when Mrs. Damer came to his aid, in her clear, cold voice—

“It *was* very long ago: we must both be forgiven for having forgotten the circumstance.”

“Well, you must renew your acquaintanceship at dinner,” said Mrs. Clayton, blithely, as she trotted off to make matters pleasant between the rest of her visitors. As she did so, Mr. Laurence remained standing by the sofa, but he did not attempt to address Mrs.

Damer. Only, when the room was nearly cleared, he held out his hand to her, and she rose to accept it. But the next minute she had sunk back again upon the sofa, and Mrs. Clayton was at her cousin's side. Mrs. Damer had fainted.

“Poor darling!” exclaimed Colonel Damer, as he pressed forward to the side of his wife. “I was afraid coming down to-night would be too much for her, but she would make the attempt; she has so much spirit. Pray don't delay the dinner, Mrs. Clayton; I will stay by her, if you will excuse the apparent rudeness, until she is sufficiently recovered to go to bed.”

But even as he spoke his wife raised herself from the many arms which supported her, and essayed to gain her feet

“Bella, dear! I am all right again. Pray, if you love me, don't make a scene about a little fatigue. I often faint now: let me go up to my bedroom and lie down, as I ought to have done at first, and I shall be quite well to-morrow morning.”

She would accept no one's help—not even her husband's, though it distressed him greatly that she refused it—but walked out of the room of her own accord, and toiled wearily up the staircase which led to the higher stories; whilst more than one pair of eyes watched her ascent, and more than one appetite was spoilt for the coming meal.

“Don't you think that Blanche is looking very ill?” demanded Bella Clayton of Colonel Damer, at the dinner-table. She had been much struck herself with the great alteration in her cousin's looks, and fancied that the husband was not so alarmed about it as he ought to be.

“I do, indeed,” he replied; “but it is the last thing she will acknowledge herself. She has very bad spirits and appetite; appears always in a low fever, and is so nervous that the least thing will frighten her. That, to me, is the worst and most surprising change of all: such a high-couraged creature as she used to be.”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Mrs. Clayton; “I can hardly imagine Blanche being nervous at anything. It must have come on since her visit to the Continent, for she was not so when she stayed here last.”

“When was that?” demanded the Colonel, anxiously.

“Just three years ago this Christmas,” was the answer. “I don't think I ever saw her look better than she did then, and she was the life of the house. But soon afterwards she went to Paris, and then we heard of her illness, and this is my first meeting with her since that time. I was very much shocked when she got out of the carriage: I should

scarcely have known her again.” Here Mrs. Clayton stopped, seeing that the attention of Mr. Laurence, who sat opposite to her, appeared to be riveted on her words, and Colonel Damer relapsed into thought and spoke no more.

In the meanwhile Mrs. Damer had gained her bedroom. Women had come to attend upon her, sent by their mistress, and laden with offers of refreshment and help of every kind, but she had dismissed them and chosen to be alone. She felt too weak to be very restless, but she had sat by the fire and cried, until she was so exhausted that her bed suggested itself to her, as the best place in which she could be; but rising to undress, preparatory to seeking it, she had nearly fallen, and catching feebly at the bedpost had missed it, and sunk down by the side of the solid black box, which was clamped with iron and fastened with a padlock, and respecting which she had been so particular a few hours before. She felt as if she was dying, and as if this were the fittest place for her to die on. “There is nothing in my possession,” she cried, “that really belongs to me but *this*—this which I loathe and abhor, and love and weep over at one and the same moment.” And, strange to relate, Mrs. Damer turned on her side, and kneeling by the iron-clamped chest pressed her lips upon its hard, unyielding surface, as if it had life wherewith to answer her embrace. And then the wearied creature dragged herself up again into an unsteady position, and managed to sustain it until she was ready to lie down upon her bed.

The next morning she was much better. Colonel Damer and Bella Clayton laid their heads together and decided that she was to remain in bed until after breakfast, therefore she was spared meeting with the assembled strangers until the dinner-hour again, for luncheon was a desultory meal at Molton Chase, and scarcely any of the gentlemen were present at it that day. After luncheon Mrs. Clayton proposed driving Mrs. Damer out in her pony-chaise.

“I don’t think you will find it cold, dear, and we can come home by the lower shrubberies and meet the gentlemen as they return from shooting,” Colonel Damer being one of the shooting party. But Mrs. Damer had declined the drive, and made her cousin understand so plainly that she preferred being left alone, that Mrs. Clayton felt no compunction in acceding to her wishes, and laying herself out to please the other ladies staying in the house.

And Mrs. Damer did wish to be alone. She wanted to think over the incidents of the night before, and devise some plan by which she could persuade her husband to leave

the Grange as soon as possible without provoking questions which she might find it difficult to answer. When the sound of the wheels of her cousin's pony-chaise had died away, and the great stillness pervading Molton Grange proclaimed that she was the sole inmate left behind, she dressed herself in a warm cloak, and drawing the hood over her head prepared for a stroll about the grounds. A little walk she thought would do her good, and with this intention she left the house. The Grange gardens were extensive and curiously laid out, and there were many winding shrubbery paths about them, which strangers were apt to find easier to enter than to find their way out of again. Into one of these Mrs. Damer now turned her steps for the sake of privacy and shelter; but she had not gone far before, on turning an abrupt corner, she came suddenly upon the figure of the gentleman she had been introduced to the night before, Mr. Laurence, who she had imagined to be with the shooting party. He was half lying, half sitting across a rustic seat which encircled the huge trunk of an old tree, with his eyes bent upon the ground and a cigar between his lips. He was more an intellectual and fine-looking than a handsome man, but he possessed two gifts which are much more winning than beauty, a mind of great power and the art of fascination. As Mrs. Damer came full in view of him, too suddenly to stop herself or to retreat, he rose quickly from the attitude he had assumed when he thought himself secure from interruption and stood in her pathway. She attempted to pass him with an inclination of the head, but he put out his hand and stopped her.

“Blanche! you must speak to me; you shall not pass like this; I insist upon it!” and she tried in vain to disengage her arm from his detaining clasp.

“Mr. Laurence, what right have you to hold me thus?”

“What right, Blanche? The right of every man over the woman who loves him!”

“That is your right over me no longer. I have tried to avoid you. You have both seen and known it! No *gentleman* would force himself upon my notice in this manner.”

“Your taunt fails to have any effect upon me. I have sought an explanation of your extraordinary conduct from you in vain. My letters have been unanswered, my entreaties for a last interview disregarded; and now that chance has brought us together again, I must have what I have a right to ask from your own lips. I did not devise this meeting; I did not even know you had returned to England till yesterday, and then I sought to avoid you; but it was fated that we should meet, and it is fated that you satisfy my curiosity.”

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“What do you want to know?” she asked, in a low voice.

“First, have you ceased to love me?”

“The angry light which had flashed across her face when he used force to detain her died away; the pallid lips commenced to tremble, and in the sunken eyes large tear-drops rose and hung quivering upon the long eyelashes.

“Enough, Blanche,” Mr. Laurence continued, in a softer voice. “Nature answers me. I will not give you the needless pain of speaking. Then, why did you forsake me? Why did you leave England without one line of farewell, and why have you refused to hold any communication with me since that time?”

“I *could* not,” she murmured. “You do not know; you cannot feel; you could never understand my feelings on that occasion.”

“That is no answer to my question, Blanche,” he said firmly, “and an answer I will have. What was the immediate cause of your breaking faith with me? I loved you, you know how well. What drove you from me? Was it fear, or indifference, or a sudden remorse?”

“It was,” she commenced slowly, and then as if gathering up a great resolution, she suddenly exclaimed, “Do you *really* wish to know what parted us?”

“I really intend to know,” he replied, and the old power which he had held over her recommenced its sway. “Whatever it was it has not tended to your happiness,” he continued, “if I may judge from your looks. You are terribly changed, Blanche! I think even I could have made you happier than you appear to have been.”

“I have had enough to change me,” she replied. “If you will know then, come with me, and I will show you.”

“Today?”

“At once; to-morrow maybe too late.” She began to walk towards the house as she spoke, rapidly and irregularly, her heart beating fast, but no trace of weakness in her limbs; and Herbert Laurence followed her, he scarcely knew why, excepting that she had desired it .

Into Molton Grange she went, up the broad staircase and to her chamber door, before she paused to see if he was following. When she did so she found that he stood just behind her on the wide landing.

“You can enter,” she said, throwing open the door of her bedroom, “don’t be afraid; there is nothing here except the cause for which I parted with you.” In her agitation and

excitement, scarcely pausing to fasten the door behind her, Mrs. Damer fell down on her knees before the little black box with its iron clamps and ponderous padlock; and drawing a key from her bosom, applied it to the lock, and in another minute had thrown back the heavy lid. Having displaced some linen which lay at the top, she carefully removed some lighter materials, and then calling to the man behind her, bid him look in and be satisfied Mr. Laurence advanced to the box, quite ignorant as to the reason of her demand; but as his eye fell upon its contents, he started backwards and covered his face with his hands. As he drew them slowly away again he met the sad, earnest look with which the kneeling woman greeted him, and for a few moments they gazed at one another in complete silence. Then Mrs. Damer withdrew her eyes from his and rearranged the contents of the black box; the, heavy lid shut with a clang, the padlock was fast again, the key in her bosom and she rose to her feet and prepared to leave the room in the same unbroken silence. But he again detained her, and this time his voice was hoarse and changed.

“Blanche! tell me, is this the truth?”

“As I believe in heaven,” she answered.

“And this was the reason that we parted—this the sole cause of our estrangement?”

“Was it not enough? she said. “I erred, but it was as one in a dream. When I awoke I could no longer err and be at peace. At peace did I say? I have known no peace since I knew you; but I should have died and waked up in hell if I had not parted with you. This is all the truth, believe it or not as you will; but there may, there can be nothing in future between you and me. Pray let me pass you.”

“But that—that—box, Blanche!” exclaimed Herbert Laurence, with drops of sweat, notwithstanding the temperature of the day, upon his forehead. “It was an accident, a misfortune; *you* did not do it?”

She turned upon him eyes which were full of mingled horror and scorn.

“*I* do it!” she said, “what are you dreaming of? I was mad, but not so mad as that! How could you think it?” and the tears rose in her eyes more at the supposition which his question had raised than at the idea that he could so misjudge her.

“But why do you keep this? why do you carry it about with you, Blanche? It is pure insanity on your part. How long is it since you have travelled in company with that dreadful box?”

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“More than two years,” she said in a fearful whisper. “I have tried to get rid of it, but to no purpose; there was always some one in the way. I have reasoned with myself, and prayed to be delivered from it, but I have never found an opportunity. And now, what does it matter? The burden and heat of the day are past.”

“Let me do it for you,” said Mr. Laurence. “Whatever our future relation to one another, I cannot consent that you should run so terrible a risk through fault of mine. The strain upon your mind has been too great already. Would to heaven I could have borne it for you! but you forbid me even the privilege of knowing that you suffered. Now that I have ascertained it, it must be my care that the cause of our separation shall at least live in your memory only.” And as he finished speaking he attempted to lift the box; but Mrs. Damer sprang forward and prevented him.

“Leave it!” she cried; “do not dare to touch it; it is *mine!* It has gone wherever I have gone for years. Do you think, for the little space that is left me, that I would part with the only link left between me and my dread past?” and saying this she threw herself upon the black trunk and burst into tears.

“Blanche! you love me as you ever did,” exclaimed Herbert Laurence. “These tears confess it. Let me make amends to you for this; let me try to make the happiness of your future life!”

But before his sentence was concluded Mrs. Damer had risen from her drooping attitude and stood before him.

“Make amends!” she echoed scornfully. “How can you ‘make amends’? Nothing can wipe out the memory of the shame and misery that I have passed through, nothing restore the quiet conscience I have lost. I do not know if I love you still or not. When I think of it, my head swims, and I only feel confused and anxious. But I am sure of one thing, that the horror of my remorse for even having listened to you has power to overwhelm any regret that may be lingering in my unworthy breast, and that the mere fact of your bodily presence is agony to me. When I met you to-day I was battling with my invention to devise some means of leaving the place where you are without exciting suspicion. If you ever loved, have pity on me now; take the initiative, and rid me of yourself.”

“Is this your final decision, Blanche?” he asked slowly. “Will you not regret it when too late, and you are left alone with only *that?*”

She shuddered, and he caught at the fact as a sign of relenting.

“Dearest, loveliest,” he commenced—This woman had been the loveliest to him in days gone past, and though she was so terribly changed in eyes that regarded her less, Herbert Laurence, her once lover, could still trace above the languor and debility and distress of her present appearance, the fresh, sparkling woman who had sacrificed herself for his sake; and although his style of address signified more than he really thought for her, the knowledge of how much she had undergone since their separation had the power to make him imagine that this partial reanimation of an old flame was a proof that the fire which kindled it had never perished. Therefore it did not appear absurd in his mental eyes to preface his appeal to Mrs. Damer thus: “Dearest, loveliest—,” but she turned upon him as though he had insulted her.

“Mr. Laurence!” she exclaimed, “I have told you that the past is past; be good enough to take me at my word. Do you think that I have lived over two years of solitary shame and grief, to break the heart that trusts in me *now*? If I had any wish, or any thought to the contrary, it would be impossible. I am enveloped by kind words and acts, by care and attention, which chain me as closely to my home as if I were kept a prisoner between four walls. I could not free myself if I would,” she continued, throwing back her arms, as though she tried to break an invisible thrall. “I must die first; the cords of gratitude are bound about me so closely. It is killing me, as nothing else could kill,” she added, in a lower voice. “I lived under your loss, and the knowledge of my own disgrace; but I cannot live under his perpetual kindness and perfect trust. It cannot last much longer: for mercy’s sake, leave me in peace until the end comes!”

“And the box?” he demanded.

“I will provide for the box before that time,” she answered, sadly; “but if you have any fear, keep the key yourself: the lock is not one that can be forced.”

She took the key from her bosom, where it hung on a broad black ribbon, as she spoke, and handed it to him. He accepted it without demur.

“You are so rash,” he said; “it will be safer with me: let me take the box also.”

“No, no!” said Mrs. Damer, hurriedly; “you shall not; and it would be no use. If it were out of my sight, I should dream that it was found, and talk of it in my sleep. I often rise in the night now to see if it is safe. Nothing could do away with it. If you buried it, some one would dig it up; if you threw it in the water, it would float. It would lie still nowhere but on my heart, where it ought to be I—it ought to be!”

Her eyes had reassumed the wild, restless expression which they took whilst speaking of the past, and her voice had sunk to a low, fearful whisper.

“This is madness,” muttered Herbert Laurence; and he was right. On the subject of the black box Mrs. Damer’s brain was turned.

He was just about to speak to her again, and try to reason her out of her folly, when voices were heard merrily talking together in the hall, and her face worked with the dread of discovery.

“Go!” she said; “pray, go at once. I have told you everything.” And in another moment Herbert Laurence had dashed through the passage to the privacy of his own room; and Mrs. Clayton, glowing from her drive, and with a fine rosy baby in her arms, had entered the apartment of her cousin.

II

BELLA found her cousin sitting in an arm-chair, with the cloak still over her shoulders, and a face of ashy whiteness, the reaction of her excitement.

“My dear, how ill you look!” was her first exclamation. “Have you been out?”

“I went a little way into the shrubberies,” said Mrs. Damer; “but the day turned so cold.”

“Do you think so? We have all been saying what a genial afternoon it is: but it certainly does not seem to have agreed with you. Look at my boy: isn’t he a fine fellow? he has been out all day in the garden. I often wish you had a child, Blanchey.”

“Do you, dear? it is more than I do.”

“Ah, but you can’t tell, till they are really yours, how much pleasure they give you; no one knows who has not been a mother.”

“No; I suppose not.”

Mrs. Damer shivered as she said the words, and looked into the baby’s fat, unmeaning face with eyes of sad import. Mrs. Clayton thought she had wounded her cousin, and stooped to kiss the slight offence away; but she fancied that Blanche almost shrunk from her embrace.

“She must be really ill,” thought the kindly little Bella, who had no notion of such a thing as heart-sickness for an apparently happy married woman. “She ought to see a doctor: I shall tell Colonel Damer so.”

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In another half-hour they were at her side together, urging her to take their advice.

“Now, my darling,” said the Colonel, when Mrs. Damer faintly protested against being made a fuss about, “you must be good for my sake. You know how precious you are to me, and how it would grieve me to have you laid up; let me send for Dr. Barlow, as your cousin advises. You were very much overcome by the long journey here, and I am afraid the subsequent excitement of seeing your kind friends has been too much for you. You do not half know how dear you are to me, Blanche, or you would not refuse such a trifling request. Here have I been, for five years, dearest, only looking forward from day to day to meeting my dear loving little wife again; and then to have you so ill as this, the first month of our reunion, is a great trial to me. Pray let me send for Dr. Barlow.”

But Mrs. Damer pleaded for delay. She had become chilled through being out in the shrubberies; she had not yet got over the fatigue of her journey; she had caught a cold whilst crossing from Havre to Folkestone: it was anything and everything but an illness which required medical attendance. If she were not better in the morning, she promised to make no opposition to their wishes.

So she forced herself to rise and dress for dinner. She appeared there calm and collected, and continued so throughout the evening, talking with Mr. Laurence quite as much as with the rest of the company; and she went to bed at the same hour as the other guests of Molton Grange, receiving with her cousin’s good-night, congratulations on the evident improvement of her health.

“I cannot quite make out what has come to that cousin of yours, Bella,” said Harry Clayton to his wife, as they too retired for the night; “she doesn’t appear half such a jolly woman as she used to be.”

“She is certainly very much altered,” was Mrs. Clayton’s response; “but I think it must be chiefly owing to her health; a feeling of debility is so very depressing.”

“I suppose it can’t be anything on her mind, Bella?” suggested the husband, after a pause.

“On her *mind*, Harry!” said Bella, sitting up in bed in her wonderment, “of course not; why, how could it be? She has everything she can wish for; and, I am sure, no woman could have a more devoted husband than Colonel Damer. He has been speaking a great deal about her to me to-day, and his anxiety is something enormous. On her *mind!*—what a funny idea, Harry; what could have put that in your head?”

“I am sure I don’t know,” was the husband’s reply, rather ruefully given, as if conscious he had made a great mistake.

“You old *goose*,” said his wife, with an emphatic kiss, as she composed herself to her innocent slumbers.

But before they were broken by nature, in the gray of the morning, Mrs. Clayton was roused by a tapping at her bed-room door; a tapping to which all Mr. Clayton’s shouts to “come in” only served as a renewal.

“Who can it be, Harry?—do get up and see,” said Bella.

So Harry got up, like a dutiful husband, and opened the door, and the figure of Colonel Damer, robed in a dressing-gown, and looking very shadowy and unreal in the dawning presented itself on the threshold.

“Is your wife here?” demanded the Colonel briefly.

“Of course she is,” said Mr. Clayton, wondering what the Colonel wanted with her.

“Will she come to Mrs Damer? she is very ill,” was the next sentence, delivered tremblingly.

“Very ill!” exclaimed Bella, jumping out of bed and wrapping herself in a dressing-gown. “How do you mean, Colonel Damer?—when did it happen?”

“God knows!” he said, in an agitated voice; “but for some time after she fell asleep she was feverish and excited, and spoke much. I woke suddenly in the night and missed her, and going in search of her with a light, found her fallen on the landing.”

“Fainted?” said Bella.

“I don’t know now whether it was a faint or a fit,” he replied, “but I incline to the latter belief. I carried her back to her bed, and gave her some restoratives, not liking to disturb you——”

“Oh! why didn’t you, Colonel Damer?” interposed his hostess.

“—and thought she was better, till just now, when she had another attack of unconsciousness, and is so weak after it she cannot move. She has fever too, I am sure, from the rapidity of her pulse, and I don’t think her head is quite clear.”

“Harry, dear, send for Dr. Barlow at once,” thrusting her naked feet into slippers, “and come back with me, Colonel Damer; she should not be left for a minute.”

And she passed swiftly along the corridor to her cousin’s room. As she neared that of Mr. Laurence, the door opened a little, and a voice asked huskily—

“Is anything the matter, Mrs. Clayton? I have been listening to noises in the house for the last hour.”

“My cousin, Mrs. Damer, has been taken ill, Mr. Laurence, but we have sent for the doctor; I am going to her now.”

And as the door closed again she fancied that she heard a sigh.

Blanche Damer was lying on her pillows very hot and flushed, with that anxious, perturbed look which the eyes assume when the brain is only half clouded, and can feel itself to be wandering.

“Blanche, dearest,” cried Bella, as she caught sight of her face, “what is the matter? How did this happen?”

“I dreamt that he had taken it,” said Mrs. Darner, slowly and sadly; “but it was a mistake: he must not have it yet—not yet! only a little while to wait now I—but he has the key.”

“Her mind is wandering at present,” said Colonel Damer, who had followed Mrs. Clayton into the room.

“Oh, Colonel Damer,” exclaimed Bella, tearfully, “how dreadful it is!—she frightens me! Could she have knocked her head in falling? Have you no idea why she got up and went into the passage?”

“Not the slightest,” he returned. And now that she examined him under the morning light, which was by this time streaming through the open shutters, Bella Clayton saw how aged and haggard his night’s anxiety had made him look. “My wife has been very subject to both sleep-talking and walking since my return, and I have several times missed her, as I did last night, and found her walking about the room in her sleep, but she has never been like this before. When I first found her in the passage, I asked her why she had gone there, or what she wanted, and she said, ‘the key.’ When I had re-lifted her into bed, I found her bunch of keys as usual, on the dressing-table, therefore I imagine she could not then have known what she was talking about. I trust Dr. Barlow will not be long in coming; I am deeply anxious.”

And he looked the truth of what he uttered; whilst poor little Mrs. Clayton could only press his hand and entreat him to be hopeful; and his wife lay on her pillows, and silently stared into vacancy.

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As soon as the doctor arrived he pronounced the patient to be suffering from an attack of pressure on the brain, and wished to know whether she had not been subjected to some great mental shock or strain.

Here Colonel Damer came forward and stoutly denied the possibility of such a thing. He had joined his wife from India a month ago, at which time she was, though in delicate, not in bad health, and he had never left her since. They had crossed from Havre to Folkestone three days before, and Mrs. Damer had not complained of any unusual sickness or fatigue. She was a person of a highly excitable and nervous temperament, and her appetite and spirit were variable; otherwise there had been nothing in her state of health to call for anxiety on the part of her friends.

Dr. Barlow listened to all these statements, and believed as much as them as he chose. However, he waived the subject of the cause of the disaster; the fact that it had occurred was undeniable; and the remedies then in vogue for such emergencies were immediately resorted to. But leeching and cupping, shaving, icing, and blistering, all proved alike ineffectual, for the simple reason that the irrevocable fiat had gone forth, and Blanche Damer was appointed to die.

As the day wore on, and the case assumed a darker aspect, and the doctor's prognostications became less hopeful Colonel Damer worked himself into a perfect frenzy of fear.

“Save her. Dr. Barlow,” he had said to that gentleman, in the insane manner in which people are used to address the Faculty, as if it was in their power to do more than help the efforts of nature. “Save her life, for God's sake! And there is nothing that I can do for you, of earthly good, that shall not be yours. Shall I call in other advice? Shall I telegraph to London? Is there any one there who can save her? It is my life as well as hers that is tremblings in the scale. For the love of heaven, do not stand on ceremony, but only tell me what is best to be done!”

Of course Dr. Barlow told him that if he was not perfectly satisfied, he should wish him to telegraph to town for further advice, and mentioned several names celebrated in such cases; at the same time he assured Colonel Damer that he did not believe any number of doctors could do more for the patient than he was doing, and that it was impossible to guess at the probable termination of the illness for some days to come.

Bella Clayton gave up the duty of amusing her guests, and stationed herself at the bedside of her cousin; and the unhappy husband wandered in and out of the room like a

ghost; trying to think upon each fresh visit, that there was a slight improvement in the symptoms, and spending the intervening time in praying for the life which he fondly imagined had been devoted to himself. Meanwhile, whenever Mrs. Darner opened her lips, it was to ramble on in this manner:—

“Dying!” her hollow voice would exclaim; “crushed to death beneath the weight of a pyramid of blessings that lies like lead upon my chest and reaches to the ceiling. Kind words—fond care, and sweet attentions—they bow me down to the earth! I am stifling beneath the burden of their silent reproaches. Two and two are four; and four is eight; eight times locked should be secure—but there is a worm that dieth not, and a fire that is not quenched.”

“Oh! don’t come in here, Colonel Damer,” poor Bella would exclaim, as the unhappy man would creep to the foot of the bed and stand listening, with blanched cheek to the delirious ravings of his wife. “She doesn’t know what she is saying, remember; and she will be better to-morrow, doubtless. Don’t distress yourself more, by listening to all this nonsense.”

“I don’t believe she will ever be better, Mrs. Clayton,” he replied, on one of these occasions. This was on the third day.

“Dearest,” the sick woman resumed, in a plaintively soft voice, without being in the least disturbed by the conversation around her, “if you have ever loved me, you will believe in this hour that I love you in return. If you have given me your love, I have given you more than my life.”

“Does she speak of me,” demanded Colonel Damer.

“I think so,” said Bella Clayton, sadly.

“Take it off! take it off!” cried Mrs. Damer, starting with terror—“this box—this iron-clamped box which presses on my soul. What have I done? Where shall I go? How am I to meet him again?”

“What does she say?” asked the Colonel, trembling.

“Colonel Damer, I must beg you to quit the room,” said Bella, weeping. “I cannot bear to stay here with both of you. Pray leave me alone with Blanche until she is quieter.”

And so the husband left the chamber, with fellow tears in his eyes, and she set herself to the painful task of attempting to soothe the delirious woman.

“If he would only strike me,” moaned Mrs. Damer, “or frown at me, or tell me that I lie, I could bear it better; but he is killing me with kindness. Where is the box?—open it—let him see all. I am ready to die; but I forgot—there is no key, and no one shall touch it; it is mine—mine. Hark! I hear it! I hear it! How could I put it there? Let me go—no one shall hold me! Let me go, I say—I *hear* it; and—and—the world is nothing to me!”

At last, when they had almost despaired of ever seeing her sleep again, there came an uninterrupted hour of repose from sheer weariness; and then wide-open hollow eyes—a changed voice sounding with the question—“Bella! have I been ill?” and Mrs. Damer’s delirium was over.

Over with her life. For on his next visit Dr. Barlow found her sensible but cold and pulseless, and broke to her friends the news that twelve hours more would end her existence.

Colonel Darner went wild, and telegraphed at once to London for men who arrived when his wife was ready to be coffined. Bella heard the decree and wept silently; and a great gloom fell upon the guests of Molton Chase, who had been left altogether on poor Harry’s hands since Mrs. Darner’s illness.

The dying woman lay very silent and exhausted for some time after she had waked from that brief, memory-restoring sleep. When she next spoke, she said, observing her cousin’s swollen eyes—

“Am I dying, Bella?”

Poor little Mrs. Clayton did not at all know what answer to make to such a direct question, but she managed to stammer out something which, whatever it was meant for, was taken as affirmative by the one it most concerned.

“I thought so. Shall I never be able to get out of bed again?”

“I am afraid not, darling—you are so weak!”

“Yes, I am—I can hardly raise my hand. And yet I must rise if I can. I have something so particular to do.”

“Cannot I do it for you, Blanche?”

“*Will* you do it, Bella?”

“Anything—everything, love! How can you ask me?”

“And you will promise secrecy? Let me look in your face. Yes, it is a true face, as it has ever been, and I can trust you. Have the black box moved out of my room before I die, Bella—mind, *before* I die, and placed in your own dressing-room.”

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“What, dear, your linen box?”

“Yes, my linen box, or whatever you choose to call it. Take it away at once, Bella. Tell no one; and when I am dead, have it buried in my grave. Surely you could manage so much for me!”

“And Colonel Darner?”

“If you speak to him about it, Bella, or to your husband, or to any one, I’ll never forgive you, and I’m dying! cried Mrs. Darner, almost rising in her excitement. “Oh! why have I delayed it so long, why did I not see to this before? I cannot even die in peace.”

“Yes, yes, dearest Blanche, I will do it, indeed I will,” said Mrs. Clayton, alarmed at her emotion; “and no one shall know of it but myself! Shall I send it to my room at once? You may trust entirely to my discretion. Pray, have no fear!”

“Yes! at once—directly; it cannot be too soon!” said Mrs. Darner, falling back exhausted on her pillow. So a servant was called, and the iron-clamped box was carried away from the sick-room and secreted in Mrs. Clayton’s private apartment. Mrs. Damer seemed so weak, that her cousin suggested summoning her husband to her side, but she appeared to shrink from an interview with him.

“I have nothing to say but what will make him sad to think of afterwards,” she murmured. “Let me die with you alone, dear Bella. It is better so.”

So Colonel Damer, although he went backwards and forwards all the night, was not called at any particular moment to see the last of his wife, and Blanche had her wish. She

died alone with her faithful little cousin before the morning broke. As she was just going, she said, in a vague sort of manner—

“Tell him, Bella, that I forgive him as I hope to be forgiven. And that I have seen Heaven open to-night, and a child spirit pleading with the Woman-bom for us; and that the burden is lifted off my soul at last.” And then she added solemnly—“I will arise and go to my Father——” and went before she could finish the sentence.

Innocent Bella repeated her last message in perfect faith to Colonel Damer.

“She told me to tell you, that she felt herself forgiven, and that she had seen heaven opened for her, and the weight of her sins was lifted off her soul. Oh! Colonel Damer, pray think of that, and take comfort. She is happier than you could make her.”

But the poor faithful husband was, for the present, beyond all reach of comfort.

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The London doctors arrived with the daylight, and had to be solemnly entertained at breakfast, and warmed and comforted before they were despatched home again. The Christmas guests were all packing up their boxes, preparatory to taking their leave of Molton Chase, for it was impossible to think of festivities with such a bereavement in the house. And Harry Clayton told his wife that he was very thankful that they thought of doing so.

“It has been a most unfortunate business altogether, Bella, and of course they all felt it, poor things; and the more so because they could take no active part in it. The house has had a pall over it the last week; and it would have been still worse if they had remained. As for Laurence, I never saw a man so cut up. He has eaten nothing since your poor cousin was taken ill. One would think he had been his sister, or his dearest friend.”

“Is he going with the rest, Harry?”

“No; he will stay till after the funeral; then he is going abroad. He feels deeply with you, Bella, and desired me to tell you so.”

“He is very good—thank him in my name.”

But released from the care of thinking for her guests, and sitting crying alone in her dressing-room, poor Mrs. Clayton could not imagine what to do with the iron-clamped black box. She had promised Blanche not to confide in her husband, or Colonel Damer. The latter, having no family vault, wished to lay the remains of his wife amongst those of the Claytons in the country churchyard of Molton; but how to get the black box conveyed to the grave without the knowledge of the chief mourners was a mystery beyond the fathoming of Bella’s open heart. But in the midst of her perplexity, Fate sent her aid. On the second day of her cousin’s death, a gentle tap sounded at her chamber door, and on her invitation to enter being answered, she was surprised to see Mr. Laurence on the threshold—come, as she imagined, to offer his sympathy in person.

“This is very kind of you, Mr. Laurence,” she said.

“I can scarcely claim your gratitude, Mrs. Clayton. I have sought you to speak on a very important but painful subject. May I ask your attention for a few moments?”

“Of course you may!” And she motioned him to a seat.

“It concerns her whom we have lost Mrs. Clayton, tell me truly—did you love your cousin?”

“Dearly—very dearly, Mr. Laurence. We were brought up together.”

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“Then I may depend on your discretion; and if you wish to save her memory you must exercise it in her behalf. There is a small iron-clamped black trunk amongst her boxes, which must not fall into Colonel Damer’s hands. Will you have that box conveyed from her chamber to your own, and (if you will so far trust my honor) make it over to me?”

“To you, Mr. Laurence—the iron-bound box? What possible knowledge can you have of my cousin’s secret?”

“Her secret?”

“Yes—she confided that box to my care the night she died. She made me promise to do (without questions.) what you have just asked me to perform, and I did it. The trunk is already here.”

And throwing open a cupboard at the side of the room, she showed him the chest which he had mentioned.

“I see that it is,” he answered. “How do you design disposing of it?”

“She wished it to be buried in her grave.”

“That is impossible in its present state. The contents must be removed.”

“But how?” Mrs. Clayton demanded, in surprise. It is locked and double locked, and there is no key.

“I have the key,” he answered, gravely.

“Oh! Mr. Laurence,” exclaimed his hostess, trembling, “there is some dreadful mystery here. For heaven’s sake tell me what it is! What connection can you possibly have with this box of my poor cousin’s, if you have only met her once in your life?”

“Did she say so?” he asked.

“No; but I fancied so. Have you known her? When? where? and why did you not tell us so before?”

“How can I tell you now?” he said, gazing into the pure womanly face upraised to his own, bearing an expression which was half surprise and half fear, but which seemed as though it could never dream of anything like shame.

“You are too good and too happy, Mrs. Clayton, to know of, or be able to sympathize with, the troubles and temptations which preceded our fatal friendship and her fall.”

“Blanche’s *fall!*” ejaculated Bella Clayton, in a voice of horror.

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“Don’t interrupt me, please, Mrs. Clayton,” he said, hurriedly, covering his face with his hands, “or I shall never be able to tell you the wretched story. I knew your cousin years ago. Had you any suspicion that she was unhappy in her marriage?”

“No! none!” replied Bella, with looks of surprise.

“She *was* then, thoroughly unhappy, as scores of women are, simply because the hearts of the men they are bound to are opposed to theirs in every taste and feeling. I met her when she first returned to England, and—it is the old story Mrs. Clayton—I loved her, and was mad enough to tell her so. When a selfish man and an unselfish woman have mutually confessed their preference for each other the, the result is easily anticipated. I ruined her—forgive my plain speaking—and she still loved on, and forgave me.”

“Oh, Blanche!” exclaimed Bella Clayton, hiding her hot face in her hands.

“We lived in a fool’s paradise for some months, and then one day she left her house and went to the Continent, without giving me any warning of her intention. I was thunder-struck when I heard it, and deeply hurt, and as soon as I had traced her to Paris, I followed and demanded an explanation of her conduct. But she refused to see me, and when she found me pertinacious, left the city as suddenly as she had done that of London. Since which time she has answered no letters of mine, nor did we ever meet until, most unexpectedly, I met her in your house. My pride, after her first refusals to see me, was too great to permit me to renew my entreaties, and so I called her a flirt, and inconstant. I tried to banish her remembrance from my heart—and I thought I had succeeded.”

“Oh, my poor darling!” exclaimed Mrs. Clayton. “This accounts then for her holding aloof from all her relations for so long a time, by which means she estranged herself from many of them. She was working out her penitence and deep remorse in solitary misery; and she would not even let me share her confidence. But about the box, Mr. Laurence; what has all this to do with the black box?”

“When I met her in your shrubbery the other day, and reproached her for her desertion of me, insisting upon her giving me the reason of her change of mind, she bade me follow her to her own apartment. There, unlocking the box before you, she showed me its contents.”

“And they are?” inquired Mrs. Clayton, breathlessly.

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“Would you like to see them?” he demanded, taking a key from his pocket. “I have as much right to show them you as she would have had. But is your love for her dead memory and reputation strong enough to insure your eternal secrecy on the subject?”

“It is,” said Bella Clayton, decidedly.

“This box,” continued Mr. Laurence, applying the key he held to the lock of the iron-clamped black trunk, has accompanied my poor girl on all her travels for the last two years. The dreadful secret of its contents which she bore in silent, solitary misery all that time has been, I believe, the ultimate cause of her death, by proving too heavy a burden for the sensitive and proud spirit which was forced to endure the knowledge of its shame. She was killed by her remorse. If you have courage, Mrs. Clayton, for the sight, look at *this*—and pity the feelings I must endure as I kneel here and look at it with you.”

He threw back the lid and the topmost linen as he spoke, and Bella Clayton pressed eagerly forward to see, carefully laid amidst withered flowers and folds of cambric, the tiny skeleton of a new-born creature whose angel was even then beholding the face of his Father in heaven.

She covered her eyes with her clasped hands, no less to shut out the sight than to catch the womanly tears which poured forth at it, and then she cried between her sobs—

“Oh! my poor, poor Blanche, what must she not have suffered! God have mercy on her soul!”

“Amen!” said Herbert Laurence.

“You will let me take the box away with me, Mrs. Clayton?” he asked, gently.

She looked up as he spoke, and the tears were standing in his eyes.

“Yes—yes,” she said; “take it away; do what you will with it, only never speak of it to me again.”

He never did but once, and that was but an allusion. On the evening of the day on which they committed the remains of Blanche Damer to the dust, he lay in wait for Mrs. Clayton on the landing.

“All has been done as she desired,” he whispered; and Mrs. Clayton asked for no further explanation. The secret of which she had been made an unwilling recipient pressed so heavily on her conscience, that she was thankful when he left Molton Grange and went abroad, as he had expressed his intention of doing.

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Since which time she has never seen Herbert Laurence again; and Colonel Damer, whose grief at the funeral and for some time after was nearly frenzied, having—like most men who mourn much outwardly—found a source of consolation in the shape of another wife, the story of Blanche Damer’s life and death is remembered, for aught her cousin knows to the contrary, by none but herself.

I feel that an objection will be raised to this episode by some people on the score of its being *unnatural*; to whom all I can say in answer is, that the principal incident on which the interest of it turns—that of the unhappy Mrs. Damer having been made so great a coward by conscience that she carried the proof of her frailty about with her for years, too fearful of discovery to permit it to leave her sight—is a *fact*.

To vary the circumstances under which the discovery of the contents of the black box was finally made, and to alter the names of places and people so as to avoid general recognition, I have made my province; to relate the story itself, since, in the form I now present it to my readers, it can give pain to no one, I consider my privilege.

