

The Black Robe

By

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BEFORE THE STORY.

FIRST SCENE.--BOULOGNE-SUR-MER.--THE DUEL.

I.

THE doctors could do no more for the Dowager Lady Berrick.

When the medical advisers of a lady who has reached seventy years of age recommend the mild climate of the South of France, they mean in plain language that they have arrived at the end of their resources. Her ladyship gave the mild climate a fair trial, and then decided (as she herself expressed it) to "die at home." Traveling slowly, she had reached Paris at the date when I last heard of her. It was then the beginning of November. A week later, I met with her nephew, Lewis Romaine, at the club.

"What brings you to London at this time of year?" I asked.

"The fatality that pursues me," he answered grimly. "I am one of the unluckiest men living."

He was thirty years old; he was not married; he was the enviable possessor of the fine old country seat, called Vange Abbey; he had no poor relations; and he was one of the handsomest men in England. When I add that I am, myself, a retired army officer, with a wretched income, a disagreeable wife, four ugly children, and a burden of fifty years on my

back, no one will be surprised to hear that I answered Romaine, with bitter sincerity, in these words:

"I wish to heaven I could change places with you!"

"I wish to heaven you could!" he burst out, with equal sincerity on his side. "Read that."

He handed me a letter addressed to him by the traveling medical attendant of Lady Berrick. After resting in Paris, the patient had continued her homeward journey as far as Boulogne. In her suffering condition, she was liable to sudden fits of caprice. An insurmountable horror of the Channel passage had got possession of her; she positively refused to be taken on board the steamboat. In this difficulty, the lady who held the post of her "companion" had ventured on a suggestion. Would Lady Berrick consent to make the Channel passage if her nephew came to Boulogne expressly to accompany her on the voyage? The reply had been so immediately favorable, that the doctor lost no time in communicating with Mr. Lewis Romaine. This was the substance of the letter.

It was needless to ask any more questions--Romaine was plainly on his way to Boulogne. I gave him some useful information. "Try the oysters," I said, "at the restaurant on the pier."

He never even thanked me. He was thinking entirely of himself.

"Just look at my position," he said. "I detest Boulogne; I cordially share my aunt's horror of the Channel passage; I had looked forward to some months of happy retirement in the country among my books--and what happens to me? I am brought to London in this season of fogs, to travel by the tidal train at seven to-morrow morning--and all for a woman with

whom I have no sympathies in common. If I am not an unlucky man--who is?"

He spoke in a tone of vehement irritation which seemed to me, under the circumstances, to be simply absurd. But my nervous system is not the irritable system--sorely tried by night study and strong tea--of my friend Romaine. "It's only a matter of two days," I remarked, by way of reconciling him to his situation.

"How do I know that?" he retorted. "In two days the weather may be stormy. In two days she may be too ill to be moved. Unfortunately, I am her heir; and I am told I must submit to any whim that seizes her. I'm rich enough already; I don't want her money. Besides, I dislike all traveling--and especially traveling alone. You are an idle man. If you were a good friend, you would offer to go with me." He added, with the delicacy which was one of the redeeming points in his wayward character. "Of course as my guest."

I had known him long enough not to take offense at his reminding me, in this considerate way, that I was a poor man. The proposed change of scene tempted me. What did I care for the Channel passage? Besides, there was the irresistible attraction of getting away from home. The end of it was that I accepted Romaine's invitation.

II.

SHORTLY after noon, on the next day, we were established at Boulogne--near Lady Berrick, but not at her hotel. "If we live in the same house," Romaine reminded me, "we shall be bored by the companion and the doctor. Meetings on the stairs, you know, and exchanging bows and small talk." He hated those trivial conventionalities of society, in which, other people delight. When somebody once asked him in what company he felt most at ease? he made a shocking answer--he said, "In the company of dogs."

I waited for him on the pier while he went to see her ladyship. He joined me again with his bitterest smile. "What did I tell you? She is not well enough to see me to-day. The doctor looks grave, and the companion puts her handkerchief to her eyes. We may be kept in this place for weeks to come."

The afternoon proved to be rainy. Our early dinner was a bad one. This last circumstance tried his temper sorely. He was no gourmand; the question of cookery was (with him) purely a matter of digestion. Those late hours of study, and that abuse of tea to which I have already alluded, had sadly injured his stomach. The doctors warned him of serious consequences to his nervous system, unless he altered his habits. He had little faith in medical science, and he greatly overrated the restorative capacity of his constitution. So far as I know, he had always neglected the doctors' advice.

The weather cleared toward evening, and we went out for a walk. We passed a church--a Roman Catholic church, of course--the doors of which were still open. Some poor women were kneeling at their prayers in the dim light. "Wait a minute," said Romaine. "I am in a vile temper. Let me try to put myself into a better frame of mind."

I followed him into the church. He knelt down in a dark corner by himself. I confess I was surprised. He had been baptized in the Church of England; but, so far as outward practice was concerned, he belonged to no religious community. I had often heard him speak with sincere reverence and admiration of the spirit of Christianity--but he never, to my knowledge, attended any place of public worship. When we met again outside the church, I asked if he had been converted to the Roman Catholic faith.

"No," he said. "I hate the inveterate striving of that priesthood after social influence and political power as cordially as the fiercest Protestant living. But let us not forget that the Church of Rome has great merits to set against great faults. Its system is administered with an admirable knowledge of the higher needs of human nature. Take as one example what you have just seen. The solemn tranquillity of that church, the poor people praying near me, the few words of prayer by which I silently united myself to my fellow-creatures, have calmed me and done me good. In our country I should have found the church closed, out of service hours." He took my arm and abruptly changed the subject. "How will you occupy yourself," he asked, "if my aunt receives me to-morrow?"

I assured him that I should easily find ways and means of getting through the time. The next morning a message came from Lady Berrick, to say that she would see her nephew after breakfast. Left by myself, I walked toward the pier, and met with a man who asked me to hire his boat. He had lines and bait, at my service. Most unfortunately, as the event proved, I decided on occupying an hour or two by sea fishing.

The wind shifted while we were out, and before we could get back to the harbor, the tide had turned against us. It was six o'clock when I arrived at the hotel. A little open carriage was waiting at the door. I found Romaine impatiently expecting me, and no signs of dinner on the table. He informed me that he had accepted an invitation, in which I was included, and promised to explain everything in the carriage.

Our driver took the road that led toward the High Town. I subordinated my curiosity to my sense of politeness, and asked for news of his aunt's health.

"She is seriously ill, poor soul," he said. "I am sorry I spoke so petulantly and so unfairly when we met at the club. The near prospect of death has developed qualities in her nature which I ought to have seen before this. No matter how it may be delayed, I will patiently wait her time for the crossing to England."

So long as he believed himself to be in the right, he was, as to his actions and opinions, one of the most obstinate men I ever met with. But once let him be convinced that he was wrong, and he rushed into the other extreme--became needlessly distrustful of himself, and needlessly eager in seizing his opportunity of making atonement. In this latter mood he was capable (with the best intentions) of committing acts of the most childish imprudence. With some misgivings, I asked how he had amused himself in my absence.

"I waited for you," he said, "till I lost all patience, and went out for a walk. First, I thought of going to the beach, but the smell of the harbor drove me back into the town; and there, oddly enough, I met with a man, a certain Captain Peterkin, who had been a friend of mine at college."

"A visitor to Boulogne?" I inquired.

"Not exactly."

"A resident?"

"Yes. The fact is, I lost sight of Peterkin when I left Oxford--and since that time he seems to have drifted into difficulties. We had a long talk. He is living here, he tells me, until his affairs are settled."

I needed no further enlightenment--Captain Peterkin stood as plainly revealed to me as if I had known him for years. "Isn't it a little imprudent," I said, "to renew your acquaintance with a man of that sort? Couldn't you have passed him, with a bow?"

Romayne smiled uneasily. "I daresay you're right," he answered. "But, remember, I had left my aunt, feeling ashamed of the unjust way in which I had thought and spoken of her. How did I know that I mightn't be wronging an old friend next, if I kept Peterkin at a distance? His present position may be as much his misfortune, poor fellow, as his fault. I was half inclined to pass him, as you say--but I distrusted my own judgment. He held out his hand, and he was so glad to see me. It can't be helped now. I shall be anxious to hear your opinion of him."

"Are we going to dine with Captain Peterkin?"

"Yes. I happened to mention that wretched dinner yesterday at our hotel. He said, 'Come to my boarding-house. Out of Paris, there isn't such a table d'hote in France.' I tried to get off it--not caring, as you know, to go among strangers--I said I had a friend with me. He invited you most cordially to accompany me. More excuses on my part only led to a painful result. I hurt Peterkin's feelings. 'I'm down in the world,' he said, 'and I'm not fit company for you and your friends. I beg your pardon for taking the liberty of inviting you!' He turned away with the tears in his eyes. What could I do?"

I thought to myself, "You could have lent him five pounds, and got rid of his invitation without the slightest difficulty." If I had returned in reasonable time to go out with Romayne, we might not have met the

captain--or, if we had met him, my presence would have prevented the confidential talk and the invitation that followed. I felt I was to blame--and yet, how could I help it? It was useless to remonstrate: the mischief was done.

We left the Old Town on our right hand, and drove on, past a little colony of suburban villas, to a house standing by itself, surrounded by a stone wall. As we crossed the front garden on our way to the door, I noticed against the side of the house two kennels, inhabited by two large watch-dogs. Was the proprietor afraid of thieves?

III.

THE moment we were introduced to the drawing-room, my suspicions of the company we were likely to meet with were fully confirmed.

"Cards, billiards, and betting"--there was the inscription legibly written on the manner and appearance of Captain Peterkin. The bright-eyed yellow old lady who kept the boarding-house would have been worth five thousand pounds in jewelry alone, if the ornaments which profusely covered her had been genuine precious stones. The younger ladies present had their cheeks as highly rouged and their eyelids as elaborately penciled in black as if they were going on the stage, instead of going to dinner. We found these fair creatures drinking Madeira as a whet to their appetites. Among the men, there were two who struck me as the most finished and complete blackguards whom I had ever met with in all my experience, at home and abroad. One, with a brown face and a broken nose, was presented to us by the title of "Commander," and was described as a person of great wealth and distinction in Peru, traveling for amusement. The other wore a military uniform and decorations, and was spoken of as "the General." A bold bullying manner, a fat sodden face, little leering eyes, and greasy-looking hands, made this man so repellent to me that I privately longed to kick him. Romaine had evidently been announced, before our arrival, as a landed gentleman with a large income. Men and women vied in servile attentions to him. When we went into the dining-room, the fascinating creature who sat next to him held her fan before her face, and so made a private interview of it between the rich Englishman and herself. With regard to the dinner, I shall only report that it justified Captain Peterkin's boast, in some degree at least. The wine was good, and the conversation became gay to the verge of indelicacy. Usually the most temperate of men, Romaine was tempted by his neighbors into drinking freely. I was unfortunately seated at the opposite extremity of the table, and I had no opportunity of warning him.

The dinner reached its conclusion, and we all returned together, on the foreign plan, to coffee and cigars in the drawing-room. The women

smoked, and drank liqueurs as well as coffee, with the men. One of them went to the piano, and a little impromptu ball followed, the ladies dancing with their cigarettes in their mouths. Keeping my eyes and ears on the alert, I saw an innocent-looking table, with a surface of rosewood, suddenly develop a substance of green cloth. At the same time, a neat little roulette-table made its appearance from a hiding-place in a sofa. Passing near the venerable landlady, I heard her ask the servant, in a whisper, "if the dogs were loose?" After what I had observed, I could only conclude that the dogs were used as a patrol, to give the alarm in case of a descent of the police. It was plainly high time to thank Captain Peterkin for his hospitality, and to take our leave.

"We have had enough of this," I whispered to Romaine in English. "Let us go."

In these days it is a delusion to suppose that you can speak confidentially in the English language, when French people are within hearing. One of the ladies asked Romaine, tenderly, if he was tired of her already. Another reminded him that it was raining heavily (as we could all hear), and suggested waiting until it cleared up. The hideous General waved his greasy hand in the direction of the card table, and said, "The game is waiting for us."

Romaine was excited, but not stupefied, by the wine he had drunk. He answered, discreetly enough, "I must beg you to excuse me; I am a poor card player."

The General suddenly looked grave. "You are speaking, sir, under a strange misapprehension," he said. "Our game is lansquenet--essentially a game of chance. With luck, the poorest player is a match for the whole table."

Romayne persisted in his refusal. As a matter of course, I supported him, with all needful care to avoid giving offense. The General took offense, nevertheless. He crossed his arms on his breast, and looked at us fiercely.

"Does this mean, gentlemen, that you distrust the company?" he asked.

The broken-nosed Commander, hearing the question, immediately joined us, in the interests of peace--bearing with him the elements of persuasion, under the form of a lady on his arm.

The lady stepped briskly forward, and tapped the General on the shoulder with her fan. "I am one of the company," she said, "and I am sure Mr. Romayne doesn't distrust me." She turned to Romayne with her most irresistible smile. "A gentleman always plays cards," she resumed, "when he has a lady for a partner. Let us join our interests at the table--and, dear Mr. Romayne, don't risk too much!" She put her pretty little purse into his hand, and looked as if she had been in love with him for half her lifetime.

The fatal influence of the sex, assisted by wine, produced the inevitable result. Romayne allowed himself to be led to the card table. For a moment the General delayed the beginning of the game. After what had happened, it was necessary that he should assert the strict sense of justice that was in him. "We are all honorable men," he began.

"And brave men," the Commander added, admiring the General.

"And brave men," the General admitted, admiring the Commander. "Gentlemen, if I have been led into expressing myself with unnecessary warmth of feeling, I apologize, and regret it.

"Nobly spoken!" the Commander pronounced. The General put his hand on his heart and bowed. The game began.

As the poorest man of the two I had escaped the attentions lavished by the ladies on Romyne. At the same time I was obliged to pay for my dinner, by taking some part in the proceedings of the evening. Small stakes were allowed, I found, at roulette; and, besides, the heavy chances in favor of the table made it hardly worth while to run the risk of cheating in this case. I placed myself next to the least rascally-looking man in the company, and played roulette.

For a wonder, I was successful at the first attempt. My neighbor handed me my winnings. "I have lost every farthing I possess," he whispered to me, piteously, "and I have a wife and children at home." I lent the poor wretch five francs. He smiled faintly as he looked at the money. "It reminds me," he said, "of my last transaction, when I borrowed of that gentleman there, who is betting on the General's luck at the card table. Beware of employing him as I did. What do you think I got for my note of hand of four thousand francs? A hundred bottles of champagne, fifty bottles of ink, fifty bottles of blacking, three dozen handkerchiefs, two pictures by unknown masters, two shawls, one hundred maps, and--five francs."

We went on playing. My luck deserted me; I lost, and lost, and lost again. From time to time I looked round at the card table. The "deal" had fallen early to the General, and it seemed to be indefinitely prolonged. A heap of notes and gold (won mainly from Romyne, as I afterward discovered) lay before him. As for my neighbor, the unhappy possessor of the bottles of blacking, the pictures by unknown masters, and the rest of it, he won, and then rashly presumed on his good fortune. Deprived of his last farthing, he retired into a corner of the room, and consoled himself with a cigar. I had just arisen, to follow his example, when a furious uproar burst out at the card table.

I saw Romaine spring up, and snatch the cards out of the General's hand. "You scoundrel!" he shouted, "you are cheating!" The General started to his feet in a fury. "You lie!" he cried. I attempted to interfere, but Romaine had already seen the necessity of controlling himself. "A gentleman doesn't accept an insult from a swindler," he said, coolly. "Accept this, then!" the General answered--and spat on him. In an instant Romaine knocked him down.

The blow was dealt straight between his eyes: he was a gross big-boned man, and he fell heavily. For the time he was stunned. The women ran, screaming, out of the room. The peaceable Commander trembled from head to foot. Two of the men present, who, to give them their due, were no cowards, locked the doors. "You don't go," they said, "till we see whether he recovers or not." Cold water, assisted by the landlady's smelling salts, brought the General to his senses after a while. He whispered something to one of his friends, who immediately turned to me. "The General challenges Mr. Romaine," he said. "As one of his seconds, I demand an appointment for to-morrow morning." I refused to make any appointment unless the doors were first unlocked, and we were left free to depart. "Our carriage is waiting outside," I added. "If it returns to the hotel without us, there will be an inquiry." This latter consideration had its effect. On their side, the doors were opened. On our side, the appointment was made. We left the house.

IV.

IN consenting to receive the General's representative, it is needless to say that I merely desired to avoid provoking another quarrel. If those persons were really impudent enough to call at the hotel, I had arranged to threaten them with the interference of the police, and so to put an end to the matter. Romaine expressed no opinion on the subject, one way or the other. His conduct inspired me with a feeling of uneasiness. The filthy insult of which he had been made the object seemed to be rankling in his mind. He went away thoughtfully to his own room. "Have you nothing to say to me?" I asked. He only answered: "Wait till to-morrow."

The next day the seconds appeared.

I had expected to see two of the men with whom we had dined. To my astonishment, the visitors proved to be officers of the General's regiment. They brought proposals for a hostile meeting the next morning; the choice of weapons being left to Romaine as the challenged man.

It was now quite plain to me that the General's peculiar method of card-playing had, thus far, not been discovered and exposed. He might keep doubtful company, and might (as I afterward heard) be suspected in certain quarters. But that he still had, formally-speaking, a reputation to preserve, was proved by the appearance of the two gentlemen present as his representatives. They declared, with evident sincerity, that Romaine had made a fatal mistake; had provoked the insult offered to him; and had resented it by a brutal and cowardly outrage. As a man and a soldier, the General was doubly bound to insist on a duel. No apology would be accepted, even if an apology were offered.

In this emergency, as I understood it, there was but one course to follow. I refused to receive the challenge.

Being asked for my reasons, I found it necessary to speak within certain limits. Though we knew the General to be a cheat, it was a delicate matter to dispute his right to claim satisfaction, when he had found two officers to carry his message. I produced the seized cards (which Romaine had brought away with him in his pocket), and offered them as a formal proof that my friend had not been mistaken.

The seconds--evidently prepared for this circumstance by their principal--declined to examine the cards. In the first place, they said, not even the discovery of foul play (supposing the discovery to have been really made) could justify Romaine's conduct. In the second place, the General's high character made it impossible, under any circumstances, that he could be responsible. Like ourselves, he had rashly associated with bad company; and he had been the innocent victim of an error or a fraud, committed by some other person present at the table.

Driven to my last resource, I could now only base my refusal to receive the challenge on the ground that we were Englishmen, and that the practice of dueling had been abolished in England. Both the seconds at once declined to accept this statement in justification of my conduct.

"You are now in France," said the elder of the two, "where a duel is the established remedy for an insult, among gentlemen. You are bound to respect the social laws of the country in which you are for the time residing. If you refuse to do so, you lay yourselves open to a public imputation on your courage, of a nature too degrading to be more particularly alluded to. Let us adjourn this interview for three hours on the ground of informality. We ought to confer with two gentlemen, acting on Mr. Romaine's behalf. Be prepared with another second to meet us, and reconsider your decision before we call again."

The Frenchmen had barely taken their departure by one door, when Romaine entered by another.

"I have heard it all," he said, quietly. "Accept the challenge."

I declare solemnly that I left no means untried of opposing my friend's resolution. No man could have felt more strongly convinced than I did, that nothing could justify the course he was taking. My remonstrances were completely thrown away. He was deaf to sense and reason, from the moment when he had heard an imputation on his courage suggested as a possible result of any affair in which he was concerned.

"With your views," he said, "I won't ask you to accompany me to the ground. I can easily find French seconds. And mind this, if you attempt to prevent the meeting, the duel will take place elsewhere--and our friendship is at an end from that moment."

After this, I suppose it is needless to add that I accompanied him to the ground the next morning as one of his seconds.

v.

WE were punctual to the appointed hour--eight o'clock.

The second who acted with me was a French gentleman, a relative of one of the officers who had brought the challenge. At his suggestion, we had chosen the pistol as our weapon. Romaine, like most Englishmen at the present time, knew nothing of the use of the sword. He was almost equally inexperienced with the pistol.

Our opponents were late. They kept us waiting for more than ten minutes. It was not pleasant weather to wait in. The day had dawned damp and drizzling. A thick white fog was slowly rolling in on us from the sea.

When they did appear, the General was not among them. A tall, well-dressed young man saluted Romaine with stern courtesy, and said to a stranger who accompanied him: "Explain the circumstances."

The stranger proved to be a surgeon. He entered at once on the necessary explanation. The General was too ill to appear. He had been attacked that morning by a fit--the consequence of the blow that he had received. Under these circumstances, his eldest son (Maurice) was now on the ground to fight the duel on his father's behalf; attended by the General's seconds, and with the General's full approval.

We instantly refused to allow the duel to take place, Romaine loudly declaring that he had no quarrel with the General's son. Upon this, Maurice broke away from his seconds; drew off one of his gloves; and stepping close up to Romaine, struck him on the face with the glove. "Have you no quarrel with me now?" the young Frenchman asked. "Must

I spit on you, as my father did?" His seconds dragged him away, and apologized to us for the outbreak. But the mischief was done. Romaine's fiery temper flashed in his eyes. "Load the pistols," he said. After the insult publicly offered to him, and the outrage publicly threatened, there was no other course to take.

It had been left to us to produce the pistols. We therefore requested the seconds of our opponent to examine and to load them. While this was being done, the advancing sea-fog so completely enveloped us that the duelists were unable to see each other. We were obliged to wait for the chance of a partial clearing in the atmosphere. Romaine's temper had become calm again. The generosity of his nature spoke in the words which he now addressed to his seconds. "After all," he said, "the young man is a good son--he is bent on redressing what he believes to be his father's wrong. Does his flipping his glove in my face matter to me? I think I shall fire in the air."

"I shall refuse to act as your second if you do," answered the French gentleman who was assisting us. "The General's son is famous for his skill with the pistol. If you didn't see it in his face just now, I did--he means to kill you. Defend your life, sir!" I spoke quite as strongly, to the same purpose, when my turn came. Romaine yielded--he placed himself unreservedly in our hands.

In a quarter of an hour the fog lifted a little. We measured the distance, having previously arranged (at my suggestion) that the two men should both fire at the same moment, at a given signal. Romaine's composure, as they faced each other, was, in a man of his irritable nervous temperament, really wonderful. I placed him sidewise, in a position which in some degree lessened his danger, by lessening the surface exposed to the bullet. My French colleague put the pistol into his hand, and gave him the last word of advice. "Let your arm hang loosely down, with the barrel of the pistol pointing straight to the ground. When you hear the signal, only lift your arm as far as the elbow; keep the elbow pressed against your side--and fire." We could do no more for him. As we

drew aside--I own it--my tongue was like a cinder in my mouth, and a horrid inner cold crept through me to the marrow of my bones.

The signal was given, and the two shots were fired at the same time.

My first look was at Romaine. He took off his hat, and handed it to me with a smile. His adversary's bullet had cut a piece out of the brim of his hat, on the right side. He had literally escaped by a hair-breadth.

While I was congratulating him, the fog gathered again more thickly than ever. Looking anxiously toward the ground occupied by our adversaries, we could only see vague, shadowy forms hurriedly crossing and recrossing each other in the mist. Something had happened! My French colleague took my arm and pressed it significantly. "Leave me to inquire," he said. Romaine tried to follow; I held him back--we neither of us exchanged a word.

The fog thickened and thickened, until nothing was to be seen. Once we heard the surgeon's voice, calling impatiently for a light to help him. No light appeared that we could see. Dreary as the fog itself, the silence gathered round us again. On a sudden it was broken, horribly broken, by another voice, strange to both of us, shrieking hysterically through the impenetrable mist. "Where is he?" the voice cried, in the French language. "Assassin! Assassin! where are you?" Was it a woman? or was it a boy? We heard nothing more. The effect upon Romaine was terrible to see. He who had calmly confronted the weapon lifted to kill him, shuddered dumbly like a terror-stricken animal. I put my arm round him, and hurried him away from the place.

We waited at the hotel until our French friend joined us. After a brief interval he appeared, announcing that the surgeon would follow him.

The duel had ended fatally. The chance course of the bullet, urged by Romaine's unpracticed hand, had struck the General's son just above the right nostril--had penetrated to the back of his neck--and had communicated a fatal shock to the spinal marrow. He was a dead man before they could take him back to his father's house.

So far, our fears were confirmed. But there was something else to tell, for which our worst presentiments had not prepared us.

A younger brother of the fallen man (a boy of thirteen years old) had secretly followed the dueling party, on their way from his father's house--had hidden himself--and had seen the dreadful end. The seconds only knew of it when he burst out of his place of concealment, and fell on his knees by his dying brother's side. His were the frightful cries which we had heard from invisible lips. The slayer of his brother was the "assassin" whom he had vainly tried to discover through the fathomless obscurity of the mist.

We both looked at Romaine. He silently looked back at us, like a man turned to stone. I tried to reason with him.

"Your life was at your opponent's mercy," I said. "It was he who was skilled in the use of the pistol; your risk was infinitely greater than his. Are you responsible for an accident? Rouse yourself, Romaine! Think of the time to come, when all this will be forgotten."

"Never," he said, "to the end of my life."

He made that reply in dull, monotonous tones. His eyes looked wearily and vacantly straight before him. I spoke to him again. He remained impenetrably silent; he appeared not to hear, or not to understand me. The surgeon came in, while I was still at a loss what to say or do next.

Without waiting to be asked for his opinion, he observed Romaine attentively, and then drew me away into the next room.

"Your friend is suffering from a severe nervous shock," he said. "Can you tell me anything of his habits of life?"

I mentioned the prolonged night studies and the excessive use of tea. The surgeon shook his head.

"If you want my advice," he proceeded, "take him home at once. Don't subject him to further excitement, when the result of the duel is known in the town. If it ends in our appearing in a court of law, it will be a mere formality in this case, and you can surrender when the time comes. Leave me your address in London."

I felt that the wisest thing I could do was to follow his advice. The boat crossed to Folkestone at an early hour that day--we had no time to lose. Romaine offered no objection to our return to England; he seemed perfectly careless what became of him. "Leave me quiet," he said; "and do as you like." I wrote a few lines to Lady Berrick's medical attendant, informing him of the circumstances. A quarter of an hour afterward we were on board the steamboat.

There were very few passengers. After we had left the harbor, my attention was attracted by a young English lady--traveling, apparently, with her mother. As we passed her on the deck she looked at Romaine with compassionate interest so vividly expressed in her beautiful face that I imagined they might be acquainted. With some difficulty, I prevailed sufficiently over the torpor that possessed him to induce him to look at our fellow passenger.

"Do you know that charming person?" I asked.

"No," he replied, with the weariest indifference. "I never saw her before. I'm tired--tired--tired! Don't speak to me; leave me by myself."

I left him. His rare personal attractions--of which, let me add, he never appeared to be conscious--had evidently made their natural appeal to the interest and admiration of the young lady who had met him by chance. The expression of resigned sadness and suffering, now visible in his face, added greatly no doubt to the influence that he had unconsciously exercised over the sympathies of a delicate and sensitive woman. It was no uncommon circumstance in his past experience of the sex--as I myself well knew--to be the object, not of admiration only, but of true and ardent love. He had never reciprocated the passion--had never even appeared to take it seriously. Marriage might, as the phrase is, be the salvation of him. Would he ever marry?

Leaning over the bulwark, idly pursuing this train of thought, I was recalled to present things by a low sweet voice--the voice of the lady of whom I had been thinking.

"Excuse me for disturbing you," she said; "I think your friend wants you."

She spoke with the modesty and self-possession of a highly-bred woman. A little heightening of her color made her, to my eyes, more beautiful than ever. I thanked her, and hastened back to Romaine.

He was standing by the barred skylight which guarded the machinery. I instantly noticed a change in him. His eyes wandering here and there, in search of me, had more than recovered their animation--there was a wild look of terror in them. He seized me roughly by the arm and pointed down to the engine-room.

"What do you hear there?" he asked.

"I hear the thump of the engines."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing. What do you hear?"

He suddenly turned away.

"I'll tell you," he said, "when we get on shore."