## BROTHER GRIFFITH'S STORY of THE FAMILY SECRET.

### CHAPTER I.

WAS it an Englishman or a Frenchman who first remarked that every family had a skeleton in its cupboard? I am not learned enough to know, but I reverence the observation, whoever made it. It speaks a startling truth through an appropriately grim metaphor--a truth which I have discovered by practical experience. Our family had a skeleton in the cupboard, and the name of it was Uncle George.

I arrived at the knowledge that this skeleton existed, and I traced it to the particular cupboard in which it was hidden, by slow degrees. I was a child when I first began to suspect that there was such a thing, and a grown man when I at last discovered that my suspicions were true.

My father was a doctor, having an excellent practice in a large country town. I have heard that he married against the wishes of his family. They could not object to my mother on the score of birth, breeding, or character--they only disliked her heartily. My grandfather, grandmother, uncles, and aunts all declared that she was a heartless, deceitful woman; all disliked her manners, her opinions, and even the expression of her face--all, with the exception of my father's youngest brother, George.

George was the unlucky member of our family. The rest were all clever; he was slow in capacity. The rest were all remarkably handsome; he was the sort of man that no woman ever looks at twice. The rest succeeded in life; he failed. His profession was the same as my father's, but he never got on when he started in practice for himself. The sick poor, who could not choose, employed him, and liked him. The sick rich, who could--especially the ladies--declined to call him in when they could get anybody else. In experience he gained greatly by his profession; in money and reputation he gained nothing.

There are very few of us, however dull and unattractive we may be to outward appearance, who have not some strong passion, some germ of what is called romance, hidden more or less deeply in our natures. All the passion

and romance in the nature of my Uncle George lay in his love and admiration for my father.

He sincerely worshipped his eldest brother as one of the noblest of human beings. When my father was engaged to be married, and when the rest of the family, as I have already mentioned, did not hesitate to express their unfavorable opinion of the disposition of his chosen wife, Uncle George, who had never ventured on differing with anyone before, to the amazement of everybody, undertook the defense of his future sister-in-law in the most vehement and positive manner. In his estimation, his brother's choice was something sacred and indisputable. The lady might, and did, treat him with unconcealed contempt, laugh at his awkwardness, grow impatient at his stammering--it made no difference to Uncle George. She was to be his brother's wife, and, in virtue of that one great fact, she became, in the estimation of the poor surgeon, a very queen, who, by the laws of the domestic constitution, could do no wrong.

When my father had been married a little while, he took his youngest brother to live with him as his assistant.

If Uncle George had been made president of the College of Surgeons, he could not have been prouder and happier than he was in his new position. I am afraid my father never understood the depth of his brother's affection for him. All the hard work fell to George's share: the long journeys at night, the physicking of wearisome poor people, the drunken cases, the revolting cases--all the drudging, dirty business of the surgery, in short, was turned over to him; and day after day, month after month, he struggled through it without a murmur. When his brother and his sister-in-law went out to dine with the county gentry, it never entered his head to feel disappointed at being left unnoticed at home. When the return dinners were given, and he was asked to come in at tea-time, and left to sit unregarded in a corner, it never occurred to him to imagine that he was treated with any want of consideration or respect. He was part of the furniture of the house, and it was the business as well as the pleasure of his life to turn himself to any use to which his brother might please to put him.

So much for what I have heard from others on the subject of my Uncle George. My own personal experience of him is limited to what I remember as a mere child. Let me say something, however, first about my parents, my sister and myself.

My sister was the eldest born and the best loved. I did not come into the world till four years after her birth, and no other child followed me. Caroline,

from her earliest days, was the perfection of beauty and health. I was small, weakly, and, if the truth must be told, almost as plain-featured as Uncle George himself. It would be ungracious and undutiful in me to presume to decide whether there was any foundation or not for the dislike that my father's family always felt for my mother. All I can venture to say is, that her children never had any cause to complain of her.

Her passionate affection for my sister, her pride in the child's beauty, I remember well, as also her uniform kindness and indulgence toward me. My personal defects must have been a sore trial to her in secret, but neither she nor my father ever showed me that they perceived any difference between Caroline and myself. When presents were made to my sister, presents were made to me. When my father and mother caught my sister up in their arms and kissed her they scrupulously gave me my turn afterward. My childish instinct told me that there was a difference in their smiles when they looked at me and looked at her; that the kisses given to Caroline were warmer than the kisses given to me; that the hands which dried her tears in our childish griefs, touched her more gently than the hands which dried mine. But these, and other small signs of preference like them, were such as no parents could be expected to control. I noticed them at the time rather with wonder than with repining. I recall them now without a harsh thought either toward my father or my mother. Both loved me, and both did their duty by me. If I seem to speak constrainedly of them here, it is not on my own account. I can honestly say that, with all my heart and soul.

Even Uncle George, fond as he was of me, was fonder of my beautiful child-sister.

When I used mischievously to pull at his lank, scanty hair, he would gently and laughingly take it out of my hands, but he would let Caroline tug at it till his dim, wandering gray eyes winked and watered again with pain. He used to plunge perilously about the garden, in awkward imitation of the cantering of a horse, while I sat on his shoulders; but he would never proceed at any pace beyond a slow and safe walk when Caroline had a ride in her turn. When he took us out walking, Caroline was always on the side next the wall. When we interrupted him over his dirty work in the surgery, he used to tell me to go and play until he was ready for me; but he would put down his bottles, and clean his clumsy fingers on his coarse apron, and lead Caroline out again, as if she had been the greatest lady in the land. Ah! how he loved her! and, let me be honest and grateful, and add, how he loved me, too!

When I was eight years old and Caroline was twelve, I was separated from

home for some time. I had been ailing for many months previously; had got benefit from being taken to the sea-side, and had shown symptoms of relapsing on being brought home again to the midland county in which we resided. After much consultation, it was at last resolved that I should be sent to live, until my constitution got stronger, with a maiden sister of my mother's, who had a house at a watering-place on the south coast.

I left home, I remember, loaded with presents, rejoicing over the prospect of looking at the sea again, as careless of the future and as happy in the present as any boy could be. Uncle George petitioned for a holiday to take me to the seaside, but he could not be spared from the surgery. He consoled himself and me by promising to make me a magnificent model of a ship.

I have that model before my eyes now while I write. It is dusty with age; the paint on it is cracked; the ropes are tangled; the sails are moth-eaten and yellow. The hull is all out of proportion, and the rig has been smiled at by every nautical friend of mine who has ever looked at it. Yet, worn-out and faulty as it is--inferior to the cheapest miniature vessel nowadays in any toy-shop window--I hardly know a possession of mine in this world that I would not sooner part with than Uncle George's ship.

My life at the sea-side was a very happy one. I remained with my aunt more than a year. My mother often came to see how I was going on, and at first always brought my sister with her; but during the last eight months of my stay Caroline never once appeared. I noticed also, at the same period, a change in my mother's manner. She looked paler and more anxious at each succeeding visit, and always had long conferences in private with my aunt. At last she ceased to come and see us altogether, and only wrote to know how my health was getting on. My father, too, who had at the earlier periods of my absence from home traveled to the sea-side to watch the progress of my recovery as often as his professional engagements would permit, now kept away like my mother. Even Uncle George, who had never been allowed a holiday to come and see me, but who had hitherto often written and begged me to write to him, broke off our correspondence.

I was naturally perplexed and amazed by these changes, and persecuted my aunt to tell me the reason of them. At first she tried to put me off with excuses; then she admitted that there was trouble in our house; and finally she confessed that the trouble was caused by the illness of my sister. When I inquired what that illness was, my aunt said it was useless to attempt to explain it to me. I next applied to the servants. One of them was less cautious than my aunt, and answered my question, but in terms that I could not comprehend. After much explanation, I was made to understand

that "something was growing on my sister's neck that would spoil her beauty forever, and perhaps kill her, if it could not be got rid of." How well I remember the shudder of horror that ran through me at the vague idea of this deadly "something"! A fearful, awe-struck curiosity to see what Caroline's illness was with my own eyes troubled my inmost heart, and I begged to be allowed to go home and help to nurse her. The request was, it is almost needless to say, refused.

Weeks passed away, and still I heard nothing, except that my sister continued to be ill. One day I privately wrote a letter to Uncle George, asking him, in my childish way, to come and tell me about Caroline's illness.

I knew where the post-office was, and slipped out in the morning unobserved and dropped my letter in the box. I stole home again by the garden, and climbed in at the window of a back parlor on the ground floor. The room above was my aunt's bedchamber, and the moment I was inside the house I heard moans and loud convulsive sobs proceeding from it. My aunt was a singularly quiet, composed woman. I could not imagine that the loud sobbing and moaning came from her, and I ran down terrified into the kitchen to ask the servants who was crying so violently in my aunt's room.

I found the housemaid and the cook talking together in whispers with serious faces. They started when they saw me as if I had been a grown-up master who had caught them neglecting their work.

"He's too young to feel it much," I heard one say to the other. "So far as he is concerned, it seems like a mercy that it happened no later."

In a few minutes they had told me the worst. It was indeed my aunt who had been crying in the bedroom. Caroline was dead.

I felt the blow more severely than the servants or anyone else about me supposed. Still I was a child in years, and I had the blessed elasticity of a child's nature. If I had been older I might have been too much absorbed in grief to observe my aunt so closely as I did, when she was composed enough to see me later in the day.

I was not surprised by the swollen state of her eyes, the paleness of her cheeks, or the fresh burst of tears that came from her when she took me in her arms at meeting. But I was both amazed and perplexed by the look of terror that I detected in her face. It was natural enough that she should grieve and weep over my sister's death, but why should she have that frightened look as if some other catastrophe had happened?

I asked if there was any more dreadful news from home besides the news of Caroline's death.

My aunt, said No in a strange, stifled voice, and suddenly turned her face from me. Was my father dead? No. My mother? No. Uncle George? My aunt trembled all over as she said No to that also, and bade me cease asking any more questions. She was not fit to bear them yet she said, and signed to the servant to lead me out of the room.

The next day I was told that I was to go home after the funeral, and was taken out toward evening by the housemaid, partly for a walk, partly to be measured for my mourning clothes. After we had left the tailor's, I persuaded the girl to extend our walk for some distance along the sea-beach, telling her, as we went, every little anecdote connected with my lost sister that came tenderly back to my memory in those first days of sorrow. She was so interested in hearing and I in speaking that we let the sun go down before we thought of turning back.

The evening was cloudy, and it got on from dusk to dark by the time we approached the town again. The housemaid was rather nervous at finding herself alone with me on the beach, and once or twice looked behind her distrustfully as we went on. Suddenly she squeezed my hand hard, and said:

"Let's get up on the cliff as fast as we can."

The words were hardly out of her mouth before I heard footsteps behind me--a man came round quickly to my side, snatched me away from the girl, and, catching me up in his arms without a word, covered my face with kisses. I knew he was crying, because my cheeks were instantly wet with his tears; but it was too dark for me to see who he was, or even how he was dressed. He did not, I should think, hold me half a minute in his arms. The housemaid screamed for help. I was put down gently on the sand, and the strange man instantly disappeared in the darkness.

When this extraordinary adventure was related to my aunt, she seemed at first merely bewildered at hearing of it; but in a moment more there came a change over her face, as if she had suddenly recollected or thought of something. She turned deadly pale, and said, in a hurried way, very unusual with her:

"Never mind; don't talk about it any more. It was only a mischievous trick to

frighten you, I dare say. Forget all about it, my dear--forget all about it."

It was easier to give this advice than to make me follow it. For many nights after, I thought of nothing but the strange man who had kissed me and cried over me.

Who could he be? Somebody who loved me very much, and who was very sorry. My childish logic carried me to that length. But when I tried to think over all the grown-up gentlemen who loved me very much, I could never get on, to my own satisfaction, beyond my father and my Uncle George.

## CHAPTER II.

I was taken home on the appointed day to suffer the trial--a hard one even at my tender years--of witnessing my mother's passionate grief and my father's mute despair. I remember that the scene of our first meeting after Caroline's death was wisely and considerately shortened by my aunt, who took me out of the room. She seemed to have a confused desire to keep me from leaving her after the door had closed behind us; but I broke away and ran downstairs to the surgery, to go and cry for my lost playmate with the sharer of all our games, Uncle George.

I opened the surgery door and could see nobody. I dried my tears and looked all round the room--it was empty. I ran upstairs again to Uncle George's garret bedroom--he was not there; his cheap hairbrush and old cast-off razor-case that had belonged to my grandfather were not on the dressing-table. Had he got some other bedroom? I went out on the landing and called softly, with an unaccountable terror and sinking at my heart:

"Uncle George!"

Nobody answered; but my aunt came hastily up the garret stairs.

"Hush!" she said. "You must never call that name out here again!"

She stopped suddenly, and looked as if her own words had frightened her.

"Is Uncle George dead?" I asked. My aunt turned red and pale, and stammered.

I did not wait to hear what she said. I brushed past her, down the stairs. My heart was bursting--my flesh felt cold. I ran breathlessly and recklessly into the room where my father and mother had received me. They were both sitting there still. I ran up to them, wringing my hands, and crying out in a passion of tears:

"Is Uncle George dead?"

My mother gave a scream that terrified me into instant silence and stillness. My father looked at her for a moment, rang the bell that summoned the maid, then seized me roughly by the arm and dragged me out of the room.

He took me down into the study, seated himself in his accustomed chair, and put me before him between his knees. His lips were awfully white, and I felt his two hands, as they grasped my shoulders, shaking violently.

"You are never to mention the name of Uncle George again," he said, in a quick, angry, trembling whisper. "Never to me, never to your mother, never to your aunt, never to anybody in this world! Never--never--never!"

The repetition of the word terrified me even more than the suppressed vehemence with which he spoke. He saw that I was frightened, and softened his manner a little before he went on.

"You will never see Uncle George again," he said. "Your mother and I love you dearly; but if you forget what I have told you, you will be sent away from home. Never speak that name again--mind, never! Now kiss me, and go away."

How his lips trembled--and oh, how cold they felt on mine!

I shrunk out of the room the moment he had kissed me, and went and hid myself in the garden.

"Uncle George is gone. I am never to see him any more; I am never to speak of him again"--those were the words I repeated to myself, with indescribable terror and confusion, the moment I was alone. There was something unspeakably horrible to my young mind in this mystery which I was commanded always to respect, and which, so far as I then knew, I could never hope to see revealed. My father, my mother, my aunt, all appeared to be separated from me now by some impassable barrier. Home seemed home no longer with Caroline dead, Uncle George gone, and a forbidden subject of talk perpetually and mysteriously interposing between my parents and me.

Though I never infringed the command my father had given me in his study (his words and looks, and that dreadful scream of my mother's, which seemed to be still ringing in my ears, were more than enough to insure my obedience), I also never lost the secret desire to penetrate the darkness which clouded over the fate of Uncle George.

For two years I remained at home and discovered nothing. If I asked the servants about my uncle, they could only tell me that one morning he disappeared from the house. Of the members of my father's family I could make no inquiries. They lived far away, and never came to see us; and the idea of writing to them, at my age and in my position, was out of the

question. My aunt was as unapproachably silent as my father and mother; but I never forgot how her face had altered when she reflected for a moment after hearing of my extraordinary adventure while going home with the servant over the sands at night. The more I thought of that change of countenance in connection with what had occurred on my return to my father's house, the more certain I felt that the stranger who had kissed me and wept over me must have been no other than Uncle George.

At the end of my two years at home I was sent to sea in the merchant navy by my own earnest desire. I had always determined to be a sailor from the time when I first went to stay with my aunt at the sea-side, and I persisted long enough in my resolution to make my parents recognize the necessity of acceding to my wishes.

My new life delighted me, and I remained away on foreign stations more than four years. When I at length returned home, it was to find a new affliction darkening our fireside. My father had died on the very day when I sailed for my return voyage to England.

Absence and change of scene had in no respect weakened my desire to penetrate the mystery of Uncle George's disappearance. My mother's health was so delicate that I hesitated for some time to approach the forbidden subject in her presence. When I at last ventured to refer to it, suggesting to her that any prudent reserve which might have been necessary while I was a child, need no longer be persisted in now that I was growing to be a young man, she fell into a violent fit of trembling, and commanded me to say no more. It had been my father's will, she said, that the reserve to which I referred should be always adopted toward me; he had not authorized her, before he died, to speak more openly; and, now that he was gone, she would not so much as think of acting on her own unaided judgment. My aunt said the same thing in effect when I appealed to her. Determined not to be discouraged even yet, I undertook a journey, ostensibly to pay my respects to my father's family, but with the secret intention of trying what I could learn in that quarter on the subject of Uncle George.

My investigations led to some results, though they were by no means satisfactory. George had always been looked upon with something like contempt by his handsome sisters and his prosperous brothers, and he had not improved his position in the family by his warm advocacy of his brother's cause at the time of my father's marriage. I found that my uncle's surviving relatives now spoke of him slightingly and carelessly. They assured me that they had never heard from him, and that they knew nothing about him, except that he had gone away to settle, as they supposed, in some

foreign place, after having behaved very basely and badly to my father. He had been traced to London, where he had sold out of the funds the small share of money which he had inherited after his father's death, and he had been seen on the deck of a packet bound for France later on the same day. Beyond this nothing was known about him. In what the alleged baseness of his behavior had consisted none of his brothers and sisters could tell me. My father had refused to pain them by going into particulars, not only at the time of his brother's disappearance, but afterward, whenever the subject was mentioned. George had always been the black sheep of the flock, and he must have been conscious of his own baseness, or he would certainly have written to explain and to justify himself.

Such were the particulars which I gleaned during my visit to my father's family. To my mind, they tended rather to deepen than to reveal the mystery. That such a gentle, docile, affectionate creature as Uncle George should have injured the brother he loved by word or deed at any period of their intercourse, seemed incredible; but that he should have been guilty of an act of baseness at the very time when my sister was dying was simply and plainly impossible. And yet there was the incomprehensible fact staring me in the face that the death of Caroline and the disappearance of Uncle George had taken place in the same week! Never did I feel more daunted and bewildered by the family secret than after I had heard all the particulars in connection with it that my father's relatives had to tell me.

I may pass over the events of the next few years of my life briefly enough.

My nautical pursuits filled up all my time, and took me far away from my country and my friends. But, whatever I did, and wherever I went, the memory of Uncle George, and the desire to penetrate the mystery of his disappearance, haunted me like familiar spirits. Often, in the lonely watches of the night at sea, did I recall the dark evening on the beach, the strange man's hurried embrace, the startling sensation of feeling his tears on my cheeks, the disappearance of him before I had breath or self-possession enough to say a word. Often did I think over the inexplicable events that followed, when I had returned, after my sister's funeral, to my father's house; and oftener still did I puzzle my brains vainly, in the attempt to form some plan for inducing my mother or my aunt to disclose the secret which they had hitherto kept from me so perseveringly. My only chance of knowing what had really happened to Uncle George, my only hope of seeing him again, rested with those two near and dear relatives. I despaired of ever getting my mother to speak on the forbidden subject after what had passed between us, but I felt more sanguine about my prospects of ultimately inducing my aunt to relax in her discretion. My anticipations, however, in

this direction were not destined to be fulfilled. On my next visit to England I found my aunt prostrated by a paralytic attack, which deprived her of the power of speech. She died soon afterward in my arms, leaving me her sole heir. I searched anxiously among her papers for some reference to the family mystery, but found no clew to guide me. All my mother's letters to her sister at the time of Caroline's illness and death had been destroyed.

## CHAPTER III.

MORE years passed; my mother followed my aunt to the grave, and still I was as far as ever from making any discoveries in relation to Uncle George. Shortly after the period of this last affliction my health gave way, and I departed, by my doctor's advice, to try some baths in the south of France.

I traveled slowly to my destination, turning aside from the direct road, and stopping wherever I pleased. One evening, when I was not more than two or three days' journey from the baths to which I was bound, I was struck by the picturesque situation of a little town placed on the brow of a hill at some distance from the main road, and resolved to have a nearer look at the place, with a view to stopping there for the night, if it pleased me. I found the principal inn clean and quiet--ordered my bed there--and, after dinner, strolled out to look at the church. No thought of Uncle George was in my mind when I entered the building; and yet, at that very moment, chance was leading me to the discovery which, for so many years past, I had vainly endeavored to make--the discovery which I had given up as hopeless since the day of my mother's death.

I found nothing worth notice in the church, and was about to leave it again, when I caught a glimpse of a pretty view through a side door, and stopped to admire it.

The churchyard formed the foreground, and below it the hill-side sloped away gently into the plain, over which the sun was setting in full glory. The cure of the church was reading his breviary, walking up and down a gravel-path that parted the rows of graves. In the course of my wanderings I had learned to speak French as fluently as most Englishmen, and when the priest came near me I said a few words in praise of the view, and complimented him on the neatness and prettiness of the churchyard. He answered with great politeness, and we got into conversation together immediately.

As we strolled along the gravel-walk, my attention was attracted by one of the graves standing apart from the rest. The cross at the head of it differed remarkably, in some points of appearance, from the crosses on the other graves. While all the rest had garlands hung on them, this one cross was quite bare; and, more extraordinary still, no name was inscribed on it.

The priest, observing that I stopped to look at the grave, shook his head and

sighed.

"A countryman of yours is buried there," he said. "I was present at his death. He had borne the burden of a great sorrow among us, in this town, for many weary years, and his conduct had taught us to respect and pity him with all our hearts."

"How is it that his name is not inscribed over his grave?" I inquired.

"It was suppressed by his own desire," answered the priest, with some little hesitation. "He confessed to me in his last moments that he had lived here under an assumed name. I asked his real name, and he told it to me, with the particulars of his sad story. He had reasons for desiring to be forgotten after his death. Almost the last words he spoke were, 'Let my name die with me.' Almost the last request he made was that I would keep that name a secret from all the world excepting only one person."

"Some relative, I suppose?" said I.

"Yes--a nephew," said the priest.

The moment the last word was out of his mouth, my heart gave a strange answering bound. I suppose I must have changed color also, for the cure looked at me with sudden attention and interest.

"A nephew," the priest went on, "whom he had loved like his own child. He told me that if this nephew ever traced him to his burial-place, and asked about him, I was free in that case to disclose all I knew. 'I should like my little Charley to know the truth,' he said. 'In spite of the difference in our ages, Charley and I were playmates years ago.'"

My heart beat faster, and I felt a choking sensation at the throat the moment I heard the priest unconsciously mention my Christian name in mentioning the dying man's last words.

As soon as I could steady my voice and feel certain of my self-possession, I communicated my family name to the cure, and asked him if that was not part of the secret that he had been requested to preserve.

He started back several steps, and clasped his hands amazedly.

"Can it be?" he said, in low tones, gazing at me earnestly, with something like dread in his face.

I gave him my passport, and looked away toward the grave. The tears came into my eyes as the recollections of past days crowded back on me. Hardly knowing what I did, I knelt down by the grave, and smoothed the grass over it with my hand. Oh, Uncle George, why not have told your secret to your old playmate? Why leave him to find you here?

The priest raised me gently, and begged me to go with him into his own house. On our way there, I mentioned persons and places that I thought my uncle might have spoken of, in order to satisfy my companion that I was really the person I represented myself to be. By the time we had entered his little parlor, and had sat down alone in it, we were almost like old friends together.

I thought it best that I should begin by telling all that I have related here on the subject of Uncle George, and his disappearance from home. My host listened with a very sad face, and said, when I had done:

"I can understand your anxiety to know what I am authorized to tell you, but pardon me if I say first that there are circumstances in your uncle's story which it may pain you to hear--" He stopped suddenly.

"Which it may pain me to hear as a nephew?" I asked.

"No," said the priest, looking away from me, "as a son."

I gratefully expressed my sense of the delicacy and kindness which had prompted my companion's warning, but I begged him, at the same time, to keep me no longer in suspense and to tell me the stern truth, no matter how painfully it might affect me as a listener.

"In telling me all you knew about what you term the Family Secret," said the priest, "you have mentioned as a strange coincidence that your sister's death and your uncle's disappearance took place at the same time. Did you ever suspect what cause it was that occasioned your sister's death?"

"I only knew what my father told me, an d what all our friends believed--that she had a tumor in the neck, or, as I sometimes heard it stated, from the effect on her constitution of a tumor in the neck."

"She died under an operation for the removal of that tumor," said the priest, in low tones; "and the operator was your Uncle George."

In those few words all the truth burst upon me.

"Console yourself with the thought that the long martyrdom of his life is over," the priest went on. "He rests; he is at peace. He and his little darling understand each other, and are happy now. That thought bore him up to the last on his death-bed. He always spoke of your sister as his 'little darling.' He firmly believed that she was waiting to forgive and console him in the other world--and who shall say he was deceived in that belief?"

Not I! Not anyone who has ever loved and suffered, surely!

"It was out of the depths of his self-sacrificing love for the child that he drew the fatal courage to undertake the operation," continued the priest. "Your father naturally shrank from attempting it. His medical brethren whom he consulted all doubted the propriety of taking any measures for the removal of the tumor, in the particular condition and situation of it when they were called in. Your uncle alone differed with them. He was too modest a man to say so, but your mother found it out. The deformity of her beautiful child horrified her. She was desperate enough to catch at the faintest hope of remedying it that anyone might hold out to her; and she persuaded your uncle to put his opinion to the proof. Her horror at the deformity of the child, and her despair at the prospect of its lasting for life, seem to have utterly blinded her to all natural sense of the danger of the operation. It is hard to know how to say it to you, her son, but it must be told, nevertheless, that one day, when your father was out, she untruly informed your uncle that his brother had consented to the performance of the operation, and that he had gone purposely out of the house because he had not nerve enough to stay and witness it. After that, your uncle no longer hesitated. He had no fear of results, provided he could be certain of his own courage. All he dreaded was the effect on him of his love for the child when he first found himself face to face with the dreadful necessity of touching her skin with the knife."

I tried hard to control myself, but I could not repress a shudder at those words.

"It is useless to shock you by going into particulars," said the priest, considerately. "Let it be enough if I say that your uncle's fortitude failed to support him when he wanted it most. His love for the child shook the firm hand which had never trembled before. In a word, the operation failed. Your father returned, and found his child dying. The frenzy of his despair when the truth was told him carried him to excesses which it shocks me to mention--excesses which began in his degrading his brother by a blow,

which ended in his binding himself by an oath to make that brother suffer public punishment for his fatal rashness in a court of law. Your uncle was too heartbroken by what had happened to feel those outrages as some men might have felt them. He looked for one moment at his sister-in-law (I do not like to say your mother, considering what I have now to tell you), to see if she would acknowledge that she had encouraged him to attempt the operation, and that she had deceived him in saying that he had his brother's permission to try it. She was silent, and when she spoke, it was to join her husband in denouncing him as the murderer of their child. Whether fear of your father's anger, or revengeful indignation against your uncle most actuated her, I cannot presume to inquire in your presence. I can only state facts."

The priest paused and looked at me anxiously. I could not speak to him at that moment--I could only encourage him to proceed by pressing his hand.

He resumed in these terms:

"Meanwhile, your uncle turned to your father, and spoke the last words he was ever to address to his eldest brother in this world. He said, 'I have deserved the worst your anger can inflict on me, but I will spare you the scandal of bringing me to justice in open court. The law, if it found me guilty, could at the worst but banish me from my country and my friends. I will go of my own accord. God is my witness that I honestly believed I could save the child from deformity and suffering. I have risked all and lost all. My heart and spirit are broken. I am fit for nothing but to go and hide myself, and my shame and misery, from all eyes that have ever looked on me. I shall never come back, never expect your pity or forgiveness. If you think less harshly of me when I am gone, keep secret what has happened; let no other lips say of me what yours and your wife's have said. I shall think that forbearance atonement enough--atonement greater than I have deserved. Forget me in this world. May we meet in another, where the secrets of all hearts are opened, and where the child who is gone before may make peace between us!' He said those words and went out. Your father never saw him or heard from him again."

I knew the reason now why my father had never confided the truth to anyone, his own family included. My mother had evidently confessed all to her sister under the seal of secrecy, and there the dreadful disclosure had been arrested.

"Your uncle told me," the priest continued, "that before he left England he took leave of you by stealth, in a place you were staying at by the sea-side.

Tie had not the heart to quit his country and his friends forever without kissing you for the last time. He followed you in the dark, and caught you up in his arms, and left you again before you had a chance of discovering him. The next day he quitted England."

"For this place?" I asked.

"Yes. He had spent a week here once with a student friend at the time when he was a pupil in the Hotel Dieu, and to this place he returned to hide, to suffer, and to die. We all saw that he was a man crushed and broken by some great sorrow, and we respected him and his affliction. He lived alone, and only came out of doors toward evening, when he used to sit on the brow of the hill yonder, with his head on his hand, looking toward England. That place seemed a favorite with him, and he is buried close by it. He revealed the story of his past life to no living soul here but me, and to me he only spoke when his last hour was approaching. What he had suffered during his long exile no man can presume to say. I, who saw more of him than anyone, never heard a word of complaint fall from his lips. He had the courage of the martyrs while he lived, and the resignation of the saints when he died. Just at the last his mind wandered. He said he saw his little darling waiting by the bedside to lead him away, and he died with a smile on his face--the first I had ever seen there."

The priest ceased, and we went out together in the mournful twilight, and stood for a little while on the brow of the hill where Uncle George used to sit, with his face turned toward England. How my heart ached for him as I thought of what he must have suffered in the silence and solitude of his long exile! Was it well for me that I had discovered the Family Secret at last? I have sometimes thought not. I have sometimes wished that the darkness had never been cleared away which once hid from me the fate of Uncle George.

THE THIRD DAY.

FINE again. Our guest rode out, with her ragged little groom, as usual. There was no news yet in the paper--that is to say, no news of George or his ship.

On this day Morgan completed his second story, and in two or three days more I expected to finish the last of my own contributions. Owen was still behindhand and still despondent.

The lot drawing to-night was Five. This proved to be the number of the first

of Morgan's stories, which he had completed before we began the readings. His second story, finished this day, being still uncorrected by me, could not yet be added to the common stock.

On being informed that it had come to his turn to occupy the attention of the company, Morgan startled us by immediately objecting to the trouble of reading his own composition, and by coolly handing it over to me, on the ground that my numerous corrections had made it, to all intents and purposes, my story.

Owen and I both remonstrated; and Jessie, mischievously persisting in her favorite jest at Morgan's expense, entreated that he would read, if it was only for her sake. Finding that we were all determined, and all against him, he declared that, rather than hear our voices any longer, he would submit to the minor inconvenience of listening to his own. Accordingly, he took his manuscript back again, and, with an air of surly resignation, spread it open before him.

"I don't think you will like this story, miss," he began, addressing Jessie, "but I shall read it, nevertheless, with the greatest pleasure. It begins in a stable--it gropes its way through a dream--it keeps company with a hostler--and it stops without an end. What do you think of that?"

After favoring his audience with this promising preface, Morgan indulged himself in a chuckle of supreme satisfaction, and then began to read, without wasting another preliminary word on any one of us.