CHAPTER XLI

HOW THE NIGHT WENT

George sat opposite to him, his hands on his knees, the red nightcap on his head, and a comical expression of astonishment upon his melancholy countenance.

"Well," he said, when Harold had done, "blow me if that ain't a master one. And yet there's folks who say that there ain't no such thing as Providence--not that there's anything prowided yet--p'raps there ain't nawthing there after all."

"I don't know if there is or not, but I'm going back to see, and I want you to come with me."

"Now?" said George rather uneasily. "Why, Colonel, that bain't a very nice spot to go digging about in on a night like this. I niver heard no good of that there place--not as I holds by sich talk myself," he added apologetically.

"Well," said the Colonel, "you can do as you like, but I'm going back at once, and going down the hole, too; the gas must be out of it by now. There are reasons," he added, "why, if this money is to be found at all, it should be found this morning. To-day is Christmas Day, you know."

"Yes, yes, Colonel; I knows what you mean. Bless you, I know all about it; the old Squire must talk to somebody; if he don't he'd bust, so he talks to me. That Cossey's coming for his answer from Miss Ida this morning. Poor young lady, I saw her yesterday, and she looks like a ghost, she du. Ah, he's a mean one, that Cossey. Laryer Quest warn't in it with him after all. Well, I cooked his goose for him, and I'd give summut to have a hand in cooking that banker chap's too. You wait a minute, Colonel, and I'll come along, gale and ghostesses and all. I only hope it mayn't be after a fool's arrand, that's all," and he retired to put on his boots. Presently he appeared again, his red nightcap still on his head, for he was afraid that the wind would blow a hat off, and carrying an unlighted lantern in his hand.

"Now, Colonel, I'm ready, sir, if you be;" and they started.

The gale was, if anything, fiercer than ever. Indeed, there had been no such wind in those parts for years, or rather centuries, as the condition of the timber by ten o'clock that morning amply testified.

"This here timpest must be like that as the Squire tells us on in the time of King Charles, as blew the top of the church tower off on a Christmas night," shouted George. But Harold made no answer, and they fought their way onward without speaking any more, for their voices were almost inaudible. Once the Colonel stopped and pointed to the sky-line. Of all the row of tall poplars which he had seen bending

like whips before the wind as he came along but one remained standing now, and as he pointed that vanished also.

Reaching the summer house in safety, they entered, and the Colonel shut and locked the door behind them. The frail building was literally rocking in the fury of the storm.

"I hope the roof will hold," shouted George, but Harold took no heed. He was thinking of other things. They lit the lanterns, of which they now had three, and the Colonel slid down into the great grave he had so industriously dug, motioning to George to follow. This that worthy did, not without trepidation. Then they both knelt and stared down through the hole in the masonry, but the light of the lanterns was not strong enough to enable them to make out anything with clearness.

"Well," said George, falling back upon his favourite expression in his amazement, as he drew his nightcapped head from the hole, "if that ain't a master one, I niver saw a masterer, that's all.

"What be you a-going to du now, Colonel? Hev you a ladder here?"

"No," answered Harold, "I never thought of that, but I've a good rope: I'll get it."

Scrambling out of the hole, he presently returned with a long coil of stout rope. It belonged to some men who had been recently employed in

cutting boughs off such of the oaks that needed attention.

They undid the rope and let the end down to see how deep the pit was. When they felt that the end lay upon the floor they pulled it up. The depth from the hole to the bottom of the pit appeared to be about sixteen feet or a trifle more.

Harold took the iron crow, and having made the rope fast to it fixed the bar across the mouth of the aperture. Then he doubled the rope, tied some knots in it, and let it fall into the pit, preparatory to climbing down it.

But George was too quick for him. Forgetting his doubts as to the wisdom of groping about Dead Man's Mount at night, in the ardour of his burning curiosity he took the dark lantern, and holding it with his teeth passed his body through the hole in the masonry, and cautiously slid down the rope.

"Are you all right?" asked Harold in a voice tremulous with excitement, for was not his life's fortune trembling on the turn?

"Yes," answered George doubtfully. Harold looking down could see that he was holding the lantern above his head and staring at something very hard.

Next moment a howl of terror echoed up from the pit, the lantern was

dropped upon the ground and the rope began to be agitated with the utmost violence.

In another two seconds George's red nightcap appeared followed by a face that was literally livid with terror.

"Let me up for Goad's sake," he gasped, "or he'll hev me by the leg!"

"He! who?" asked the Colonel, not without a thrill of superstitious fear, as he dragged the panting man through the hole.

But George would give no answer until he was out of the grave. Indeed had it not been for the Colonel's eager entreaties, backed to some extent by actual force, he would by this time have been out of the summer-house also, and half-way down the mount.

"What is it?" roared the Colonel in the pit to George, who shivering with terror was standing on its edge.

"It's a blessed ghost, that's what it is, Colonel," answered George, keeping his eyes fixed upon the hole as though he momentarily expected to see the object of his fears emerge.

"Nonsense," said Harold doubtfully. "What rubbish you talk. What sort of a ghost?"

"A white un," said George, "all bones like."

"All bones?" answered the Colonel, "why it must be a skeleton."

"I don't say that he ain't," was the answer, "but if he be, he's nigh on seven foot high, and sitting airing of hissel in a stone bath."

"Oh, rubbish," said the Colonel. "How can a skeleton sit and air himself? He would tumble to bits."

"I don't know, but there he be, and they don't call this here place 'Dead Man's Mount' for nawthing."

"Well," said the Colonel argumentatively, "a skeleton is a perfectly harmless thing."

"Yes, if he's dead maybe, sir, but this one's alive, I saw him nod his head at me."

"Look here, George," answered Harold, feeling that if this went on much longer he should lose his nerve altogether. "I'm not going to be scared. Great heavens, what a gust! I'm going down to see for myself."

"Very good, Colonel," answered George, "and I'll wait here till you come up again--that is if you iver du."

Thrice did Harold look at the hole in the masonry and thrice did he shrink back.

"Come," he shouted angrily, "don't be a fool; get down here and hand me the lantern."

George obeyed with evident trepidation. Then Harold scrambled through the opening and with many an inward tremor, for there is scarcely a man on the earth who is really free from supernatural fears, descended hand over hand. But in so doing he managed to let the lantern fall and it went out. Now as any one will admit this was exceedingly trying. It is not pleasant to be left alone in the dark and underground in the company of an unknown "spook." He had some matches, but what between fear and cold it was some time before he could get a light. Down in this deep place the rush of the great gale reached his ears like a faint and melancholy sighing, and he heard other tapping noises, too, or he thought he did, noises of a creepy and unpleasant nature. Would the matches never light? The chill and death-like damp of the place struck to his marrow and the cold sweat poured from his brow. Ah! at last! He kept his eyes steadily fixed upon the lantern till he had lit it and the flame was burning brightly. Then with an effort he turned and looked round him.

And this is what he saw.

There, three or four paces from him, in the centre of the chamber of

Death sat or rather lay a figure of Death. It reclined in a stone chest or coffin, like a man in a hip bath which is too small for him. The bony arms hung down on either side, the bony limbs projected towards him, the great white skull hung forward over the massive breast bone. It moved, too, of itself, and as it moved, the jaw-bone tapped against the breast and the teeth clacked gently together.

Terror seized him while he looked, and, as George had done, he turned to fly. How could that thing move its head? The head ought to fall off.

Seizing the rope, he jerked it violently in the first effort of mounting.

"Hev he got yew, Colonel?" sung out George above; and the sound of a human voice brought him back to his sense.

"No," he answered as boldly as he could, and then setting his teeth, turned and tottered straight at the Horror in the chest.

He was there now, and holding the lantern against the thing, examined it. It was a skeleton of enormous size, and the skull was fixed with rusty wire to one of the vertebrae.

At this evidence of the handiwork of man his fears almost vanished. Even in that company he could not help remembering that it is scarcely

to be supposed that spiritual skeletons carry about wire with which to tie on their skulls.

With a sigh of relief he held up the lantern and looked round. He was standing in a good-sized vault or chamber, built of rubble stone. Some of this rubble had fallen in to his left; but otherwise, though the workmanship showed that it must be of extreme antiquity, the stone lining was still strong and good. He looked upon the floor, and then for the first time saw that the nodding skeleton before him was not the only one. All round lay remnants of the dead. There they were, stretched out in the form of a circle, of which the stone kist was the centre.[*] One place in the circle was vacant; evidently it had once been occupied by the giant frame which now sat within the kist. Next he looked at the kist itself. It had all the appearance of one of those rude stone chests in which the very ancient inhabitants of this island buried the ashes of their cremated dead. But, if this was so, whence came the un-cremated skeletons?

[*] At Bungay, in Suffolk, there stood a mound or tumulus, on which was a windmill. Some years ago the windmill was pulled down, and the owner of the ground wishing to build a house upon its site, set to work to cart away the mound. His astonishment may be conceived when he found in the earth a great number of skeletons arranged in circles. These skeletons were of large size, and a gentleman who saw them informed me that he measured one. It was that of a man who must have been nearly seven feet high. The bones

were, unhappily, carted away and thrown into a dyke. But no house has been built upon the resting-place of those unknown warriors. --Author.

Perhaps a subsequent race or tribe had found the chamber ready prepared, and used it to bury some among them who had fallen in battle. It was impossible to say more, especially as with one exception there was nothing buried with the skeletons which would assist to identify their race or age. That exception was a dog. A dog had been placed by one of the bodies. Evidently from the position of the bones of its master's arms he had been left to his last sleep with his hand resting on the hound's head.

Bending down, Harold examined the seated skeleton more closely. It was, he discovered, accurately jointed together with strong wire. Clearly this was the work of hands which were born into the world long after the flesh on those mighty bones had crumbled into dust.

But where was the treasure? He saw none. His heart sank as the idea struck him that he had made an interesting archaeological discovery, and that was all. Before undertaking a closer search he went under the hole and halloaed to George to come down as there was nothing but some bones to frighten him.

This the worthy George was at length with much difficulty persuaded to do.

When at last he stood beside him in the vault, Harold explained to him what the place was and how ridiculous were his fears, without however succeeding in allaying them to any considerable extent.

And really when one considers the position it is not wonderful that George was scared. For they were shut up in the bowels of a place which had for centuries owned the reputation of being haunted, faced by a nodding skeleton of almost superhuman size, and surrounded by various other skeletons all "very fine and large," while the most violent tempest that had visited the country for years sighed away outside.

"Well," he said, his teeth chattering, "if this ain't the masterest one that iver I did see." But here he stopped, language was not equal to the expression of his feelings.

Meanwhile Harold, with a heart full of anxiety, was turning the lantern this way and that in the hope of discovering some traces of Sir James's treasure, but naught could he see. There to the left the masonry had fallen in. He went to it and pulled aside some of the stones. There was a cavity behind, apparently a passage, leading no doubt to the secret entrance to the vault, but he could see nothing in it. Once more he searched. There was nothing. Unless the treasure was buried somewhere, or hidden away in the passage, it was non-existent.

And yet what was the meaning of that jointed skeleton sitting in the stone bath? It must have been put there for some purpose, probably to frighten would-be plunderers away. Could he be sitting on the money? He rushed to the chest and looked through the bony legs. No, his pelvis rested on the stone bottom of the kist.

"Well, George, it seems we're done," said Harold, with a ghastly attempt at a laugh. "There's no treasure here."

"Maybe it's underneath that there stone corn bin," suggested George, whose teeth were still chattering. "It should be here or hereabouts, surely."

This was an idea. Helping himself to the shoulder-blade of some deceased hero, Harold, using it as a trowel, began to scoop away the soft sand upon which the stone chest stood. He scooped and scooped manfully, but he could not come to the bottom of the kist.

He stepped back and looked at it. It must be one of two things--either the hollow at the top was but a shallow cutting in a great block of stone, or the kist had a false bottom.

He sprang at it. Seizing the giant skeleton by the spine, he jerked it out of the kist and dropped it on one side in a bristling bony heap. Just as he did so there came so furious a gust of wind that, buried as they were in the earth, they literally felt the mound rock beneath it.

Instantly it was followed by a frightful crash overhead.

George collapsed in terror, and for a moment Harold could not for the life of him think what had happened. He ran to the hole and looked up. Straight above him he could see the sky, in which the first cold lights of dawn were quivering. Mrs. Massey's summer-house had been blown bodily away, and the "ancient British Dwelling Place" was once more open to the sky, as it had been for centuries.

"The summer-house has gone, George," he said. "Thank goodness that we were not in it, or we should have gone too."

"Oh, Lord, sir," groaned the unhappy George, "this is an awful business. It's like a judgment."

"It might have been if we had been up above instead of safe down here," he answered. "Come, bring that other lantern."

George roused himself, and together they bent over the now empty kist, examining it closely.

The stone bottom was not of quite the same colour as the walls of the chest, and there was a crack across it. Harold felt in his pocket and drew out his knife, which had at the back of it one of those strong iron hooks that are used to extract stones from the hoofs of horses. This hook he worked into the crack and managed before it broke to pull

up a fragment of stone. Then, looking round, he found a long sharp flint among the rubbish where the wall had fallen in. This he inserted in the hole and they both levered away at it.

Half of the cracked stone came up a few inches, far enough to allow them to get their fingers underneath it. So it /was/ a false bottom.

"Catch hold," gasped the Colonel, "and pull for your life."

George did as he was bid, and setting their knees against the hollowed stone, they tugged till their muscles cracked.

"It's a-moving," said George. "Now thin, Colonel."

Next second they both found themselves on the flat of their backs. The stone had given with a run.

Up sprang Harold like a kitten. The broken stone was standing edgeways in the kist. There was something soft beneath it.

"The light, George," he said hoarsely.

Beneath the stone were some layers of rotten linen.

Was it a shroud, or what?

They pulled the linen out by handfuls. One! two! three!

/Oh, great heaven!/

There, under the linen, were row on row of shining gold coins set edgeways.

For a moment everything swam before Harold's eyes, and his heart stopped beating. As for George, he muttered something inaudible about its being a "master one," and collapsed.

With trembling fingers Harold managed to pick out two pieces of gold which had been disturbed by the upheaval of the stone, and held them to the light. He was a skilled numismatist, and had no difficulty in recognising them. One was a beautiful three-pound piece of Charles I., and the other a Spur Rial of James I.

That proved it. There was no doubt that this was the treasure hidden by Sir James de la Molle. He it must have been also who had conceived the idea of putting a false bottom to the kist and setting up the skeleton to frighten marauders from the treasure, if by any chance they should enter.

For a minute or two the men stood staring at each other over the great treasure which they had unearthed in that dread place, shaking with the reaction of their first excitement, and scarcely able to speak.

"How deep du it go?" said George at length.

Harold took his knife and loosed some of the top coins, which were very tightly packed, till he could move his hand in them freely. Then he pulled out handful after handful of every sort of gold coin. There were Rose Nobles of Edward IV.; Sovereigns and Angels of Henry VII. and VIII.; Sovereigns, Half-Sovereigns and gold Crowns of Edward VI.; Sovereigns, Rials, and Angels of Mary; Sovereigns, Double Crowns and Crowns of Elizabeth; Thirty-shilling pieces, Spur Rials, Angels, Unites and Laurels of James I.; Three-pound pieces, Broads, and Half Broads of Charles I.; some in greater quantity and some in less; all were represented. Handful after handful did he pull out, and yet the bottom was not reached. At last he came to it. The layer of gold pieces was about twenty inches broad by three feet six long.

"We must get this into the house, George, before any one is about," gasped the Colonel.

"Yes, sir, yes, for sure we must; but how be we a-going to carry it?"

Harold thought for a minute, and then acted thus. Bidding George stay in the vault with the treasure, which he was with difficulty persuaded to do, he climbed the improvised rope ladder, and got in safety through the hole. In his excitement he had forgotten about the summer-house having been carried away by the gale, which was still blowing,

though not with so much fury as before. The wind-swept desolation that met his view as he emerged into the dawning light broke upon him with a shock. The summer-house was clean gone, nothing but a few uprights remained of it; and fifty yards away he thought he could make out the crumpled shape of the roof. Nor was that all. Quite a quarter of the great oaks which were the glory of the place were down, or splintered and ruined.

But what did he care for the summer-house or the oaks now? Forgetting his exhaustion, he ran down the slope and reached the house, which he entered as softly as he could by the side door. Nobody was about yet, or would be for another hour. It was Christmas Day, and not a pleasant morning to get up on, so the servants would be sure to lie a-bed. On his way to his bed-room he peeped into the dining-room, where he had fallen asleep on the previous evening. When he had woke up, it may be remembered, he lit a candle. This candle was now flaring itself to death, for he had forgotten to extinguish it, and by its side lay the paper from which he had made the great discovery. There was nothing in it, of course, but somehow the sight impressed him very much. It seemed months since he awoke to find the lamp gone out. How much may happen between the lighting of a candle and its burning away! Smiling at this trite reflection, he blew that light out, and, taking another, went to his room. Here he found a stout hand-bag, with which he made haste to return to the Mount.

"Are you all right, George?" he shouted down the hole.

"Well, Colonel, yes, but not sorry to see you back. It's lonesome like down here with these deaders."

"Very well. Look out! There's a bag. Put as much gold in it as you can lift comfortably, and then make it fast to the rope."

Some three minutes passed, and then George announced that the bagful of gold was ready. Harold hauled away, and with a considerable effort brought it to the surface. Then, lifting the bag on his shoulder he staggered with it to the house. In his room stood a massive sea-going chest, the companion of his many wanderings. It was about half full of uniforms and old clothes, which he bundled unceremoniously on to the floor. This done, he shot the bagful of shining gold, as bright and uncorrupted now as when it was packed away two and a half centuries ago, into the chest, and returned for another load.

About twenty times did he make this journey. At the tenth something happened.

"Here's a writing, sir, with this lot," shouted George. "It was packed away in the money."

He took the "writing," or rather parchment, out of the mouth of the bag, and put it in his pocket unread.

At length the store, enormous as it was, was exhausted.

"That's the lot, sir," shouted George, as he sent up the last bagful. "If you'll kindly let down that there rope, I'll come up too."

"All right," said the Colonel, "put the skeleton back first."

"Well, sir," answered George, "he looks wonderful comfortable where he lay, he du, so if you're agreeable I think I'll let him be."

Harold chuckled, and presently George arrived, covered with filth and perspiration.

"Well, sir," he said, "I never did think that I should get dead tired of handling gold coin, but it's a rum world, and that's a fact. Well, I niver, and the summer-house gone, and jist look at thim there oaks. Well, if that beant a master one."

"You never saw a masterer, that's what you were going to say, wasn't it? Well, and take one thing with another, nor did I, George, if that's any comfort to you. Now look here, just cover over this hole with some boards and earth, and then come in and get some breakfast. It's past eight o'clock and the gale is blowing itself out. A merry Christmas to you, George!" and he held out his hand, covered with cuts, grime and blood.

George shook it. "Same to you, Colonel, I'm sure. And a merry Christmas it is. God bless you, sir, for what you've done to-night. You've saved the old place from that banker chap, that's what you've done; and you'll hev Miss Ida, and I'm durned glad on it, that I am. Lord! won't this make the Squire open his eyes," and the honest fellow brushed away a tear and fairly capered with joy, his red nightcap waving on the wind.

It was a strange and beautiful sight to see the solemn George capering thus in the midst of that storm-swept desolation.

Harold was too moved to answer, so he shouldered his last load of treasure and limped off with it to the house. Mrs. Jobson and her talkative niece were up now, but they did not happen to see him, and he reached his room unnoticed. He poured the last bagful of gold into the chest, smoothed it down, shut the lid and locked it. Then as he was, covered with filth and grime, bruised and bleeding, his hair flying wildly about his face, he sat down upon it, and from his heart thanked heaven for the wonderful thing that had happened to him.

So exhausted was he that he nearly fell asleep as he sat, but remembering himself rose, and taking the parchment from his pocket cut the faded silk with which it was tied and opened it.

On it was a short inscription in the same crabbed writing which he had seen in the old Bible that Ida had found.

It ran as follows:

"Seeing that the times be so troublous that no man can be sure of his own, I, Sir James de la Molle, have brought together all my substance in money from wheresoever it lay at interest, and have hid the same in this sepulchre, to which I found the entry by a chance, till such time as peace come back to this unhappy England. This have I done on the early morn of Christmas Day, in the year of our Lord 1642, having ended the hiding of the gold while the great gale was blowing.

"James de la Molle."

Thus on a long gone Christmas Day, in the hour of a great wind, was the gold hid, and now on this Christmas Day, when another great wind raged overhead, it was found again, in time to save a daughter of the house of de la Molle from a fate sore as death.