

The Curse of the Catafalques

F. Anstey

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The Curse of the Catafalques

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Chapter I

Unless I am very much mistaken, until the time when I was subjected to the strange and exceptional experience which I now propose to relate, I had never been brought into close contact with anything of a supernatural description. At least if I ever was, the circumstance can have made no lasting impression upon me, as I am quite unable to recall it. But in the "Curse of the Catafalques" I was confronted with a horror so weird and so altogether unusual, that I doubt whether I shall ever succeed in wholly forgetting it and I know that I have never felt really well since.

It is difficult for me to tell my story intelligibly without some account of my previous history by way of introduction, although I will try to make it as little diffuse as I may.

I had not been a success at home; I was an orphan, and, in my anxiety to please a wealthy uncle upon whom I was practically dependent, I had consented to submit myself to a series of competitive examinations for quite a variety of professions, but in each successive instance I achieved the same disheartening failure. Some explanation of this may, no doubt, be found in the fact that, with a fatal want of forethought, I had entirely omitted to prepare myself by any particular course of study which, as I discovered too late, is almost indispensable to success in these intellectual contests.

My uncle himself took this view, and conceiving not without discernment that I was by no means likely to retrieve myself by any severe degree of application in the future, he had me shipped out to Australia, where he had correspondents and friends who would put things in my way.

They did put several things in my way and, as might have been expected, I came to grief over every one of them, until at length, having given a fair trial to each opening that had been provided for me, I began to perceive that my uncle had made a grave mistake in believing me suited for a colonial career.

I resolved to return home and convince him of his error, and give him one more opportunity of repairing it; he had failed to discover the best means of utilizing my undoubted ability, yet I would not reproach him (nor do I reproach him even now), for I too have felt the difficulty.

In pursuance of my resolution, I booked my passage home by one of the Orient liners from Melbourne to London. About an hour before the ship was to leave her moorings, I went on board and made my way at once to the stateroom which I was to share with a fellow passenger, whose acquaintance I then made for the first time.

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He was a tall cadaverous young man of about my own age, and my first view of him was not encouraging, for when I came in, I found him rolling restlessly on the cabin floor, and uttering hollow groans.

"This will never do," I said, after I had introduced myself; "if you're like this now, my good sir, what will you be when we're fairly out at sea? You must husband your resources for that.

And why trouble to roll? The ship will do all that for you, if you will only have patience."

He explained, somewhat brusquely, that he was suffering from mental agony, not seasickness; and by a little pertinacious questioning (for I would not allow myself to be rebuffed) I was soon in possession of the secret which was troubling my companion, whose name, as I also learned, was Augustus McFadden.

It seemed that his parents had emigrated before his birth, and he had lived all his life in the Colony, where he was contented and fairly prosperous when an eccentric old aunt of his over in England happened to die.

She left McFadden himself nothing, having given by her will the bulk of her property to the only daughter of a baronet of ancient family, in whom she took a strong interest. But the will was not without its effect upon her existence, for it expressly mentioned the desire of the testatrix that the baronet should receive her nephew Augustus if he presented himself within a certain time, and should afford him every facility for proving his fitness for acceptance as a suitor. The alliance was merely recommended, however, not enjoined, and the gift was unfettered by any conditions.

"I heard of it first," said McFadden, "from Chlorine's father (Chlorine is her name, you know).

Sir Paul Catafalque wrote to me, informing me of the mention of my name in my aunt's will, enclosing his daughter's photograph, and formally inviting me to come over and do my best, if my affections were not preengaged, to carry out the last wishes of the departed. He added that I might expect to receive shortly a packet from my aunt's executors which would explain matters fully, and in which I should find certain directions for my guidance. The photograph decided me; it was so eminently pleasing that I felt at once that my poor aunt's wishes must be sacred to me. I could not wait for the packet to arrive, and so I wrote at once to Sir Paul accepting the invitation.

Yes," he added, with another of the hollow groans, "miserable wretch that I am, I pledged my honor to present myself as a suitor, and now now here I am, actually embarked upon the desperate errand!"

He seemed inclined to begin to roll again here, but I stopped him. "Really," I said, "I think in your place, with an excellent chance for I presume the lady's heart is also disengaged with an excellent chance of winning a baronet's daughter with a considerable fortune and a pleasing appearance, I should bear up better."

"You think so," he rejoined, "but you do not know all! The very day after I had despatched my fatal letter, my aunt's explanatory packet arrived. I tell you that when I read the hideous revelations it contained, and knew to what horrors I had innocently pledged myself, my hair stood on end, and I believe it has remained on end ever since. But it was too late. Here I am, engaged to carry out a task from which my inmost soul recoils. Ah, if I dared but retract!"

"Then why in the name of common sense, don't you retract?" I asked. "Write and say that you much regret that a previous engagement, which you had unfortunately overlooked, deprives you of the pleasure of accepting."

"Impossible," he said; "it would be agony to me to feel that I had incurred Chlorine's contempt, even though I only know her through a photograph at present. If I were to back out of it now, she would have reason to despise me, would she not?"

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"Perhaps she would," I said.

"You see my dilemma I cannot retract; on the other hand, I dare not go on. The only thing, as I have thought lately, which could save me and my honor at the same time would be my death on the voyage out, for then my cowardice would remain undiscovered."

"Well," I said, "you can die on the voyage out if you want to there need be no difficulty about that. All you have to do is just to slip over the side some dark night when no one is looking. I tell you what," I added (for somehow I began to feel a friendly interest in this poor.slack-baked creature): "if you don't find your nerves equal to it when it comes to the point, I don't mind giving you a leg over myself."

"I never intended to go as far as that," he said, rather pettishly, and without any sign of gratitude for my offer; "I don't care about actually dying, if she could only be made to believe I had died that would be quite enough for me. I could live on here, happy in the thought that I was saved from her scorn. But how can she be made to believe it? that's the point."

"Precisely," I said. "You can hardly write yourself and inform her that you died on the voyage.

You might do this, though: sail to England as you propose, and go to see her under another name, and break the sad intelligence to her."

"Why, to be sure, I might do that!" he said, with some animation; "I should certainly not be recognized she can have no photograph of me, for I have never been photographed. And yet no," he added, with a shudder, "it is useless. I can't do it; I dare not trust myself under that roof!

I must find some other way. You have given me an idea. Listen," he said, after a short pause:

"you seem to take an interest in me; you are going to London; the Catafalques live there, or near it, at some place called Parson's Green. Can I ask a great favor of you would you very much mind seeking them out yourself as a fellow-voyager of mine? I could not expect you to tell a positive untruth on my account but if, in the course of an interview with Chlorine, you could contrive to convey the impression that I died on my way to her side, you would be doing me a service I can never repay!"

"I should very much prefer to do you a service that you could repay," was my very natural rejoinder.

"She will not require strict proof," he continued eagerly; "I could give you enough papers and things to convince her that you come from me. Say you will do me this kindness!"

I hesitated for some time longer, not so much, perhaps, from scruples of a conscientious kind as from a disinclination to undertake a troublesome commission for an entire stranger gratuitously. But McFadden pressed me hard, and at length he made an appeal to springs in my nature which are never touched in vain, and I yielded.

When we had settled the question in its financial aspect, I said to McFadden, "The only thing now is how would you prefer to pass away? Shall I make you fall over and be devoured by a shark? That would be a picturesque end and I could do myself justice over the shark? I should make the young lady weep considerably."

"That won't do at all!" he said irritably; "I can see from her face that Chlorine is a girl of a delicate sensibility, and would be disgusted by the idea of any suitor of hers spending his last cohesive moments inside such a beastly repulsive thing as a shark. I don't want to be associated in her mind with anything so unpleasant. No, sir; I will die if you will oblige me by remembering it of a low fever, of a noninfectious type, at sunset, gazing at her portrait with my fading eyesight and gasping her name with my last breath. She will cry more over that!"

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"I might work it up into something effective, certainly," I admitted; "and, by the way, if you are going to expire in my stateroom, I ought to know a little more about you than I do. There is time still before the tender goes; you might do worse than spend it in coaching me in your life's history."

He gave me a few leading facts, and supplied me with several documents for study on the voyage; he even abandoned to me the whole of his traveling arrangements, which proved far more complete and serviceable than my own.

And then the "All-ashore" bell rang, and McFadden, as he bade me farewell, took from his pocket a bulky packet. "You have saved me," he said. "Now I can banish every recollection of this miserable episode. I need no longer preserve my poor aunt's directions; let them go, then."

Before I could say anything, he had fastened something heavy to the parcel and dropped it through the cabin-light into the sea, after which he went ashore, and I have never seen nor heard of him since.

During the voyage I had leisure to think seriously over the affair, and the more I thought of the task I had undertaken, the less I liked it.

No man with the instincts of a gentleman can feel any satisfaction at finding himself on the way to harrow up a poor young lady's feelings by a perfectly fictitious account of the death of a poor-spirited suitor who could selfishly save his reputation at her expense.

And so strong was my feeling about this from the very first, that I doubt whether, if McFadden's terms had been a shade less liberal, I could ever have brought myself to consent.

But it struck me that, under judiciously sympathetic treatment, the lady might prove not inconsolable, and that I myself might be able to heal the wound I was about to inflict.

I found a subtle pleasure in the thought of this, for, unless McFadden had misinformed me, Chlorine's fortune was considerable, and did not depend upon any marriage she might or might not make. On the other hand, I was penniless, and it seemed to me only too likely that her parents might seek to found some objection to me on that ground.

I studied the photograph McFadden had left with me; it was that of a pensive but distinctly pretty face, with an absence of firmness in it that betrayed a plastic nature. I felt certain that if I only had the recommendation, as McFadden had, of an aunt's dying wishes, it would not take me long to effect a complete conquest.

And then, as naturally as possible, came the thought why should not I procure myself the advantages of this recommendation? Nothing could be easier; I had merely to present myself as Augustus McFadden, who was hitherto a mere name to them; the information I already possessed as to his past life would enable me to support the character, and as it seemed that the baronet lived in great seclusion, I could easily contrive to keep out of the way of the few friends and relations I had in London until my position was secure.

What harm would this innocent deception do to anyone? McFadden, even if he ever knew, would have no right to complain he had given up all pretensions himself and if he was merely anxious to preserve his reputation, his wishes would be more than carried out, for I flattered myself that whatever ideal Chlorine might have formed of her destined suitor, I should come much nearer to it than poor McFadden could ever have done. No, he would gain, positively gain, by my assumption. He could not have counted upon arousing more than a mild regret as it was; now he would be fondly, it might be madly, loved. By proxy, it is true, but that was far more than he deserved.

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Chlorine was not injured far from it; she would have a suitor to welcome, not weep over, and his mere surname could make no possible difference to her. And lastly, it was a distinct benefit to me, for with a new name and an excellent reputation success would be an absolute certainty.

What wonder, then, that the scheme, which opened out a far more manly and honorable means of obtaining a livelihood than any I had previously contemplated, should have grown more attractively feasible each day, until I resolved at last to carry it out? Let rigid moralists blame me if they will; I have never pretended to be better than the average run of mankind (though I am certainly no worse), and no one who really knows what human nature is will reproach me very keenly for obeying what was almost an instinct. And I may say this, that if ever an unfortunate man was bitterly punished for a fraud which was harmless, if not actually pious, by a visitation of intense and protracted terror, that person was I!

Chapter II

After arriving in England, and before presenting myself at Parson's Green in my assumed character, I took one precaution against any danger there might be of my throwing away my liberty in a fit of youthful impulsiveness. I went to Somerset House, and carefully examined the probate copy of the late Miss Petronia McFadden's last will and testament.

Nothing could have been more satisfactory; a sum of between forty and fifty thousand pounds was Chlorine's unconditionally, just as McFadden had said. I searched, but could find nothing in the will whatever to prevent her property, under the then existing state of the law, from passing under the entire control of a future husband.

After this, then, I could no longer restrain my ardor, and so, one foggy afternoon about the middle of December, I found myself driving towards the house in which I reckoned upon achieving a comfortable independence.

Parson's Green was reached at last; a small triangular open space bordered on two of its sides by mean and modern erections, but on the third by some ancient mansions, gloomy and neglected—looking indeed, but with traces on them still of their former consequence.

My cab stopped before the gloomiest of them all a square grim house with dull and small-paned windows, flanked by two narrow and projecting wings, and built of dingy brick, faced with yellow-stone. Some old scrollwork railings, with a corroded frame in the middle for a long departed oil lamp, separated the house from the road; inside was a semicircular patch of rank grass, and a damp gravel sweep led from the heavy gate to a square portico supported by two wasted black wooden pillars.

As I stood there, after pulling the pear-shaped bell-handle, and heard the bell tinkling and jangling fretfully within, and as I glanced up at the dull housefront looming cheerless out of the fog-laden December twilight, I felt my confidence beginning to abandon me for the first time, and I really was almost inclined to give the whole thing up and run away.

Before I could make up my mind, a mouldy and melancholy butler had come slowly down the sweep and opened the gate and my opportunity had fled. Later I remembered how, as I walked along the gravel, a wild and wailing scream pierced the heavy silence it seemed at once a lamentation and a warning. But as the District Railway was quite near, I did not attach any particular importance to the sound at the time.

I followed the butler through a dank and chilly hall, where an antique lamp hung glimmering feebly through its panes of dusty stained glass, up a broad carved staircase, and along some tortuous paneled passages, until at length I was ushered into a long and rather low reception room, scantily furnished with the tarnished mirrors and spindle-legged brocaded furniture of a bygone century.

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A tall and meager old man, with a long white beard, and haggard, sunken black eyes, was seated at one side of the high chimney-piece, while opposite him sat a little limp old lady with a nervous expression, and dressed in trailing black robes relieved by a little yellow lace about the head and throat. As I saw them, I recognized at once that I was in the presence of Sir Paul Catafalque and his wife.

They both rose slowly, and advanced arm-in-arm in their old-fashioned way, and met me with a stately solemnity. "You are indeed welcome," they said in faint hollow voices. "We thank you for this proof of your chivalry and devotion. It cannot be but that such courage and such self-sacrifice will meet with their reward!"

And although I did not quite understand how they could have discerned, as yet, that I was chivalrous and devoted, I was too glad to have made a good impression to do anything but beg them not to mention it.

And then a slender figure, with a drooping head, a wan face, and large sad eyes, came softly down the dimly-lighted room towards me, and I and my destined bride met for the first time.

As I had expected, after she had once anxiously raised her eyes, and allowed them to rest upon me, her face was lighted up by an evident relief, as she discovered that the fulfillment of my aunt's wishes would not be so distasteful to her, personally, as it might have been.

For myself, I was upon the whole rather disappointed in her; the portrait had flattered her considerably the real Chlorine was thinner and paler than I had been led to anticipate, while there was a settled melancholy in her manner which I felt would prevent her from being an exhilarating companion.

And I must say I prefer a touch of archness and animation in womankind, and, if I had been free to consult my own tastes, should have greatly preferred to become a member of a more cheerful family. Under the circumstances, however, I was not entitled to be too particular, and I put up with it.

From the moment of my arrival I fell easily and naturally into the position of an honored guest, who might be expected in time to form nearer and dearer relations with the family, and certainly I was afforded every opportunity of doing so.

I made no mistakes, for the diligence with which I had got up McFadden's antecedents enabled me to give perfectly satisfactory replies to most of the few allusions or questions that were addressed to me, and I drew upon my imagination for the rest.

But those days I spent in the baronet's family were far from lively: the Catafalques went nowhere; they seemed to know nobody; at least no visitors ever called or dined there while I was with them, and the time dragged slowly on in a terrible monotony in that dim tomb of a house, which I was not expected to leave except for very brief periods, for Sir Paul would grow uneasy if I walked out alone even to Putney.

There was something, indeed, about the attitude of both the old people towards myself which I could only consider as extremely puzzling. They would follow me about with a jealous care, blended with anxious alarm, and their faces as they looked at me wore an expression of tearful admiration, touched with something of pity, as for some youthful martyr; at times, too, they spoke of the gratitude they felt, and professed a determined hopefulness as to my ultimate success.

Now I was well aware that this is not the ordinary bearing of the parents of an heiress to a suitor who, however deserving in other respects, is both obscure and penniless, and the only way in which I could account for it was by the supposition that there was some latent defect in Chlorine's temper or constitution, which entitled the man who won her to commiseration, and which would also explain their evident anxiety to get her off their hands.

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But although anything of this kind would be, of course, a drawback, I felt that forty or fifty thousand pounds would be a fair set-off and I could not expect everything.

When the time came at which I felt that I could safely speak to Chlorine of what lay nearest my heart, I found an unforeseen difficulty in bringing her to confess that she reciprocated my passion.

She seemed to shrink unaccountably from speaking the word which gave me the right to claim her, confessing that she dreaded it not for her own sake, but for mine alone, which struck me as an unpleasantly morbid trait in so young a girl.

Again and again I protested that I was willing to run all risks as I was and again and again she resisted, though always more faintly, until at last my efforts were successful, and I forced from her lips the assent which was of so much importance to me.

But it cost her a great effort, and I believe she even swooned immediately afterwards; but this is only conjecture, as I lost no time in seeking Sir Paul and clenching the matter before Chlorine had time to retract.

He heard what I had to tell him with a strange light of triumph and relief in his weary eyes.

"You have made an old man very happy and hopeful," he said. "I ought, perhaps, even now to deter you, but I am too selfish for that. And you are young and brave and ardent; why need we despair? I suppose," he added, looking keenly at me, "you would prefer as little delay as possible?"

"I should indeed," I replied. I was pleased, for I had not expected to find him so sensible as that.

"Then leave all preliminaries to me; when the day and time have been settled, I will let you know. As you are aware, it will be necessary to have your signature to this document; and here, my boy, I must in conscience warn you solemnly that by signing you make your decision irrevocable irrevocable, you understand?"

When I had heard this, I need scarcely say that I was all eagerness to sign; so great was my haste that I did not even try to decipher the somewhat crabbed and antiquated writing in which the terms of the agreement were set out.

I was anxious to impress the baronet with a sense of my gentlemanly feeling and the confidence I had in him, while I naturally presumed that, since the contract was binding upon me, the baronet would, as a man of honor, hold it equally conclusive on his own side.

As I look back upon it now, it seems simply extraordinary that I should have been so easily satisfied, have taken so little pains to find out the exact position in which I was placing myself; but, with the ingenuous confidence of youth, I fell an easy victim, as I was to realize later with terrible enlightenment.

"Say nothing of this to Chlorine," said Sir Paul, as I handed him the document signed, "until the final arrangements are made; it will only distress her unnecessarily."

I wondered why at the time, but I promised to obey, supposing that he knew best, and for some days after that I made no mention to Chlorine of the approaching day which was to witness our union.

As we were continually together, I began to regard her with an esteem which I had not thought possible at first. Her looks improved considerably under the influence of happiness, and I found she could converse intelligently enough upon several topics, and did not bore me nearly as much as I was fully prepared for.

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And so the time passed less heavily, until one afternoon the baronet took me aside mysteriously. "Prepare yourself, Augustus" (they had all learned to call me Augustus), he said; "all is arranged. The event upon which our dearest hopes depend is fixed for tomorrow in the Gray Chamber of course, and at midnight."

I thought this a curious time and place for the ceremony, but I had divined his eccentric passion for privacy and retirement, and only imagined that he had procured some very special form of license.

"But you do not know the Gray Chamber," he added.

"Come with me, and I will show you where it is." And he led me up the broad staircase, and, stopping at the end of a passage before an immense door covered with black baize and studded with brass nails, which gave it a hideous resemblance to a gigantic coffin lid, he pressed a spring, and it fell slowly back.

I saw a long dim gallery, whose very existence nothing in the external appearance of the mansion had led me to suspect; it led to a heavy oaken door with cumbrous plates and fastenings of metal.

"Tomorrow night is Christmas eve, as you are doubtless aware," he said in a hushed voice. "At twelve, then, you will present yourself at yonder door the door of the Gray Chamber where you must fulfill the engagement you have made."

I was surprised at his choosing such a place for the ceremony; it would have been more cheerful in the long drawing room; but it was evidently a whim of his, and I was too happy to think of opposing it. I hastened at once to Chlorine, with her father's sanction, and told her that the crowning moment of both our lives was fixed at last.

The effect of my announcement was astonishing: she fainted, for which I remonstrated with her as soon as she came to herself. "Such extreme sensitiveness, my love," I could not help saying, "may be highly creditable to your sense of maidenly propriety, but allow me to say that I can scarcely regard it as a compliment."

"Augustus," she said, "you must not think I doubt you; and yet and yet the ordeal will be a severe one for you."

"I will steel my nerves," I said grimly (for I was annoyed with her); "and, after all, Chlorine, the ceremony is not invariably fatal; I have heard of the victim surviving it occasionally."

"How brave you are!" she said earnestly. "I will imitate you, Augustus; I too will hope."

I really thought her insane, which alarmed me for the validity of the marriage. "Yes, I am weak, foolish, I know," she continued; "but oh, I shudder so when I think of you, away in that gloomy Gray Chamber, going through it all alone!"

This confirmed my worst fears. No wonder her parents felt grateful to me for relieving them of such a responsibility! "May I ask where you intend to be at the time?" I inquired very quietly.

"You will not think us unfeeling," she replied, "but dear papa considered that such anxiety as ours would be scarcely endurable did we not seek some distraction from it; and so, as a special favor, he has procured evening orders for Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, where we shall drive immediately after dinner."

I knew that the proper way to treat the insane was by reasoning with them gently, so as to place their own absurdity clearly before them. "If you are forgetting your anxiety in Sir John Soane's Museum, while I cool my heels in the Gray Chamber," I said, "is it probable that any clergyman will be induced to perform the marriage ceremony? Did you really think two people can be united separately?"

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She was astonished this time. "You are joking!" she cried; "you cannot really believe that we are to be married in in the Gray Chamber?"

"Then will you tell me where we are to be married?" I asked. "I think I have the right to know it can hardly be at the Museum!"

She turned upon me with a sudden misgiving; "I could almost fancy," she said anxiously, "that this is no feigned ignorance. Augustus, your aunt sent you a message tell me, have you read it?" Now, owing to McFadden's want of consideration, this was my one weak point I had not read it, and thus I felt myself upon delicate ground. The message evidently related to business of importance which was to be transacted in this Gray Chamber, and as the genuine McFadden clearly knew all about it, it would have been simply suicidal to confess my own ignorance.

"Why of course, darling, of course," I said hastily. "You must think no more of my silly joke; there is something I have to arrange in the Gray Chamber before I can call you mine. But, tell me, why does it make you so uneasy?" I added, thinking it might be prudent to find out beforehand what formality was expected from me.

"I cannot help it no, I cannot!" she cried, "the test is so searching are you sure that you are prepared at all points? I overheard my father say that no precaution could safely be neglected. I have such a terrible foreboding that, after all, this may come between us."

It was clear enough to me now; the baronet was by no means so simple and confiding in his choice of a son-in-law as I had imagined, and had no intention, after all, of accepting me without some inquiry into my past life, my habits, and my prospects.

That he should seek to make this examination more impressive by appointing this ridiculous midnight interview for it, was only what might have been expected from an old man of his confirmed eccentricity.

But I knew I could easily contrive to satisfy the baronet, and with the idea of consoling Chlorine, I said as much. "Why will you persist in treating me like a child, Augustus?" she broke out almost petulantly. "They have tried to hide it all from me, but do you suppose I do not know that in the Gray Chamber you will have to encounter one far more formidable, far more difficult to satisfy, than poor dear papa?"

"I see you know more than I more than I thought you did," I said. "Let us understand one another, Chlorine tell me exactly how much you know."

"I have told you all I know," she said; "it is your turn to confide in me."

"Not even for your sweet sake, my dearest," I was obliged to say, "can I break the seal that is set upon my tongue. You must not press me. Come, let us talk of other things."

But I now saw that matters were worse than I had thought; instead of the feeble old baronet I should have to deal with a stranger, some exacting and officious friend or relation perhaps, or, more probably, a keen family solicitor who would put questions I should not care about answering, and even be capable of insisting upon strict settlements.

It was that, of course; they would try to tie my hands by a strict settlement, with a brace of cautious trustees; unless I was very careful, all I should get by my marriage would be a paltry life-interest, contingent upon my surviving my wife.

This revolted me; it seems to me that when law comes in with its offensively suspicious restraints upon the husband and its indelicately premature provisions for the offspring, all the poetry of love is gone at once. By

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allowing the wife to receive the income "for her separate use and free from the control of her husband," as the phrase runs, you infallibly brush the bloom from the peach, and implant the "little speck within the fruit" which, as Tennyson beautifully says, will widen by and by and make the music mute.

This may be overstrained on my part, but it represents my honest conviction; I was determined to have nothing to do with law. If it was necessary, I felt quite sure enough of Chlorine to defy Sir Paul. I would refuse to meet a family solicitor anywhere, and I intended to say so plainly at the first convenient opportunity.

Chapter III

The opportunity came after dinner that evening when we were all in the drawing-room, Lady Catafalque dozing uneasily in her armchair behind a fire screen, and Chlorine, in the further room, playing funereal dirges in the darkness, and pressing the stiff keys of the old piano with a languid uncertain touch.

Drawing a chair up to Sir Paul's, I began to broach the subject calmly and temperately. "I find," I said, "that we have not quite understood one another over this affair in the Gray Chamber. When I agreed to an appointment there, I thought well, it doesn't matter what I thought, I was a little too premature. What I want to say now is, that while I have no objection to you, as Chlorine's father, asking me any questions (in reason) about myself, I feel a delicacy in discussing my private affairs with a perfect stranger."

His burning eyes looked me through and through; "I don't understand," he said. "Tell me what you are talking about."

I began all over again, telling him exactly what I felt about solicitors and settlements. "Are you well?" he asked sternly. "What have I ever said about settlements or solicitors?"

I saw that I was wrong again, and could only stammer something to the effect that a remark of Chlorine's had given me this impression.

"What she could have said to convey such an idea passes my comprehension," he said gravely; "but she knows nothing she's a mere child. I have felt from the first, my boy, that your aunt's intention was to benefit you quite as much as my own daughter. Believe me, I shall not attempt to restrict you in any way; I shall be too rejoiced to see you come forth in safety from the Gray Chamber."

All the relief I had begun to feel respecting the settlements was poisoned by these last words.

Why did he talk of that confounded Gray Chamber as if it were a fiery furnace, or a cage of lions? What mystery was there concealed beneath all this, and how, since I was obviously supposed to be thoroughly acquainted with it, could I manage to penetrate the secret of this perplexing appointment?

While he had been speaking, the faint, mournful music died away, and, looking up, I saw Chlorine, a pale, slight form, standing framed in the archway which connected the two rooms.

"Go back to your piano, my child," said the baronet; "Augustus and I have much to talk about which is not for your ears."

"But why not?" she said; "oh, why not? Papa! Dearest mother! Augustus! I can bear it no longer! I have often felt of late that we are living this strange life under the shadow of some fearful Thing, which would chase all cheerfulness from any home. More than this I did not seek to know; I dared not ask. But now, when I know that Augustus, whom I love with my whole heart, must shortly face this ghastly presence, you cannot wonder if I seek

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to learn the real extent of the danger that awaits him! Tell me all. I can bear the worst for it cannot be more horrible than my own fears!"

Lady Catafalque had roused herself and was wringing her long mittened hands and moaning feebly. "Paul," she said, "you must not tell her; it will kill her; she is not strong!" Her husband seemed undecided, and I myself began to feel exquisitely uncomfortable. Chlorine's words pointed to something infinitely more terrible than a mere solicitor.

"Poor girl," said Sir Paul at last, "it was for your own good that the whole truth has been thus concealed from you; but now, perhaps, the time has come when the truest kindness will be to reveal all. What do you say, Augustus?" "I agree with you," I replied faintly; "she ought to be told."

"Precisely!" he said. "Break to her, then, the nature of the ordeal which lies before you."

It was the very thing which I wanted to be broken to me! I would have given the world to know all about it myself, and so I stared at his gloomy old face with eyes that must have betrayed my helpless dismay. At last I saved myself by suggesting that such a story would come less harshly from a parent's lips.

"Well, so be it," he said. "Chlorine, compose yourself, dearest one; sit down there, and summon up all your fortitude to hear what I am about to tell you. You must know, then I think you had better let your mother give you a cup of tea before I begin; it will steady your nerves."

During the delay which followed for Sir Paul did not consider his daughter sufficiently fortified until she had taken at least three cups I suffered tortures of suspense, which I dared not betray.

They never thought of offering me any tea, though the merest observer might have noticed how very badly I wanted it.

At last the baronet was satisfied, and not without a sort of gloomy enjoyment and a proud relish of the distinction implied in his exceptional affliction, he began his weird and almost incredible tale.

"It is now," said he, "some centuries since our ill-fated house was first afflicted with the family curse which still attends it. A certain Humfrey de Catafalque, by his acquaintance with the black art, as it was said, had procured the services of a species of familiar, a dread and supernatural being. For some reason he had conceived a bitter enmity towards his nearest relations, whom he hated with a virulence that not even death could soften. For, by a refinement of malice, he bequeathed this baleful thing to his descendants forever, as an inalienable heirloom! And to this day it follows the title and the head of the family for the time being is bound to provide it with a secret apartment under his own roof. But that is not the worst as each member of our house succeeds to the ancestral rank and honors, he must seek an interview with "The Curse," as it has been styled for generations. And, in that interview, it is decided whether the spell is to be broken and the Curse depart from us forever or whether it is to continue its blighting influence, and hold yet another life in miserable thralldom."

"And are you one of its thralls then, papa?" faltered Chlorine.

"I am, indeed," he said. "I failed to quell it, as every Catafalque, however brave and resolute, has failed yet. It checks all my accounts, and woe to me if that cold, withering eye discovers the slightest error even in the pence column! I could not describe the extent of my bondage to you, my daughter, or the humiliation of having to go and tremble monthly before that awful presence.

Not even yet, old as I am, have I grown quite accustomed to it!"

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Never, in my wildest imaginings, had I anticipated anything one quarter so dreadful as this; but still I clung to the hope that it was impossible to bring me into the affair.

"But, Sir Paul," I said "Sir Paul, you you mustn't stop there, or you'll alarm Chlorine more than there's any need to do. She ha, ha! don't you see, she has got some idea into her head that I have to go through much the same sort of thing. Just explain that to her. I'm not a Catafalque, Chlorine, so it can't interfere with me. That is so, isn't it, Sir Paul? Good heavens, sir, don't torture her like this!" I cried, as he was silent. "Speak out!"

"You mean well, Augustus," he said, "but the time for deceiving her has gone by; she must know the worst. Yes, my poor child," he continued to Chlorine, whose eyes were wide with terror though I fancy mine were even wider "unhappily, though our beloved Augustus is not a Catafalque himself, he has of his own free will brought himself within the influence of the Curse, and he, too, at the appointed hour, must keep the awful assignation, and brave all that the most fiendish malevolence can do to shake his resolution."

I could not say a single word; the horror of the idea was altogether too much for me, and I fell back on my chair in a state of speechless collapse.

"You see," Sir Paul went on explaining, "it is not only all new baronets, but every one who would seek an alliance with the females of our race, who must, by the terms of that strange bequest, also undergo this trial. It may be in some degree owing to this necessity that, ever since Humfrey de Catafalque's diabolical testament first took effect, every maiden of our House has died a spinster." (Here Chlorine hid her face with a low wail.) "In 1770, it is true, one solitary suitor was emboldened by love and daring to face the ordeal. He went calmly and resolutely to the chamber where the Curse was then lodged, and the next morning they found him outside the door a gibbering maniac!"

I writhed on my chair. "Augustus!" cried Chlorine wildly, "promise me you will not permit the Curse to turn you into a gibbering maniac. I think if I saw you gibber I should die!"

I was on the verge of gibbering then; I dared not trust myself to speak.

"Nay, Chlorine," said Sir Paul more cheerfully "there is no cause for alarm; all has been made smooth for Augustus." (I began to brighten a little at this.) "His Aunt Petronia had made a special study of the old-world science of incantation, and had undoubtedly succeeded at last in discovering the master-word which, employed according to her directions, would almost certainly break the unhallowed spell. In her compassionate attachment to us, she formed the design of persuading a youth of blameless life and antecedents to present himself as our champion, and the reports she had been given of our dear Augustus's irreproachable character led her to select him as a likely instrument. And her confidence in his generosity and courage was indeed well-founded, for he responded at once to the appeal of his departed aunt, and, with her instructions for his safeguard, and the consciousness of his virtue as an additional protection, there is hope, my child, strong hope, that, though the struggle may be a long and bitter one, yet Augustus will emerge a victor!"

I saw very little ground for expecting to emerge as anything of the kind, or for that matter to emerge at all, except in installments for the master-word which was to abash the demon was probably inside the packet of instructions, and that was certainly somewhere at the bottom of the sea, outside Melbourne, fathoms below the surface.

I could bear no more. "It's simply astonishing to me," I said, "that in the nineteenth century, hardly six miles from Charing Cross, you can calmly allow this hideous 'Curse,' or whatever you call it, to have things all its own way like this."

"What can I do, Augustus?" he asked helplessly.

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"Do? Anything!" I retorted wildly (for I scarcely knew what I said). "Take it out for an airing (it must want an airing by this time); take it out and lose it! Or gew both the archbishops to step in and lay it for you. Sell the house, and make the purchaser take it at a valuation, with the other fixtures. I certainly would not live under the same roof with it. And I want you to understand one thing I was never told all this; I have been kept in the dark about it. Of course I knew there was some kind of a curse in the family but I never dreamed of anything so bad as this, and I never had any intention of being boxed up alone with it either. I shall not go near the Gray Chamber!"

"Not go near it!" they all cried aghast.

"Not on any account," I said, for I felt firmer and easier now that I had taken up this position.

"If the Curse has any business with me, let it come down and settle it here before you all in a plain straightforward manner. Let us go about it in a businesslike way. On second thoughts," I added, fearing lest they should find means of carrying out this suggestion, "I won't meet it anywhere!"

"And why why won't you meet it?" they asked breathlessly.

"Because," I explained desperately, "because I'm I'm a materialist." (I had not been previously aware that I had any decided opinions on the question, but I could not stay then to consider the point.) "How can I have any dealings with a preposterous supernatural something which my reason forbids me to believe in? You see my difficulty? It would be inconsistent, to begin with, and and extremely painful to both sides."

"No more of this ribaldry," said Sir Paul sternly. "It may be terribly remembered against you when the hour comes. Keep a guard over your tongue, for all our sakes, and more especially your own. Recollect that the Curse knows all that passes beneath this roof. And do not forget, too, that you are pledged irrevocably pledged. You must confront the Curse!"

Only a short hour ago, and I had counted Chlorine's fortune and Chlorine as virtually mine; and now I saw my golden dreams roughly shattered forever! And, oh, what a wrench it was to tear myself from them! What it cost me to speak the words that barred my Paradise to me forever!

But if I wished to avoid confronting the Curse and I did wish this very much I had no other course. "I had no right to pledge myself," I said, with quivering lips, "under all the circumstances."

"Why not," they demanded again; "what circumstances?"

"Well, in the first place," I assured them earnestly, "I'm a base impostor. I am indeed. I'm not Augustus McFadden at all. My real name is of no consequence but it's a prettier one than that.

As for McFadden, he, I regret to say, is now no more."

Why on earth I could not have told the plain truth here has always been a mystery to me. I suppose I had been lying so long that it was difficult to break myself of this occasionally inconvenient trick at so short a notice, but I certainly mixed things up to a hopeless extent.

"Yes," I continued mournfully, "McFadden is dead; I will tell you how he died if you would care to know. During his voyage here he fell overboard, and was almost instantly appropriated by a gigantic shark, when, as I happened to be present, I enjoyed the melancholy privilege of seeing him pass away. For one brief moment I beheld him between the jaws of the creature, so pale but so composed (I refer to McFadden, you understand not the shark), he threw just one glance up at me, and with a smile, the sad sweetness of which I shall never forget (it was McFadden's smile, I mean, of course not the shark's), he, courteous and considerate to the last, requested me to

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break the news and remember him very kindly to you all. And, in the same instant, he abruptly vanished within the monster and I saw neither of them again!"

Of course in bringing the shark in at all I was acting directly contrary to my instructions, but I quite forgot them in my anxiety to escape the acquaintance of the Curse of the Catafalques.

"If this is true, sir," said the baronet haughtily when I had finished, "you have indeed deceived us basely."

"That," I replied, "is what I was endeavoring to bring out. You see, it puts it quite out of my power to meet your family Curse. I should not feel justified in intruding upon it. So, if you will kindly let some one fetch a fly or a cab in half an hour "

"Stop!" cried Chlorine. "Augustus, as I will call you still, you must not go like this. If you have stooped to deceit, it was for love of me, and and Mr. McFadden is dead. If he had been alive, I should have felt it lily duty to allow him an opportunity of winning my affection, but he is lying.in his silent tomb, and and I have learnt to love you. Stay, then; stay and brave the Curse; we may yet be happy!"

I saw how foolish I had been not to tell the truth at first, and I hastened to repair this error.

"When I described McFadden as dead," I said hoarsely, "it was a loose way of putting the facts because, to be quite accurate, he isn't dead. We found out afterwards that it was another fellow the shark had swallowed, and, in fact, another shark altogether. So he is alive and well now, at Melbourne, but when he came to know about the Curse, he was too much frightened to come across, and he asked me to call and make his excuses. I have now done so, and will trespass no further on your kindness if you will tell somebody to bring a vehicle of any sort in a quarter of an hour."

"Pardon me," said the baronet, "but we cannot part in this way. I feared when first I saw you that your resolution might give way under the strain; it is only natural, I admit. But you deceive yourself if you think we cannot see that these extraordinary and utterly contradictory stories are prompted by sudden panic. I quite understand it, Augustus; I cannot blame you; but to allow you to withdraw now would be worse than weakness on my part. The panic will pass, you will forget these fears tomorrow, you must forget them; remember, you have promised. For your own sake, I shall take care that you do not forfeit that solemn bond, for I dare not let you run the danger of exciting the Curse by a deliberate insult."

I saw clearly that his conduct was dictated by a deliberate and most repulsive selfishness; he did not entirely believe me, but he was determined that if there was any chance that I, whoever I might be, could free him from his present thralldom, he would not let it escape him.

I raved, I protested, I implored all in vain; they would not believe a single word I said, they positively refused to release me, and insisted upon my performing my engagement.

And at last Chlorine and her mother left the room, with a little contempt for my unworthiness mingled with their evident compassion; and a little later Sir Paul conducted me to my room, and locked me in "till," as he said, "I had returned to my senses.

Chapter IV

What a night I passed, as I tossed sleeplessly from side to side under the canopy of my old-fashioned bedstead, torturing my fevered brain with vain speculations as to the fate the morrow was to bring me.

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I felt myself perfectly helpless; I saw no way out of it; they seemed bent upon offering me up as a sacrifice to this private Moloch of theirs. The baronet was quite capable of keeping me locked up all the next day and pushing me into the Gray Chamber to take my chance when the hour came.

If I had only some idea what the Curse was like to look at, I thought I might not feel quite so afraid of it; the vague and impalpable awfulness of the thing was intolerable, and the very thought of it caused me to fling myself about in an ecstasy of horror.

By degrees, however, as daybreak came near, I grew calmer until at length I arrived at a decision. It seemed evident to me that, as I could not avoid my fate, the wisest course was to go forth to meet it with as good a grace as possible. Then, should I by some fortunate accident come well out of it, my fortune was ensured.

But if I went on repudiating my assumed self to the very last, I should surely arouse a suspicion which the most signal rout of the Curse would not serve to dispel.

And after all, as I began to think, the whole thing had probably been much exaggerated; if I could only keep my head, and exercise all my powers of cool impudence, I might contrive to hoodwink this formidable relic of medieval days, which must have fallen rather behind the age by this time. It might even turn out to be (although I was hardly sanguine as to this) as big a humbug as I was myself, and we should meet with confidential winks, like the two augurs.

But, at all events, I resolved to see this mysterious affair out, and trust to my customary good luck to bring me safely through, and so, having found the door unlocked, I came down to breakfast something like my usual self, and set myself to remove the unfavorable impression I had made on the previous night.

They did it from consideration for me, but still it was mistaken kindness for them all to leave me entirely to my own thoughts during the whole of the day, for I was driven to mope alone about the gloom-laden building, until by dinnertime I was very low indeed from nervous depression.

We dined in almost unbroken silence; now and then, as Sir Paul saw my hand approaching a decanter, he would open his lips to observe that I should need the clearest head and the firmest nerve ere long, and warn me solemnly against the brown sherry; from time to time, too, Chlorine and her mother stole apprehensive glances at me, and sighed heavily between every course. I never remember eating a dinner with so little enjoyment.

The meal came to an end at last; the ladies rose, and Sir Paul and I were left to brood over the dessert. I fancy both of us felt a delicacy in starting a conversation, and before I could hit upon a safe remark, Lady Catafalque and her daughter returned, dressed, to my unspeakable horror, in readiness to go out. Worse than that even, Sir Paul apparently intended to accompany them, for he rose at their entrance.

"It is now time for us to bid you a solemn farewell, Augustus," he said, in his hollow old voice.

"You have three hours before you yet, and if you are wise, you will spend them in earnest self-preparation.

At midnight, punctually, for you must not dare to delay, you will go to the Gray Chamber the way thither you know, and you will find the Curse prepared for you. Good-bye, then, brave and devoted boy; stand firm, and no harm can befall you!"

"You are going away, all of you!" I cried. They were not what you might call a gay family to sit up with, but even their society was better than my own.

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"Upon these dread occasions," he explained, "it is absolutely forbidden for any human being but one to remain in the house. All the servants have already left, and we are about to take our departure for a private hotel near the Strand. We shall just have time, if we start at once, to inspect the Soane Museum on our way thither, which will serve as some distraction from the terrible anxiety we shall be feeling."

At this I believe I positively howled with terror; all my old panic came back with a rush.

"Don't leave me all alone with It!" I cried; "I shall go mad if you do!"

Sir Paul simply turned on his heel in silent contempt, and his wife followed him; but Chlorine remained behind for one instant, and somehow, as she gazed at me with a yearning pity in her sad eyes, I thought I had never seen her looking so pretty before.

"Augustus," she said, "get up." (I suppose I must have been on the floor somewhere.) "Be a man; show us we were not mistaken in you. You know I would spare you this if I could; but we are powerless. Oh, be brave, or I shall lose you forever!"

Her appeal did seem to put a little courage into me; I staggered up and kissed her slender hand and vowed sincerely to be worthy of her.

And then she too passed out, and the heavy hall door slammed behind the three, and the rusty old gate screeched like a banshee as it swung back and closed with a clang.

I heard the carriage-wheels grind the slush, and the next moment I knew that I was shut up on Christmas eve in that somber mansion with the Curse of the Catafalques as my sole companion.

I don't think the generous ardor with which Chlorine's last words had inspired me lasted very long, for I caught myself shivering before the clock struck nine, and, drawing up a clumsy leathern armchair close to the fire, I piled on the logs and tried to get rid of a certain horrible sensation of internal vacancy which was beginning to afflict me.

I tried to look my situation fairly in the face; whatever reason and common sense had to say about it, there seemed no possible doubt that something of a supernatural order was shut up in that great chamber down the corridor, and also that, if I meant to win Chlorine, I must go up and have some kind of an interview with it. Once more I wished I had some definite idea to go upon; what description of being should I find this Curse? Would it be aggressively ugly, like the bogie of my infancy, or should I see a lank and unsubstantial shape, draped in clinging black, with nothing visible beneath it but a pair of burning hollow eyes and one long pale bony hand? Really I could not decide which would be the more trying of the two.

By and by I began to recollect unwillingly all the frightful stories I had ever read; one in particular came back to me the adventure of a foreign marshal who, after much industry, succeeded in invoking an evil spirit, which came bouncing into the room shaped like a gigantic ball, with, I think, a hideous face in the middle of it, and would not be got rid of until the horrified marshal had spent hours in hard praying and persistent exorcism!

What should I do if the Curse was a globular one and came rolling all round the room after me?

Then there was another appalling tale I had read in some magazine a tale of a secret chamber, too, and in some respects a very similar case to my own, for there the heir of some great house had to go in and meet a mysterious aged person with strange eyes and an evil smile, who kept attempting to shake hands with him.

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Nothing should induce me to shake hands with the Curse of the Catafalques, however apparently friendly I might find it.

But it was not very likely to be friendly, for it was one of those mystic powers of darkness which know nearly everything it would detect me as an impostor directly, and what would become of me? I declare I almost resolved to confess all and sob out my deceit upon its bosom, and the only thing which made me pause was the reflection that probably the Curse did not possess a bosom.

By this time I had worked myself up to such a pitch of terror that I found it absolutely necessary to brace my nerves, and I did brace them. I emptied all the three decanters, but as Sir Paul's cellar was none of the best, the only result was that, while my courage and daring were not perceptibly heightened, I was conscious of feeling exceedingly unwell.

Tobacco, no doubt, would have calmed and soothed me, but I did not dare to smoke. For the Curse, being old-fashioned, might object to the smell of it, and I was anxious to avoid exciting its prejudices unnecessarily.

And so I simply sat in my chair and shook. Every now and then I heard steps on the frosty path outside: sometimes a rapid tread, as of some happy person bound to scenes of Christmas revelry, and little dreaming of the miserable wretch he was passing; sometimes the slow creaking tramp of the Fulham policeman on his beat.

What if I called him in and gave the Curse into custody either for putting me in bodily fear (as it was undeniably doing), or for being found on the premises under suspicious circumstances?

There was a certain audacity about this means of cutting the knot that fascinated me at first, but still I did not venture to adopt it, thinking it most probable that the stolid constable would decline to interfere as soon as he knew the facts; and even if he did, it would certainly annoy Sir Paul extremely to hear of his Family Curse spending its Christmas in a police cell, and I felt instinctively that he would consider it a piece of unpardonable bad taste on my part.

So one hour passed. A few minutes after ten I heard more footsteps and voices in low consultation, as if a band of men had collected outside the railings. Could there be any indication without of the horrors these walls contained?

But no; the gaunt housefront kept its secret too well; they were merely the waits. They saluted me with the old carol, "God rest you, merry gentleman, let nothing you dismay!" which should have encouraged me, but it didn't and they followed that up by a wheezy but pathetic rendering of "The Mistletoe Bough."

For a time I did not object to them; while they were scraping and blowing outside I felt less abandoned and cut off from human help, and then they might arouse softer sentiments in the Curse upstairs by their seasonable strains: these things do happen at Christmas sometimes. But their performance was really so infernally bad that it was calculated rather to irritate than subdue any evil spirit, and very soon I rushed to the window and beckoned to them furiously to go away.

Unhappily, they thought I was inviting them indoors for refreshment, and came round to the gate, when they knocked and rang incessantly for a quarter of an hour.

This must have stirred the Curse up quite enough, but when they had gone, there came a man with a barrel organ, which was suffering from some complicated internal disorder, causing it to play its whole repertory at once, in maddening discords. Even the grinder himself seemed dimly aware that his instrument was not doing itself justice, for he would stop occasionally, as if to ponder or examine it. But he was evidently a sanguine person and had hopes of bringing it round by a little perseverance; so, as Parson's Green was well-suited by its quiet for this

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mode of treatment, he remained there till he must have reduced the Curse to a rampant and rabid condition.

He went at last, and then the silence that followed began to my excited fancy (for I certainly saw nothing) to be invaded by strange sounds that echoed about the old house. I heard sharp reports from the furniture, sighing moans in the draughty passages, doors opening and shutting, and worse still stealthy padding footsteps, both above and in the ghostly hall outside!

I sat there in an ice-cold perspiration, until my nerves required more bracing, to effect which I had recourse to the spirit-case.

And after a short time my fears began to melt away rapidly. What a ridiculous bugbear I was making of this thing after all! Was I not too hasty in setting it down as ugly and hostile before I had seen it... how did I know it was anything which deserved my horror?

Here a gush of sentiment came over me at the thought that it might be that for long centuries the poor Curse had been cruelly misunderstood that it might be a blessing in disguise.

I was so affected by the thought that I resolved to go up at once and wish it a merry Christmas through the keyhole, just to show that I came in no unfriendly spirit.

But would not that seem as if I was afraid of it? I scorned the idea of being afraid. Why, for two straws, I would go straight in and pull its nose for it if it had a nose! I went out with this object, not very steadily, but before I had reached the top of the dim and misty staircase, I had given up all ideas of defiance, and merely intended to go as far as the corridor by way of a preliminary canter.

The coffin-lid door stood open, and I looked apprehensively down the corridor; the grim metal fittings on the massive door of the Gray Chamber were gleaming with a mysterious pale light, something between the phenomena obtained by electricity and the peculiar phosphorescence observable in a decayed shellfish; under the door I saw the reflection of a sullen red glow, and within I could hear sounds like the roar of a mighty wind, above which peals of fiendish mirth rang out at intervals, and were followed by a hideous dull clanking.

It seemed only too evident that the Curse was getting up the steam for our interview. I did not stay there long, because I was afraid that it might dart out suddenly and catch me eavesdropping, which would be a hopelessly bad beginning. I got back to the dining room, somehow; the fire had taken advantage of my short absence to go out, and I was surprised to find by the light of the fast-dimming lamp that it was a quarter to twelve already.

Only fifteen more fleeting minutes and then unless I gave tip Chlorine and her fortune forever I must go up and knock at that awful door, and enter the presence of the frightful mystic Thing that was roaring and laughing and clanking on the other side!

Stupidly I sat and stared at the clock; in five minutes, now, I should be beginning my desperate duel with one of the powers of darkness a thought which gave me sickening qualms.

I was clinging to the thought that I had still two precious minutes left perhaps my last moments of safety and sanity when the lamp expired with a gurgling sob, and left me in the dark.

I was afraid of sitting there all alone any longer, and besides, if I lingered, the Curse might come down and fetch me. The horror of this idea made me resolve to go up at once, especially as scrupulous punctuality might propitiate it.

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Groping my way to the door, I reached the hall and stood there, swaying under the old stained-glass lantern. And then I made a terrible discovery. I was not in a condition to transact any business; I had disregarded Sir Paul's well-meant warning at dinner; I was not my own master. I was lost!

The clock in the adjoining room tolled twelve, and from without the distant steeples proclaimed in faint peals and chimes that it was Christmas morn. My hour had come!

Why did I not mount those stairs? I tried again and again, and fell down every time, and at each attempt I knew the Curse would be getting more and more impatient.

I was quite five minutes late, and yet, with all my eagerness to be punctual, I could not get up that staircase. It was a horrible situation, but it was not at its worst even then, for I heard a jarring sound above, as if heavy rusty bolts were being withdrawn.

The Curse was coming down to see what had become of me! I should have to confess my inability to go upstairs without assistance, and so place myself wholly at its mercy!

I made one more desperate effort, and then and then, upon my word, I don't know how it was exactly but, as I looked wildly about, I caught sight of my hat on the hat-rack below, and the thoughts it roused in me proved too strong for resistance. Perhaps it was weak of me, but I venture to think that very few men in my position would have behaved any better.

I renounced my ingenious and elaborate scheme forever, the door (fortunately for me) was neither locked nor bolted, and the next moment I was running for my life along the road to Chelsea, urged on by the fancy that the Curse itself was in hot pursuit.

For weeks after that I lay in hiding, starting at every sound, so fearful was I that the outraged Curse might track me down at last; all my worldly possessions were at Parson's Green, and I could not bring myself to write or call for them, nor indeed have I seen any of the Catafalques since that awful Christmas eve.

I wish to have nothing more to do with them, for I feel naturally that they took a cruel advantage of my youth and inexperience, and I shall always resent the deception and constraint to which I so nearly fell a victim.

But it occurs to me that those who may have followed my strange story with any curiosity and interest may be slightly disappointed at its conclusion, which I cannot deny is a lame and unsatisfactory one.

They expected, no doubt, to be told what the Curse's personal appearance is, and how it comports itself in that ghastly Gray Chamber, what it said to me, and what I said to it, and what happened after that.

This information, as will be easily understood, I cannot pretend to give, and, for myself, I have long ceased to feel the slightest curiosity on any of these points. But for the benefit of such as are less indifferent, I may suggest that almost any eligible bachelor would easily obtain the opportunities I failed to enjoy by simply calling at the old mansion at Parson's Green, and presenting himself to the baronet as a suitor for his daughter's hand.

I shall be most happy to allow my name to be used as a reference.