THE DEAD HAND.

From the first day of our temporary residence at 14 Tennessee terrace, West-ill-by-sea, I became aware that someone was ill next door. The weather was so gloriously wet that I was compelled to remain within, and, being alone, I naturally spent much of my time at the window, wondering whether it would ever be fine enough for outdoor sketching. Thus it was that the frequent visits to 13 of no unmistakable doctor in an unmistakable doctor's brougham attracted my attention. Two and even three times a day he came, and on his departure I always noticed that look of grave professional anxiety, which, on a doctor's face, looks to me so painful.

Sometimes the medical man was accompanied to his carriage by a gentleman who appeared to be giving him, with singular earnestness, some loaded and repeated of the latter coming into the latter would stand at the door of the brougham seemingly loath to let the doctor go without some final instructions, or perhaps some ray of hope. The accounts he gave was talk with narrow, sympathy sometimes, but all that I could see of his patients as he jerked back into the house was that he was about thirty years of age, with no hair on his face, which was very pale.

With a curiosity born of enforced idleness I asked my landlady what was the matter at 13, but all she could tell me was that the house next door was also a lodging house, and that the doctor's visits were paid to an old gentleman who had been brought there, very ill, by his nephew. My landlady added that it was a strange choice of apartments to have made for a sick person, as the woman who kept them was little better than an idiot, who was only assisted by an equally simple servant girl. At the time I put the remark down to professional jealousy, especially as the nephew had been to look at the rooms herself, and had seemed very anxious for her to send, who happened to be out for the evening. On hearing this the gentleman had inquired if there was any one else in the house who could accompany him back next door for a few minutes on a matter of business. The landlady was unable to go herself, the servant being out, but as the gentleman seemed disappointed she had taken the liberty of suggesting that he ask me. Would I, at any rate, see him and then decide?

I was only too glad to be of use to people who appeared to be in great trouble, far from their friends in a seaside lodging house, and I told the lady to show the gentleman in.

In another moment the tall, loose framed man whom I had seen so often attending the doctor to his carriage stood bowing to the doorway.

"Pray come in," I said, rising. "In what way can I be of service to you?"

The stranger entered the room. His eyes, which I saw were weak, blinked in the bright lamplight. He disregarded the motion I made to a chair and answered my standing. He seemed nervously anxious to compact his shortsighted eyes in order to make out what manner of man I was. In other words he peered at me somewhat rudely.

"It is simply the small matter of witnessing the signature to a will," he said. "If I might trespass on your kindness to step in the next door for that purpose I should be greatly obliged. My uncle is ill, and things I trust he is in no immediate danger he is anxious to affix his signature tonight."

"I shall be most happy," I said, taking up my hat. "I will come with you at once."

"I must introduce myself," said the stranger as I led the way down stairs. "My name is Gaston Pierrepont. My uncle, whom you are about to see, is General Maitland, of Godalmy Park, Northamptonshire. I brought him here in the hope that he might derive benefit from the sea air."

"With good results I trust," was the reply which politeness dictates, though the frequent visits of that eminent barrister led me to expect a negative answer.

To my surprise Mr. Pierrepont replied in the affirmative.

"Yes," he said, "my uncle is better, though still dangerously ill."

By this time we were out in the street at the door of 13. He had already inserted his latchkey in the lock, which he pushed and looked at me.

"There is one thing I must prepare you for," he said, holding his weak eyes on me in the gloom; "my uncle is unable to speak. His complaint is paralysis, but, however—

Otherwise he is in perfect possession of his faculties. The doctor is with him now, and expects to be gone in an hour."

I merely bowed and followed him into the house. The hall was a fine one of 13, with the exception of some slight differences in the furniture which struck it, as what it would overall take another lodging house. Mr. Pierrepont unclosed the up stairs to the first floor, and stopped outside the door on the landing knocked three times. There was a sight, quick and a movement inside the chamber, and then a voice said, "Come in."

Grasping the door handle, Mr. Pierrepont turned to me hurriedly, as if he had forgotten something.

"I think," he said, "it might be as well if I knew who is witnessing this earlier for us. May I ask?"

I laughed him by mentioning to his very reasonable request. I took out my professional card and gave him one of my visiting cards with my name—Angus McDonald—and the address of my studio in St. John's Wood—in gravel Darcon. He put it close to his eyes, blinked at it and said in a tone which sounded low or rather suggested relief:

"Ah, you live in London—not from—I see."

He opened the door, and I followed him into the room. There was a dim light from a shaded lamp which stood on a small table at the head of the bed, but so disguised that the curtains prevented its rays from falling on the sick man. On the bed, half reclining, half supported by a young man with fair hair and wearing spectacles, was an old man whom even in the dim light, I saw to be of stately presence and dignified mien.

His stately locks were snow white, as were the bushy eyebrows which he kept bent down toward a paper lying on the bed before him. But what surprised me most was the ruddy glow of health in General Maitland's cheeks. The latter seemed to be in a trance, but the color brought upon my mind to show me a pink and white rose that would have done no disgrace to a maiden of sixteen.

My companion introduced me to it. The general merely inclined, colored my presence by a courteous motion of the hand, a movement which he repeated when Mr. Pierrepont asked him after his health if he was ready to go through the usual formalities.

"Very well, then, I will fetch Mrs. Burton as a second witness," said the nephew. "The doctor there would do, but his attention must not be taken from his patient."

"The doctor!" I thought, wondering why the portly individual whom I had watched so often should have given place to the fussy little young man whose right arm exercised the general so carefully.

Pierrepont left the room, and I was left with the sick man and his nurse. The latter, a young man with a face of great intelligence, rose and bowed to me as I entered.

The sick man turned his head and looked at me with a vague, inquiring stare, but he made no sign of recognition.

The door opened, and I found Pierrepont returned with a second witness, a tall, gaunt woman, who, I should say, was a lady, but of the type that is generally described as "a character." She had a long, pale face, with a mass of fair hair, and a pair of eyes that, though they were dim with age, had a wonderfully sweet and pathetic expression in them. She bowed to me as I entered, and I felt instantly that she was a lady.

Pierrepont placed a chair for her at the bedside, and she sat down and looked at her nephew as if waiting for him to speak.

The sick man's eyes, dim as they were, seemed to grow more intelligent as they rested on his sister, and he made a feeble effort to raise his hand as she bent over him and spoke to him in a low, sweet voice.

Pierrepont, who had been standing at the foot of the bed, now came forward and handed me a paper. It was a short document, and I read it through twice before I grasped its meaning. It was the will of General Maitland, and it left all his property to his nephew, Gaston Pierrepont.

"Do you understand?" he whispered as I laid it down.

I bowed my head. I was too agitated to speak. The sick man had been watching us with a look of anxiety in his eyes, and when he saw that I had signed the document he sank back with a sigh of relief.

Pierrepont folded the paper and put it in his pocket. Then he walked to the window and stood there with his back to us for a few minutes. When he came back his face was calm and composed, but I could see that he was very agitated.

He spoke to me in a low voice, and I followed him out of the room, down stairs, to the street door. He paused on the threshold and shook my hand.

"I shall be glad if you will come in to see us from time to time," he said. "My uncle has taken a great fancy to you, and anything that may rouse him from this state of apathy is to be desired."

I promised to do so, and he closed the door softly behind me.

I walked home in a state of excitement that I had never experienced before in my life. The strangeness of the scene I had just left, the mystery that surrounded the sick man, the beauty of his sister, and the strange behavior of the doctor, all combined to keep me awake for hours.

The next morning I was aroused by a knock at my door, and on my landlady entering I sat up in bed and asked if she had come to tell me that I was wanted next door.

"No, sir," she said, "but there is a gentleman in the parlor who wishes to see you on business. He says he is your clerk, and his name is Andrews."

I dressed hurriedly and went down stairs to find the clerk. I had expected the physician first and set to work, but after some hesitation I had resolved to wait for my patients in order to obtain a different view of my subject. In this I had met with no accident. An old man with an ulcerated leg had entered my studio in the afternoon, and I had eagerly sketched the poor old fellow's leg, and felt instantly that I had secured a good picture. When I arose I found that my left arm was broken.

In great pain I made my way back to my lodgings, and accepted my landlady's offer to send at once for the doctor. In answer to her inquiries as to which of the medical men in the town I would prefer, I named the only one I had any knowledge of—Dr. Lorimer, who had been such a frequent visitor next door.

The doctor came quickly and dressed my wounded arm. It was a simple fracture, and easily set. Dr. Lorimer was a cheerful, ready man, and after I had thanked him I commented on the fact that a medical consultation after his professional skill had so baffled itself.

"By the way, doctor," I said, "you have lost your patient next door."

"Yes, poor old fellow," he replied, "and before I expected, though. There was no hope for him from the first."

"Your assistant, Mr. Andrews, seemed to be taking very good of him last night," I said.

"Mr. Andrews! Mr. Andrews! Last night! He was not called in in consequence. I have no assistant—at least, not at this place, sir."

I remembered that I had been asked to by Mr. Pierrepont to witness the signature of a will, and that the person who had signed it was the person I had seen the day before.

Dr. Lorimer gave me a little lecture on the folly of jumping to conclusions, and I left the house with a promise from him that he would call half past 4 to see if I was all right. Arrived at my lodgings I found it was just half past 4 yesterday afternoon.

* * *

My broken arm was the means of exposing Gaston Pierrepont's villainy in quite another way. Dr. Lorimer called to his wife, but she could not go, and so I had to go alone. Having finished with my patient, I was leaving the house, when I met Mr. Andrews, who said he was just leaving the house, and he would be making inquiries in a very pleasant way, if I would go with him. I did so, and we found the gentleman in question, Gaston Pierrepont, in the act of forging a codicil to his uncle's will, by which the sick man was made to leave his property to the "Mr. Andrews" I had met in the house. The forgery was so good that the general, who was still able to write, had signed it, and it was only by the merest accident that the fraud was discovered. Dr. Lorimer had given a certificate for the signature, and had called in Mr. Andrews to witness it, and when the latter came he was astonished at the sight of his brother's corpse. The author of the "healing glass" which had been so powerful was in reality a poisoned one, and he died in agonies which could be easily explained.

The people who had been taken in by Dr. Lorimer, and Maitland, which he was to make for them, looked for the credit of the family and imperiled them, saying that to be had such a brother for with his father had signed with a dead hand—Billing.

Or, perhaps—

She—Of course Mr. Pickerstone is poetic, but she is to be wrapped up in herself.

He—And why shouldn't she be with such a lovely wrap.—Detroit Free Press.

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