

(Continued from first page.)

my lost playmate, with the sharer of all our games, Uncle George.

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

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

"Hush!" she said. "You must never call that name here again. Never!" She stopped suddenly and looked as if her own words had frightened her.

"Is Uncle George dead?" I asked.

My aunt turned red and pale, and stammered. I did not want to hear what she said; I brushed past her, down the stairs, my heart was bursting—my flesh felt cold. I ran breathlessly and recklessly into the room where my father and mother had received me. They were both sitting there still. I ran up to them, ringing my hands, and crying out in a passion of tears, "Is Uncle George dead?"

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

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

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

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

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

How his lips trembled—and Oh, how cold they felt on mine. I shrank out of the room the moment he had kissed me, and went and hid myself in the garden. "Uncle George is gone—I am never to see him anymore—I am never to speak of him again—these were the words I repeated to myself, with indescribable terror and confusion the moment I was alone. There was something unspeakably horrible to my young mind in this mystery which I was commanded always to respect, and which, so far as I then knew, I could never hope to see revealed. My father, my mother, my aunt—all appeared to be separated from me now by the same impassable barrier. Home seemed home no longer, with Caroline dead, Uncle George gone, and a torrid subject of talk perpetually and mysteriously interposing between my parents and me.

Though I never had intruded the command my father had given me in his study (his words and looks, and that dreadful scream of my mother's, which seemed to be always ringing in my ears, were more than enough to ensure my obedience.) I also never lost the secret desire to penetrate the darkness which clouded over the fate of Uncle George. For two years I remained at home, and discovered nothing. If I asked the servants about my uncle, they could only tell me that one morning he disappeared from the house. Of the members of my father's family, I could make no inquiries. They lived far away, and never came to see us—and the idea of writing to them, at my age and in my position, was out of the question. My aunt was as unapproachably silent as my father and mother; but I never forgot how her face had altered, when she had reflected for a moment, after hearing of my extraordinary adventure while going home with the servant over the sands at night. The more I thought of that change of countenance, in connection with what had occurred on my return to my father's house, the more certain I felt that the stranger who had kissed me and wept over me must have been no other than Uncle George.

At the end of my two years home, I was sent to sea in the merchant navy by my own earnest desire. I had always determined to be a sailor from the time when I wanted to stay with my aunt by the seaside—and I persisted long enough in my resolution to make my parents recognize the necessity of acceding to my wishes. My new life delighted me; and I remained away on foreign stations more than four years. When I at length returned home, it was to find a new affliction darkening our fireside. My father had died on the very day when I sailed for my return voyage to England.

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

My investigations led to some results, though they were by no means satisfactory. George had always been looked on with contempt by his handsome sisters and his prosperous brothers; and he had not improved his position in the family by his warm advocacy of his brother's cause at the time of my father's marriage. I found that my Uncle's surviving relatives now spoke of him slightly and carelessly. They assumed me that they had never heard from him, and that they knew nothing of him except that he had gone away to settle as they supposed in some foreign place, after having behaved very basely and badly to my father. He had been traced to London where he had sold out of the funds the small share of money which he had inherited after his father's death, and he had been seen on the deck of a packet bound for France, later on the same day. Beyond this, nothing was known about him. In what the alleged baseness of his behavior consisted, none of his brothers and sisters could tell me. My father had refused to pain them by going into particulars; not only at the time of his brother's disappearance, but afterwards whenever the subject was mentioned. George had always been the black

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

I may pass over the events of the next few years of my life briefly enough. My nautical pursuits filled up all my time, and took me far away from my country and my friends. But, whatever I did, and wherever I went, the memory of Uncle George, and the desire to penetrate the mystery of his disappearance, haunted me like familiar spirits. Often, in the lonely watches of the night at sea, did I recall the dark evening on the beach, the strange man's hurried embrace, the startling sensation of feeling his tears had on my cheeks, the disappearance of him before I had breath or self-possession enough to say a word. Often did I think over the inexplicable events that followed, when I had returned, after my sister's funeral, to my father's house, and often still did I puzzle my brains vainly in the attempt to form some plan for inducing my mother or my aunt to disclose the secret which they had hitherto kept from me so perseveringly. My only chance of knowing what had really happened to Uncle George, my only hope of seeing him again, rested with those two near and dear relatives. I despaired of ever getting my mother to speak on the forbidden subject after what had passed between us, but felt more sanguine about my prospects of ultimately inducing my aunt to relax in her discretions. My anticipations, however, in this direction were not destined to be fulfilled. On my next visit to England I found my aunt prostrated by a paralytic attack, which deprived her of the power of speech. She died soon afterwards in my arms, leaving me her sole heir. I searched anxiously among her papers for some reference to the family mystery, but found no clue to guide me. All my mother's letters to her sister at the time of Caroline's illness and death had been destroyed.

More years passed; my mother followed my aunt to the grave, and still I was as far as ever from making any discoveries in relation to Uncle George. Shortly after the period of this last affliction, my health gave way, and I departed by my doctor's advice, to try some baths in the south of France. I travelled slowly to my destination, turning aside from the direct road, and stopping wherever I pleased. One evening, when I was not more than two or three days' journey from the baths to which I was bound, I was struck by the picturesque situation of a little town placed on the brow of a hill at some distance from the main road, and resolved to have a nearer look at the place, with a view to stopping there for the night if it pleased me. I found the principal inn clean and quiet—ordered my bed there—and after dinner strolled out to look at the church. No thought of Uncle George was in my mind when I entered the building; and yet at that very moment chance was leading me to the discovery which, for so many years past, I had vainly endeavored to make—the discovery which I had given up as hopeless since the day of my mother's death.

I found nothing worth noticing in the church, and was about to leave it again, when I caught a glimpse of a pretty view through a side door, and stopped to admire it. The churchyard formed the foreground, and below it the hillside sloped gently into the plain over which the sun was setting in full glory. The turret of the church was reaching his brows, walking up and down a gravel path that parted the rows of graves. In the course of my wanderings I had learnt to speak French as fluently as most Englishmen; and when the priest came near me I said a few words in praise of the view, and complimented him on the neatness and prettiness of the churchyard. He answered with great politeness, and we got into conversation together immediately.

As we strolled along the gravel-walk, my attention was attracted by one of the graves standing apart from the rest. The cross on the head of it differed remarkably, in some points of appearance, from the crosses on the other graves. While all the rest had garlands hung over them, this one cross was quite bare; and the more extraordinary still, the name was not inscribed on it. The priest, observing that I stopped to look at the grave, shook his head and sighed.

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

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

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

"Some relative, I suppose," said I.

"Yes—a nephew," said the priest.

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

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

My heart beat faster, and I felt a choking sensation at the throat the moment I heard the priest unconsciously mention my Christian name in reporting the dying man's last words. As soon as I could steady my voice and feel certain of my self-possession, I communicated my family name to the priest, and asked him if that was not part of the secret that he had been requested to preserve.

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

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

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

The priest raised me gently, and begged me to go with him into his own house. On our way there, I mentioned persons and places that I thought my companion that I was really the priest's nephew, and smoothed the grass over it with my hand. Oh, Uncle George, why not have told your secret to your old playmate—why leave him to find you here?"

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

"I can understand your anxiety to know all that I am authorized to tell you—but pardon me if I say first

that there are circumstances in your uncle's story which it may pain you to hear—he stopped suddenly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"In those few words all the truth burst upon me. Console yourself with the thought that the long martyrdom of his life is over; the priest went on, after allowing me a few moments to control the violent agitation which his disclosure had caused in me. He rests; he is at peace. He and his little darling understand each other, and are happy now. That thought bore him up to the last, on his death-bed. He always spoke of your sister as his 'little darling.' He firmly believed that she was waiting to forgive and console him—and who shall say he was deceived in that belief?"

Not I. Not any one who has ever loved and suffered, surely.

"It was out of the depths of his self-sacrificing love for the child that he drew the fatal courage to undertake the operation," continued the priest. "Your father naturally shrank from attempting it. His medical brethren whom he consulted all doubted the propriety of taking any measures for the removal of the tumor, in the particular condition and situation of it, when they were called in. Your uncle alone differed with them. He was too modest a man to say so, but your mother found it out. The deformity of her beautiful child horrified her; she was desperate enough to catch the faintest hope of remedying it that any one might hold out to her; she persuaded her uncle to put his opinion to the proof. Her horror at the deformity of her child, and her despair at the prospect of its lasting for life, seem to have utterly blinded to all her natural sense of the danger of the operation. It is hard to say it to you, her son, but it must be told, nevertheless, that one day, when your father was out, she actually informed your uncle that his brother had consented to the performance of the operation, and that he had gone purposely out of the house because he had not nerve enough to stay and witness it. After that your uncle did not hesitate. He had no fear of results, provided he could be certain of his own courage. All he dreaded was the effect on him of his love for the child, when he first found himself face to face with the dreadful necessity of touching her skin with the knife. It is needless to shock you by going into particulars. Let it be enough if I say that your uncle's fortune failed when he wanted it most. His love for the child shook the firm hand that had never trembled before. In a word, the operation failed. Your father returned, and found his child dying. The frenzy of his despair when he saw the truth, was told him carried him to excesses which it shocks me to mention—excesses which began in his degrading his brother by a blow, which ended in his binding himself by an oath to make that brother suffer public punishment for his fatal rashness in a court of law. Your uncle was too heart-broken by what had happened to feel those outrages as some men might have felt them. He looked for a moment at his sister-in-law (I do not like to say your mother, considering what I have now to tell you) to see if she would acknowledge that she had encouraged him to attempt the operation, and that she had deceived him in saying that he had his brother's permission to try it. She was silent; and when she spoke it was to join her husband in denouncing him as the murderer of their child. Whether aware of your father's anger, or of the painful indignation against your uncle most calculated for it, I cannot presume to enquire, especially in your presence. I can only state facts. Meanwhile your uncle turned to your father, and spoke the last words he was ever to address to his eldest brother in this world. He said—

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

"I know the reason now why my father had never confided the truth to any one, his own family included. My father had evidently told the worst to her sister, under the seal of secrecy. And there the dreadful disclosure had been arrested."

Your uncle told me, the priest continued, "that before he left England he took leave of you by stealth, in a place you were staying at by the seaside. He had not the heart to quit his country and his friends forever, without kissing you for the last time. He followed you in the dark, and caught you up in his arms, and left you again before you had a chance of discovering him. The next day he departed from England. He had spent a week here with a student friend, at the time when he was a pupil at the Hotel Dieu. And to this place he returned to hide, to suffer, and to die. We shall say that he was a man crushed and broken by some great sorrow, and we respected him and his affliction. He lived alone, and only came out of doors towards evening, when he used to sit on the brow of the hill you saw, with his head on his hand, looking towards England. That place seemed a favorite with him, and he is buried close by it. He revealed the story of his past life to no living soul here but me, and to me he only spoke when his last hour was approaching. What he had suffered here during his exile no man can presume to say. I, who saw more of him than any one, never heard a word of complaint fall from his lips. He had the courage of the martyrs while he lived, and the resignation of the saints when he died. Just at the last, his mind wandered. He said he saw his little darling, waiting by the fire-side to lead him away, and he died with a smile on his face—the first I had ever seen there."

The priest ceased, and went out, together with the mournful twilight, and stood for a while on the brow of the hill where Uncle George used to sit, with his face turned towards England. How my heart ached for him, as I thought of what he must have suffered in the silence and solitude of his long exile! It was well for me that I had discovered the Family Mystery at last. I have sometimes thought, now, I have sometimes wished that the address had never been disclosed, a way which had once led from me the father Uncle George.

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