

# *The Oaken Cabinet:*

## *And What It Held*

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### Chapter I.

SOME five-and-twenty years ago, when I had just been articled to my father, an attorney of good practice in a small country town, the name of which it is of no consequence that the reader should know, he received instructions from one of his principal clients to draw out the settlements for marriage, which created no small sensation amongst those who were acquainted with the contracting parties. Colonel Thorne, the client to whom I allude, was a retired officer, who had served with distinction in the war between America and Great Britain. He was a widower, having one daughter named Laura, the reigning beauty of the county. Being the last descendant of an ancient family, and owning immense estates, it was not strange that he was a proud, reserved man. When I say proud, I do not mean the insolent *hauteur* of a *parvenue*; for the pride of Colonel Thorne was not directly perceptible. He could talk familiarly with the lowest peasant on his estate, interest himself in the well-being of the humblest servant in his employ: he could do all this, I say, without for a moment allowing them to think that they were of the same mortality as himself. His kindness was that of an angel to a mortal, of a god to its worshipper, rather than that of a man to a fellow-man. As long as his tenants were humble, voted according to his opinion, and spoke of him as a superior being, they were safe. If their rents were in arrear, we had order to allow them time, and, if required, to give them pecuniary assistance; if in distress, the colonel's hand was instantly stretched forth to aid them. But once let any one of them question his master's right to direct his vote, once let him assert that his master was no greater, as a man, than himself, and he was a marked individual; he was systematically crushed down, and the sooner he was removed from the power of the colonel, the better for him, for he showed no mercy to rebellion.

Thorne Lodge, the colonel's residence, was situated about a mile from the town, in close juxtaposition with another mansion, called Bickersteth Park, which was occupied by a gentleman named Sir Nicholas Bickersteth, an old comrade of Mr. Thorne in his soldiering days, of whom anon. The colonel's family comprised only his daughter and a protégé of his, the son of a college friend who had died in poverty, called Chester. Colonel Thorne, on the death of his companion, had adopted this person, who was intended for the church, and spent his time, while awaiting a vacancy in one of the livings in his patron's gift, in acting as a tutor to Miss Thorne. He was a pale-faced, slender young man, with a peculiarly oily face, and eyes which were constantly averted from the gaze of others.

Laura Thorne, whose story I am about to relate, was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Although it is more than forty years since I last saw her, I never hear that name uttered, or see it in print, but a vision of her, not as she was then, but as she appeared at the time I write of, appears before me. Yet it would be an impossible task for me to describe her. Taken individually, her features presented nothing extraordinary; it was only when lit up by her dark, luminous eyes, which seemed to me like the surface of a pool in the rocks, that you realized her

wonderful beauty. It was only natural that she should have many admirers, and they were countless.

The man destined to be the bridegroom in this happy marriage was Sir Nicholas Bickersteth, her father's friend, a dissolute old roué at least thrice her age, who, having indulged when a young man in all the licentious revelry of the court in the days of George IV., retired to his country-seat in disgust at the dull routine of court life under the rule of the successor of that monarch. Here he entertained a bevy of choice spirits, as reckless and dishonorable as himself, indulging in a course of living that was the scandal of the neighborhood. Many times, as I passed the park on my return home at night, I have seen the illuminated windows of the rooms where they held their orgies, and heard their boisterous shouts and laughter as they sat over the gaming-table. Sometimes they sallied out armed with their swords, and attacked passers-by, after the mode of Mohocks. To such a pitch were their atrocities carried that the villagers would go miles out of their way rather than pass the park after dark.

At length Colonel Thorne determined to visit his quondam friend, and use his influence to reclaim him. He visited the park, and had a protracted private interview with the baronet. He dined there. On the following day, Sir Nicholas dismissed his guests, and returned the visit; and two days after, was proclaimed the accepted suitor of Miss Laura Thorne.

Scandal whispered that a scene of the most violent description had taken place at the lodge; that Miss Thorne had refused to comply with her father's commands; and that her father, who was far too gentlemanly to use violence, had offered her the choice between consenting to marry her friend and retiring to the nunnery, which he declared she should enter if she persisted in her refusal. Be this as it may, the preparations for the marriage were carried out, the settlements drawn out; and, one afternoon, a few days prior to the appointed day, I left the office to submit the draft to her father for his revision of approval.

Having time to spare, I determined, instead of pursuing my course along the highway, to proceed along a sequestered path seldom frequented, but which was one of the most picturesque and delightful by-roads in the county. High trees shaded it on one side, while on the other ran a clear stream of water. It was a clear, summer's afternoon; hardly a sound disturbed the pleasant stillness, save the ripple of the water and the songs of the birds. Through the branches of the trees I caught glimpses of the yellow corn, as it waved in the cool breeze; and, far away beyond, stretched a scene, the like of which is found in no country but our own—a practical exposition of the word "peace." I loitered along the path, stopping here and there to regard the prospect before me, and, if I must confess the truth, was engaged in the composition of an ode, when my attention was disturbed by the sound of voices, in which I could distinguish that of a woman in supplication. Thinking that one of the friends of Sir Nicholas was amusing himself with one of his victims, I hurriedly entered a kind of thicket formed by the trees, and was the witness of an interview which I can hardly persuade myself was real, even now.

For, leaning against a tree, in a careless attitude, switching the leaves from off a low bough with a cane he carried, and striving to preserve an expression of unconcern on his white face, was Mr. Chester; and, at his feet, groveling in the most abject humility before him, her hair disheveled and her eyes blurred with tears, was Miss Thorne.

I drew back, thunderstruck with surprise. That the proud beauty, who seemed to regard her admirers as toys created merely to amuse her and then to be cast carelessly aside, should condescend to humble herself to a dependent on the bounty of her father, appeared to me to be inexplicable.

“Philip, O Philip!” cried Miss Thorne; “you can never have loved me, or you would not speak so cruelly to me now. Have you considered what it is that you urge me to do? Have pity on me, Philip! Think how wretched I shall be if I marry him. My Heaven, I shall go mad!”

“It is you who have not reflected,” replied her tutor, coldly; “you would not speak as you do if you had. Follow my advice, and you will be rich and happy. If I grant your request, we shall both be rendered miserable for life.”

“No! no!” the poor girl said, her voice broken with sobs. “Rich I may be, but not happy. Rather a thousand times poverty with—with you, than the greatest wealth with him. O, my love! I have sacrificed almost all for you; I am ready to sacrifice all, to endure all with you. Do not leave me, Philip! Only grant me what I ask, and I am ready to suffer anything without complaint. Save me from that, if you love me as you say you do.”

“You say you love me, Laura?” said Chester, unmoved.

“I do love you, and you know it!” cried Laura, vehemently.

“And yet,” sneered the chaplain, “you wish to doom me with yourself to poverty and misery. What an unselfish love it is—how pure and disinterested! Bah! I make no loud-sounding professions; but yet I love you sufficiently well to endeavor to save you from a life compared to which, that you reject is a paradise. What do you know of poverty? You have never experienced the sickening, heart-wearing struggle for bread—the protracted agony, the hopeless drudgery of the poor, crushed down and trampled on by any fool or brute who has money.”

“Better that fate than the other.”

“No, I say,” said Chester, savagely; “it is not better. I counsel you for your good against my inclinations, and yet I am accused of selfishness because my advice is not palatable to you; because I look at things in a practical light, you call me interested.”

“No, no; forgive me. I did not say that you had other motives than a desire for my happiness in your conduct; but, O! your wishes are so hard to obey. Save me, Philip!”

“I have given you my decision,” said Chester, impatiently; “let us have no more of this. If you really love me, marry Sir Nicholas, and be happy!”

He turned, as he spoke, and walked quickly away. She stood looking after his retreating form, until it was lost to sight, and then ensued a gust of fierce passion, strangely at variance with her former humility. Her eyes blazed with scorn, and her breath came in quick, convulsive gasps.

Taking a small gold chain and ivory miniature from her breast, she snapped the chain, and trampled the portrait under foot, and I think that, had she been able to kill him at that moment, she would have done so. Again her temper changed; her eyes became hazy with tears, and bursting into a fit of sobbing, she took up the miniature, and kissing it, reproached herself in piteous tones for being angry with her “dear Philip” in a manner that made my heart ache. Yet an hour later, when I saw her at the Lodge, she was as calm as though all emotion was strange to her, she pointed out some omissions in the draft, far more calmly than I explained them; but it was the calm of despair, and terrified me more than the most violent passion would have done. I cannot describe this woman as she was; my description is naturally imperfect. I can only show you the outward appearances; the suffering she must have endured while apparently so calm, it is out of my power to paint. But, enigmatical as her conduct appeared to me, I felt, even then, little as I knew respecting her, that she was a woman to be feared.

The appointed day arrived, and the marriage took place. Of all the fair bridesmaids she seemed the most joyous, as she was the most beautiful. There was not a trace on her countenance of the agony that rent her heart—her smile was the happiest, her words the lightest. She delivered her responses in a clear, hard voice, and, while Mr. Chester, who officiated, was nervous and embarrassed, she was as collected as the least interested spectator—she never once hesitated during the whole service. The baronet spoke his part of the ceremony in a loud, defiant style, and leered frightfully on the conclusion of the rite. The equanimity of Colonel Thorne was perfect. He evidently regarded the union as an evil contract, laying on the wedded pair some restraints, and productive of some advantages, but calling for no particular exhilaration of feeling on his part. Had he been cognizant of the state of his daughter’s feelings, I question whether he would have understood it, far less paid any attention to it.

Nothing worthy of record occurred until the departure of the happy pair for their wedding tour to the lakes of Cumberland. Then, as Colonel Thorne embraced his daughter when bidding her farewell, she whispered some sentences in his ear. What the words were, I cannot say; but their effect was startling. At the first words, the color forsook her father’s face, leaving it ashy white, and he fixed his eyes on hers incredulously. She met his gaze firmly, and before he had moved from the spot, where he seemed transfixed with surprise, they were gone. He never smiled again.

A week afterwards, almost before the rejoicings on the occasion had subsided, Colonel Thorne was discovered lying dead in his private laboratory at the Lodge. A post-mortem examination of the body elicited the facts that having, during his favorite chemical investigations, engaged himself with some experiments with poisons, he had met with his death through inhaling the fumes arising from his crucible, having, accidentally, of course, omitted to take the precaution of properly securing his glass mask. An inquest was held, a verdict in accordance with the evidence returned, and the married pair summoned to his funeral.

Whether or not Sir Nicholas suspected the existence of some understanding between the chaplain and his wife is uncertain. Most probably he did, for immediately after his return, he seized the recent death of her father as a pretext for immuring his wife in the strictest privacy at the Park, and here he resumed, though with a little more moderation, it is true, his former dissipated courses.

When the act was accomplished which separated him from the woman who, with all her faults, had at least loved him truly and devotedly, I think that Mr. Chester repented of the brutally selfish part he had acted in assisting to force the unhappy creature to a fate to which death would have been preferable. Not even then had he the moral courage to endeavor to strengthen her to pursue the path pointed out by duty; but endeavored, by all means in his power, to procure an interview with her. This, however, she steadfastly refused to grant, though what it must have cost her to do so, Heaven only knows. There is no pleading, however eloquent, so difficult to resist as that seconded by our own hearts, and this unfortunate girl must have endured torture like that of Tantalus at this time.

Tied by indissoluble bonds to a heartless brute, who had not one feeling or sympathy in unison with her, a daily witness of his excesses, and hourly enduring his unmanly tyranny, without one friend or word of kindness to encourage and assist her, and burying in her heart with indomitable pride the secret which embittered her life, she endured all the pangs of hell.

I do not attempt to palliate her conduct in marrying Sir Nicholas under the circumstances I have stated, nor to excite sympathy on her behalf, by describing, or rather endeavoring to describe, the misery she endured. She had sinned, and she was doomed to expiate that sin; she deserves no sentimental pity, and her fate told plainly, may, perhaps, serve as a beacon to warn others off the rocks where she was lost. Suffering is the invariable companion of sin.

## Chapter II.

SOME months elapsed, and the incumbency of the parish church having fallen vacant, Sir Nicholas, who held the living in his gift, presented it to Mr. Chester. His reasons for this act I am unable to explain; most probably he had suspicions which he wished to verify, or he may have intended to torture his wife by the constant presence of the man she loved, and by openly watching her actions in this position. If this was his intention, he evinced considerable ingenuity in his method of carrying it into execution. He invited Mr. Chester to visit the Park, amongst other company, and Lady Bickersteth was, of course, thrown into almost daily intercourse with him, forced to smile and welcome him, with the consciousness that her husband's Argus eyes were regarding her every action, every expression of her countenance and tremor of her voice. This was a trial for which she was least prepared, and one doubly hard to endure; but she had determined to do her duty, and never flinched from the pain. The curate's efforts to procure a *tete-a-tete* with her were fruitless, for she never left the boundaries of the Park, except on Sunday, when she attended the church with Sir Nicholas.

So far from discouraging Mr. Chester, the difficulties he met with seemed to give him a further impetus, and taking advantage of the absence of Sir Nicholas, who was invited to a dinner party, he one evening wrote to her, demanding an interview, and threatening that, in event of her refusal, he would forward to the baronet the letters she had written to him prior to her marriage. This threat to any woman of her rank, even at the present day, would be terrible; but then, how much more so? A divorced woman then was to all intent dead to society. No matter how high her station, no matter what extenuating circumstances attended the case, the divorcée was forgotten, disowned by her own relatives.

But the thought of a divorce, even if it entered Lady Bickersteth's mind, was instantly dismissed. The terms of her marriage settlement were such that, while as the widow of Sir Nicholas she inherited her father's property, and claimed a heavy jointure from the estates of her husband, in the event of a separation a small annuity was all she was entitled to. The year that had passed since the death of Colonel Thorne had effected an immense alteration in her views. The girl who knelt at Chester's feet, and was ready to endure poverty to preserve her self-respect, was a very different being to the desperate woman I am describing.

She returned an answer to the effect that she would comply with his request, and, there being service in the church where Mr. Chester officiated, she determined to attend it. Leaving the Park by a private entrance, and taking an unfrequented path to the church, she reached it unobserved. The service was nearly over when she entered, and the rector, perceiving the dark figure in the Bickersteth pew, hurried over his sermon, and dismissed the congregation. He despatched the clerk, who waited to close the church, upon an errand which he knew would occupy some time, and, with a hasty gesture to Lady Bickersteth, entered the vestry to disrobe. In a few moments she followed him, and sank into a chair breathless.

"Well," said Chester, turning to her, "you have come at last."

"I have had great difficulty in evading observation," she said, submissively; "and I can stay only a very short time."

"And during that time," said Chester, locking the door, and placing the key in his pocket, "let me hope you will act sensibly. I have a proposition to make."

He seemed to have some difficulty in beginning what he had to say, and paced the floor, moodily. At length he stopped opposite her chair.

"I have been considering our position, Laura," said he, speaking slowly; "it is a painful—a very painful one. We are both miserable, and there is only one remedy. I was a fool to advise you as I did; but the past cannot be recalled. It is impossible for me to stay here, subject to the insulting patronage of every idiot who has money, and to the tyranny of your husband; and yet the income of the living is the only barrier between me and starvation. What am I to do?"

Lady Bickersteth did not reply.

"Cannot you speak?" demanded the curate, furiously; "or do you join with them to harass and oppress me? Probably you think that I should be contented to waste the best years of my life here amongst a parcel of senseless brutes, who have not even spirit enough to be wicked. Answer me!"

"Do you think," said my lady, springing from her seat, her eyes flashing with a fire that cowed the heartless egotist before her; "do you think that I am happy? You are a man, and at least possess liberty of action. What if you had to suffer all that I endure? What if every word you spoke, every action you did, were watched by a revengeful, hated task-master? My heaven! when I hear you rebel against the fate you have brought upon yourself, when I listen to your selfish

complaining, I ask myself what it is that hinders me from ridding myself of an existence compared to which hell itself would be a relief? I never murmur, yet it is through following your advice that I am wretched. It was you that urged upon me this marriage—you who aided my father to force me to it. How many times in these weary, weary days, every minute of which seems an age, do I wish that I had died when a child!”

She sank back into her chair as she spoke the last words, and Mr. Chester resumed his moody walk.

“Will you listen to me, Laura?” he said, at last. “You say that you are miserable. There is a method by which, if you have courage enough, you may be free.”

Lady Bickersteth looked dreamily at him, evidently not comprehending his words.

“Suppose,” whispered Chester, taking her hand; “suppose Sir Nicholas were to die?”

My lady started violently.

“Do you know what would be the consequence? You would be free! Free to cast the miserable past aside, and live only for a happy future—free to live and love!”

“There is no ho—fear of death for many years,” said my lady.

“Not in the course of nature,” said the curate. “He is sixty, I suppose—not a very advanced age—and, possessing a physique which has withstood a life like his, he may reasonably expect to live for twenty—nay five-and-twenty—years to come.”

His listener shuddered.

“Five-and-twenty years of misery for you—five-and-twenty years to be dependent on his caprices, to see your beauty fade and vanish, to degenerate into the faithful nurse of your loving husband, to administer his medicines, and watch his rest, and to be released when hope and youth have vanished—finally, to welcome death as freedom. What a destiny for beautiful Laura Thorne!”

“Let the future bring its own evil,” said my lady.

“I anticipate it merely to point out the way of escape,” said Chester.

“There is no escape,” Lady Bickersteth said.

“There is a way to escape!” hissed Chester. “Where are your father’s chemicals?”

“They were destroyed by Sir Nicholas’s order,” was the reply.

“Not all,” said the curate; “look!”

He held to the light, as he spoke, a small glass *flacon*, containing a few drops of pale yellow liquid, apparently of an oily nature.

“It would be death to the strongest man that ever breathed to taste one drop of this,” said the curate; “one drop in a glass of wine would, without disturbing its clearness, or impregnating it with any odor or flavor, kill a man without leaving any trace of its presence. One drop in the wine your husband drinks, and in an hour you are free.”

“It is *murder!*” said my lady, shrinking back.

“What, to free yourself? Bah! Laura, I gave you credit for more courage. I offer you freedom, and you turn away. Very good! I will leave the *flacon* on the table for two minutes, and, if at the expiration of that time I find it there, I will use it on myself.”

He turned from her, and taking up his watch stood regarding the hand as it traversed the allotted space. There was no sound, save the measure [of] ticking, and the rush of the wind amongst the leaves of the churchyard trees; but when he turned to her once more, the *flacon* was gone.

“My brave Laura!” said Chester, who, I need hardly say, had used the threat of self-destruction merely to terrify her; “it is but a moment’s courage, and you are free! Only his life!”

“Hush!” said my lady, in an awful voice. “do not repeat your vain sophistry to me; it is my heart that consents, not my reason. Heaven forgive me; it knows how I have suffered.”

A moment after she was gone, and Chester left the church with a triumphant heart.

My lady had hardly reached the Park, and changed her dress, when Sir Nicholas, who had returned earlier than usual, sent a message to her to the effect that, by her leave, he would pass the evening with her. She replied that his company would afford her much pleasure, and the baronet, who had just drunk enough to make him savagely good-humored, repaired thither at once. The suite occupied by my lady was situated in the north wing of the building, which was erected in the time of Elizabeth. The walls were hung with Gobelin tapestry, quaintly embroidered, and one side of her boudoir was filled by an immense cabinet of dark oak, with an intricate Italian lock, the key of which my lady kept. The furniture was in accordance with the hangings, and the fire, instead of being in a grate, was held on bronze dogs.

My lady, when her husband entered, was seated near the fire, gazing into its blazing depths, and her heart every minute closing against the counsels of her better nature. Her life had been cold and cheerless. She had never possessed one true friend. If she had, this story would hardly have been written; for proud and high-spirited as she was, there as an undercurrent of fierce, passionate love in her nature, which, properly directed, might have saved her. As it was, however, it only hurried her the faster to perdition. She had persuaded herself that a superior power directed all her actions—that she was merely an agent in the hands of destiny; and she clung to this belief as a shipwrecked mariner clings to a plank. Once having given herself up to



this, she was lost. It is the last refuge of a despairing soul—the last resting-place on the broad road.

“Ha!” said Sir Nicholas, drawing a chair to the fire; “you are sad, my lady?”

His wife murmured a denial.

“You are gloomy,” continued the baronet. “You should mix with company; solitude is unfitted for you; or, perhaps, you are in spiritual difficulties? I will speak with our worthy vicar in the morning.”

“I am not in spiritual difficulties,” replied my lady.

“You are too unselfish to complain,” said the little demon, grinning; “but your health of body and soul must be cared for. Mr. Chester shall reason with you in the morning. What is your opinion of his abilities, my wife?”

“I have given no thought to the subject, Sir Nicholas,” was the reply.

“You should hear him then. His eloquence on the subject of a wife’s duty to her husband is astonishing. You shall explain your doubts and fears to him. The most pure must have something to confess, and innocent and pure as you are, the offices of such a model confessor must at all times be grateful.”

“No, no!” said the lady, hastily.

“Yes, I say,” repeated her husband, with another grin; “you *shall* see him, and as the occasion will be improving, I will be present!”

Lady Bickersteth recoiled at these mocking words, which were uttered in the presence of a servant.

“Fetch me a pack of cards, and set wine on the table,” said the baronet, addressing the man.

The servant retired, and presently returned with the required articles.

“Go,” said his master; “the servants may retire. There will be no further need of their attendance. Now, my lady, you will condescend to take a hand with me. We will play for love; the mention of money between wedded lovers like us would be a mockery. I cut. The deal to me.”

Lady Bickersteth followed her hand; the baronet revoked.

“Play,” said my lady, laying down the ace of spades.

Hours passed, and still the pair sat at the table, Sir Nicholas laughing and uttering brutal jests; my lady silent and grim as death. At length, with a curse on his ill-luck, the baronet flung down the cards, and leant back in his chair, fixing his eyes on those of his wife.

“Come here, you witch,” he said, after a pause.

She rose from her seat and went to his side. Only his life!

“What are you thinking about, you she-devil?” he said, savagely seizing her wrist with a grip like that of a vice. “What is it that makes your black eyes blaze? Are you thinking of your cicisbeo, the Reverend Chester? Are you wishing that your husband was safe in the family vault, leaving his handsome wife to her own devices, to marry your love?”

“I am ill, Sir Nicholas,” said his wife, sorrowfully.

“Ah, you are ill! You wish to hide your thoughts from me; you wish to deceive me, you siren; but I read your thoughts in those flashing eyes of yours. O, how I will torture you! Have you promised to marry him? Are you longing for my death? Wait until then before you promise, you jade! Curse you! Go!”

The cowardly brute struck her as he spoke, and pushed her rudely from him. She drew her breath convulsively, and clasped her hands upon her breast. The *flacon* was there—she felt it.

Only his life.

“The bottle’s out!” shouted the baronet. “I—I—steady. Fill the glass, my lady; fill the glass, I say.”

My lady uncorked a fresh bottle, and poured out the wine. Turning for a moment to ascertain whether he was regarding her, and finding that his attention was fixed on the fire, my lady took the *flacon* from her breast, and removed the stopper.

“Fill me a glass, I say!” cried her husband. “Fill the glass! Give it to me! A—h!”

ONLY HIS LIFE!

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At an early hour on the following morning, my father received a message from Lady Bickersteth, requesting his immediate presence at Bickersteth Park. The demand was, of course, instantly complied with, and upon his arrival he found that the baronet had disappeared, and was nowhere discoverable. My lady appeared to be in a state of great anxiety respecting him, and urged my father to cause a search to be made. In answer to his inquiries, she informed him that her husband had left her apartments at midnight, on the previous evening, with the intention of retiring to rest as usual, and that nothing had been subsequently heard of him. Sir Nicholas, she stated, was partially intoxicated, but not helplessly so; he could walk steadily. After he had left her, she

immediately retired to rest. She did not know whether he had left the house; he might have done, but she thought not.

The servants were examined, but to no avail. The baronet's valet stated that, on knocking at his master's door, as usual, in the morning, he had received no answer, and having, after repeated summonses, opened it, he discovered that his master was not in his room. The bed had not been disturbed, and he believed that his master had not entered the room since he had dressed for dinner the night before. Could he swear that his master had not been there? No, he wouldn't like to swear; but he believed not. Sir Nicholas might have left the house either by the hall-door, or by the window of his room, which opened on the terrace beneath. He did not know whether the window was fastened inside when he went in to call his master. He wouldn't like to swear either way. He had no idea where his master was. He could give us no further information.

An inquiry, conducted by the magistracy of the county, was immediately set on foot. Messengers were despatched in all directions; the aid of a couple of Bow-street runners was invoked, and large rewards offered. The neighboring rivers and ponds were dragged, and several doubtful characters were arrested on suspicion. Foremost in the search was Mr. Chester, who, with tears in his eyes, incited us to search after his "beloved patron." No trouble seemed too great for him to request us to undertake. He himself preferred taking the part of a director of the searches to becoming a participator in their toils. He was the first to suggest difficult enterprises, which nothing but a belief that his humble services were of more value at home could deter him from aiding us to put into execution. He was truly a devoted man.

All our endeavors, however, were vain, and at length it was universally believed that Sir Nicholas, having left the house by night, had either fallen, or been thrown, into a deep pool near the private entrance to the grounds, which was impossible to drag.

My lady assumed her weeds, a distant relative of the baronet succeeded to the title and estates; which latter were encumbered by the heavy jointure of my lady. This she offered to forego upon the condition that the new tenant would allow her to occupy the Park during her life. The proposal was agreed to, and a deed to that effect drawn out and signed by both parties.

Some time after the disappearance of the baronet, Mr. Chester presented himself at the Park, and desired an audience with my lady. Her maid, who conveyed his message to her, brought him a note in Lady Bickersteth's handwriting, containing these words:

"Henceforth we must never meet. The past cannot be recalled. If you require money, draw upon my father's bankers. Do not attempt to see me; it will be useless. Think of me as dead. Dead to the world and hope—dead to all except remorse, which never dies. Repent! May Heaven forgive us!  
L.T."

He did not repeat the visit. Giving up his living, he retired to London, where he died some time afterwards in great misery.

My lady, after this, never left her rooms. Those of her friends who were sufficiently intimate with her to endeavor to draw her into society, found their efforts unavailing.

She saw no visitors, and allowed no one save her maid, and, at rare intervals, my father or myself, to see her. She was known only by her charity, and this—the only pursuit in which she took any interest—she carried to excess, giving away more than half her income. And the world, knowing what her husband had been, and how little she had lost by his death, regarded her as a model wife. All who knew her attributed her retirement from the world to grief for her husband. Ah me! what wise judgments we pass on each other!

Here, in her rooms, she remained, pursuing a life of asceticism—repentant, without hope of pardon; fulfilling the outward observances of religion without a particle of religious spirit, save an agonized penitence; guarding her dreadful secret with never-slumbering vigilance.

I have often thought how horrible this life must have been. To be weighed down by the knowledge of her crime—to look forward constantly to the punishment of it—to watch every word she uttered, lest she should betray herself—to sleep and dream of detection—to wake and fear it—to pray, with the consciousness that Heaven was deaf to her cries—and to cling to this miserable life as delaying retribution!

She lived for ten years after the disappearance of her husband; ten years of agony more poignant than man could ever inflict. When I saw her for the last time, she lay on her deathbed, an aged woman in appearance. The passionate fire of her youth had been superseded by an indescribably gloomy and constrained expression. Never before had I seen such a sight, and I pray Heaven I may never see such another. Her countenance was that of a criminal awaiting doom.

After her death, the successor of Sir Nicholas ordered that the suite occupied by her during her life should be refitted for the use of his wife. By his direction, the hangings were to be removed, and the rooms paneled with oak. To do this, it was necessary that the cabinet I have mentioned should be removed, and, the key being nowhere to be found, it was broken open. It contained a ghostly skeleton, robed in the dress worn by Sir Nicholas on the night of his disappearance, and an empty glass *flacon* with a silver top.

\* \* \* \* \*

The discovery was hushed up, the skeleton removed, and buried in secrecy. None of the few who were present knew whose skeleton it was, nor how it came there, save myself. Knowing all that I did respecting my lady, it needed but little consideration upon the matter to solve the enigma. Most probably my lady, haunted by the fear of discovery, which invariably follows crime, had, upon her husband's death, by an exertion of strength with which only extreme terror could have endowed her, placed the body in the cabinet, to avoid the risk of a medical examination, and afterwards was never able to leave it, lest it should be discovered.

Be this as it may, the evidence of the murder was sufficiently clear.

That my lady, tempted beyond her strength, had released herself from the bonds which held her in the manner I have described, does not admit of a doubt.

The chambers were disused, and the door leading to them blocked up. No one has entered them since the day when the skeleton was carried out; no one, in all human probability, will ever enter them again. It is a sad story this—all the more sad because it is true; but there is an old proverb that truth is stranger than fiction.

*The Flag of Our Union*, November 10, 1866