

In Moated Grange.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART I.

CHAPTER I.

MURDER!

The Moated Grange was a curious place. In one sense it was not moated, for it stood upon an island. It was a river, rather than a moat, which surrounded it. But there was a tradition that there had really been a moat in bygone days. At any rate, someone had given the place that name, and it was never called by any other.

It was in Lincolnshire, right in the heart of the ten country. The river which, in a sudden capricious curve, flowed round it, was both wide and deep. The house itself was a big, rambling old place, with many gables and irregular stacks of chimneys. It was built of red brick, and part of it was falling to decay. Only three or four rooms were now habitable, and even these were dreary and dilapidated. Nevertheless, the tenant of the Moated Grange was wealthy. His name was Richard Whittaker. He was seventy years of age, a gentleman by birth and education, and had never married. People called him a miser. He knew they so called him, and smiled in scorn. They called him a misanthropist also, and here, perhaps, they were right. He did not love money, but he hated mankind. And it was because of this hatred that he chose to shut himself up in a lonely, tumble-down old house, with a wide, deep river to flow between him and his fellow men. His misanthropy had begun forty years before, when the woman he loved jilted him; but it had not quite shut up his heart from tenderness. He had bestowed a parent's care on two nephews, who were cousins not brothers and it was not until he was bitterly disappointed in both of these young men, that he shut himself off in the Moated Grange, breathing curses on the whole human race. The elder of his nephews had had a furious quarrel with him, and had then gone to Australia. The other had given himself up to a life of dissipation, and was as much dead to the stern old man as was his cousin. Stern old man though he was, he could not live quite alone. He had a single servant, by name Robert Fergusson, a tall, raw boned Scotchman, who had lived with the old man for nearly thirty years, and might be said to understand him in any human being did. One cold, raw evening, four days before Christmas, Fergusson, having finished off his weekly cleaning of the plate in the big, old-fashioned kitchen, washed and dressed himself; then tapped at the door of the parlor in which his master sat. "Come in!" called a sharp, irritable voice. Old Richard Whittaker was sitting in a big easy chair before a miserable little fire. A single candle burned on the table near him, and by its light he was poring over a letter he held in his hand. Fergusson knew well enough who the letter was from. It had been left by the postman a few minutes ago in the iron pillar-box on the inner side of the river—which the old man had erected there, rather than suffer any communion between himself and the outer world. Fergusson had gone across in the boat to fetch the letter, on hearing the postman's whistle. He had recognised the writing of the address. It was that of Reginald Whittaker, the nephew who lived in London, and who was supposed to have wasted his substance in riotous living. Richard Whittaker looked up with a snarl as his servant stood before him. "What do you want?" he demanded. "You're always bothering. What do you want now?" "It's Friday evening, Mr. Whittaker." "Why shouldn't it be Friday evening?" The man knew his master, and was used to bearing with his temper, and humoring his whims. "Am I to go into the town as usual?" he asked quietly. "Of course you're to go. What makes you ask such a fool's question?" "And am I to bring the usual things?" "Of course you are." "Nothing more?" "What is the fool driving at?" "And the old man stamped his foot as if he raged. 'It's Christmas day on Tuesday, that's my I asked you.' 'What's Christmas Day to do with me? What have I to do with Christmas Day?' He spoke with intense bitterness, and resumed the reading of his letter. Fergusson, however, was not to be disconcerted. "Hain't I better bring you a bottle of wine, or something of that sort?" he suggested. "Something a little extra. I'm sure you need it," repeated the man

firmly. "You live on gruel, and such like stuff, till you're as thin as a herring, and have no more strength than a kitten. Let me order you a goose or a turkey, and a bottle or two of wine." Old Whittaker gave a sardonic smile. "It's easy to see why you're so considerate. If I'd done like other fools, and put you down for something in my will, you'd have been ready to give me poison instead of turkeys and port wine. But I'm worth more to you alive than dead—aren't I, Fergusson? You'd be sorry to lose your poor old master. I verily believe—because if you lost him you'd lose what he gives you every year." "I know you're very good to me, Mr. Whittaker," said Fergusson quietly. He did not seem vexed at the taunt and perhaps the old man had not wished to vex him. He suspected all men; but in his heart he liked and trusted Fergusson to a degree which would have surprised the man if he had known it. "Well, sir, am I to bring anything for Christmas?" he asked again. "No; you are not!" cried old Whittaker in a fury. "What do I care for Christmas. Look at this letter!" And he dashed it on the table. "It's that scoundrel, Reginald asking me for money! How dare he? Hasn't he robbed me enough as it is. He says he's coming down here. But I won't see him—mind you—I won't see him. Look up the boat—don't let him get across." The boat is always kept locked up Mr. Whittaker. You know that." "I know nothing of the sort. I know you are quite capable of siding with him against me. You would let him in if you dared; and you would like him to wheedle money out of me, as he has wheedled and cheated me out of it before." Fergusson listened with an unmoved countenance, then said, very quietly, as if he had not heard a word. "Do you want anything before I go? I shall be away more than an hour." "Not I—get along with you." The man withdrew, went into the kitchen for a big market basket, then left the house and made his way to where the boat lay, and jumping into it, was speedily on the other side of the river. There he fastened the boat to a post. The nearest church clock struck six as he finished doing so. The church was half a mile off, but the strokes could be distinctly heard. Fergusson counted them as he strode away. Old Whittaker, left alone in the Moated Grange, cowered still more closely over the fire, and taking up the letter he had flung on to the table, again read it slowly through. "All self—self—self!" he muttered bitterly. "He was always so. Ah! how different from the other—how different from John!" He rose slowly, and opening his desk, took from it a couple of miniatures. One represented a boy of ten, fair haired blue eyed, the mouth almost feminine in its gentleness, the features soft and delicate. The other was of a boy of a widely different type. A gypsy like face, with dark, widely opened eyes, a broad forehead, and a mouth which spoke of both passion and pride. The old man glanced from face to face, seeming to be comparing them in his mind. But it was the dark eyed lad on which his glance rested oftenest. Nay, he kept that portrait in his hand after he had replaced the other in his desk. His mind had wandered far back into the past. He was thinking of how affection, torn and bleeding from a woman's faithlessness had twined themselves round that dark eyed lad. There had been a time when they were all the world to each other—the stern old uncle and the passionate, self-willed nephew. But at last a quarrel had arisen—a fatal quarrel. The sternness and the self will had come into conflict, and the result was that the lad had betaken himself to a far off land, and the uncle was left to a lonely and comfortless old age. "I shall not be here long," he mused; "Fergusson is right enough in that. I grow weaker every day. Is the lad alive or dead I wonder? He was very bitter with his old uncle; but perhaps I was hard on him—perhaps I was. If I could have seen him once again!" He held up the miniature to the light, and looked at it long and earnestly. A quarter of an hour had passed. The old man's head had sunk forward. His eyes were closed; his features wore a softened and peaceful look. He still held the miniature in his hand, his senses were sunk in a dreamy retrospect but he was not asleep. Silence hung over the Moated Grange. The night was calm; scarce a leaf stirred, and the sluggish river made no sound as it flowed on between the willow trees and osiers which fringed its banks. The ticking of the clock alone broke the stillness inside the room. But presently there came a movement,

though not a sound. The baize covered door opened softly, slowly, stealthily, inch by inch. It was not the wind that opened it. A human form glided through the aperture. A man, with a black mask covering his features stole into the room. The old man, with his eyes closed and his head dropping forward, saw nothing. Slowly, stealthily, noiselessly, the man in the mask advanced across the carpet. He stood behind the old man's chair, and raised his arm. There was a glitter of steel flashing through the air; then Richard Whittaker uttered a groan, and fell heavily forward with his face upon the floor. The murderer stood quite still. He believed he had despatched his victim; but the body stirred; the grey head moved feebly—nay, even raised itself. Then the murderer stooped over him, to despatch him with a second blow. Ere that blow could be delivered, however, the old man, with a surprising burst of strength and energy, rose to his knees, and tore the mask from his assailant's face. The moment he saw that face he shrank back in overwhelming horror. "You!" he gasped. "Oh, my God! is it you?" Again the weapon descended. The old, grey-headed man lay motionless this time. His murderer knelt beside him. All was silence in the Moated Grange.

CHAPTER II.

RUBY MORELAND'S ADVENTURE.

On the same night which saw that awful crime committed, Miss Ruby Moreland a young lady who was one of the principal land-owners in the neighbourhood of the Moated Grange, was riding homewards on her bicycle. The road was a lonely one, and she most certainly would not have been permitted to traverse it in the darkness, and alone, if her aunt, who lived with her, and who was her only living relative had possessed that authority which elderly female relatives are supposed to have over young ladies of barely twenty-one. But Ruby was self-willed, and high-spirited, and courageous, and her aunt's warnings too often fell on unheeding ears. This afternoon she had been visiting a girl friend, and had sat chatting over the tea-cups longer than she had intended, with the result that it was past five o'clock before she set out on her homeward journey. She had seven miles to go, and for the first three she went like the wind. Then suddenly an ominous sound warned her that there was something wrong with the machine. She jumped off, only just in time to save herself a nasty fall. The bicycle fell into the roadway. She bent over it, saw what had happened, and gave a little ejaculation of dismay. The injury was one she could not repair. She stood considering what was best to be done. Templedene was fully four miles away. She could walk that distance well enough but the lateness of her return would alarm Aunt Henrietta dreadfully; and, beside there was the machine to be thought of. What was to be done with it? There was no house near at which to leave it. Even as this thought passed through her mind, she saw a light shining among the willow trees scarce half a mile away. But she knew it would be useless to seek for help there. The light shone from the windows of the Moated Grange. "Whatever am I to do?" she murmured. The next morning she gave a little start; for a man stood beside her—a man who must have been sitting or standing in the shadow of a high hedge on her right. "I am afraid you are in a difficulty," said this new comer. "Can I be of any assistance?" The voice was decidedly a pleasant one—frank and refined. Ruby looked up, expecting to see a gentleman, and experienced a very distinct shock of surprise on discovering that the person who had come thus unexpectedly to her aid bore in his attire all the marks of the genus tramp. But she saw that he had the look of a gentleman. As to his face, Ruby decided it was distinctly handsome. A dark, gypsy face, with bright, widely-opened eyes, a broad forehead, a sun-burned complexion, and lips which, though very pleasant when he smiled, had a touch of pride. "I hope I didn't startle you," he said, as he bent over the machine. "I think I can put this to rights for you if you'll let me." "Oh, thank you! I shall be ever so much obliged." Any other girl might have felt frightened at the appearance of such a man on a lonely road; but Ruby had singular courage. Besides, she had faith in the stranger. "I'll have the thing right in a trivet," he said, "you see it I don't." He certainly had it right in a very short time, and, having finished his task, he held the machine for Ruby to mount. But she hesitated. "Wait a moment," she said, a little confusedly. "I—I'm sure I don't know how to thank you." "I've done nothing for you to thank me for." "Oh, yes—yes, indeed, you have! And I should like to give you something if I may—if it wouldn't be offended." "Certainly shouldn't be offended. Do I look as if I'm likely to be?" said the tramp, with a grim smile. "I can tell you have seen better days. I believe you were born a gentleman," said Ruby, in her impulsive fashion, speaking very hurriedly. "And I am so much obliged to you. Please take this half-sovereign, and my best thanks with it."

"It is I who owe all the thanks," said the man in a low voice, turning aside his face a little as he held out his hand for the coin. Her own hand was unglued. As it touched his she felt that it was hard with toil. At any rate, that proves he is not a mere lazy loafer," she said to herself; but in her heart of hearts she felt a little disappointed because this fact militated against a romantic theory she was cherishing that he might be a disguised gentleman. The next moment she had mounted her machine and ridden off. When she reached Templedene, her aunt was in a flutter of nervous excitement. Ruby deemed it wise not to mention the broken bicycle and the assistance she had received from the tramp. She simply said she had stayed later than she had intended at the house of her friend. When she went upstairs to dress for dinner, she made a discovery which annoyed her greatly. She found she had given the tramp a gilded sixpence instead of half a sovereign. The gilded sixpence had come into her possession a few days before. She had laid it aside in a certain purse, intending to show it to a friend and neighbor, who was a justice of the peace. This purse she had slipped into her pocket by mistake when she went out that afternoon, and thus the sixpence had been bestowed upon the tramp. "Whatever will he think of me?" thought Ruby. And her cheeks glowed with vexation. The tramp, when Ruby left him, stood for a moment or two looking after her; then he pulled his hat very low over his brows, and struck across the fields in the direction of the Moated Grange. Arrived at the river, he found the boat fastened, as Fergusson had left it. Casting it loose, he stepped into it, and pulled across to the island. A quarter of an hour passed; then the tramp came hurrying from the Moated Grange. He stepped into the boat, pulled across with rapid strokes, jumped out, re-fastened the boat, and ran across the fields, avoiding the high road.

CHAPTER III.

THE DISCOVERY.

It was a quarter past seven when Fergusson came trudging back across the fields with his market basket, full of purchases, upon his arm. At the stile which led to the field nearest The Grange, he overtook a laborer who lived at a cottage a mile or so away, and whose work took him across the fields by the river regularly at that hour. "Hallo, Snait!" "Hallo, Fergusson!" was the greeting between the two men, and they tramped on together. "We shall soon have Christmas here now," said Snait. "We shall," returned Fergusson laconically. After this, nothing was said till they reached the riverside. "How's the old man?" asked Snait, as Fergusson was unlatching the boat. "Middin'! very middin'!" shut up there in your damp old house. I wouldn't stop in it for a pension. I wonder how you stand it?" "I'm used to it. That makes a lot of difference. Good night, Snait!" The countryman plodded on. His way led him straight by the bank of the river. It curved considerably, and he had not got out of sight of the Grange, when he heard a voice, raised very loud and trembling with excitement, bidding him stop. The voice was Fergusson's. "For God's sake, come here Snait!" it said. "There is something the matter with the master." Bring the boat across, then? Fergusson obeyed, and Snait got into the boat. The two men looked at each other with frightened eyes. "What is the matter?" whispered Snait. "He is lying on the rug, there is blood on him. I believe he is dead." "A fit, perhaps," suggested Snait. "But even as he made the suggestion, it was easy to see his mind was travelling to darker things. 'I do not know. I never touched him. He is lying there, and I believe he is dead.' They reached the island and walked towards the house. The door stood wide open. "Which room?" whispered Snait. Fergusson, without speaking, pointed to the first door on the left hand. Horror weighed down the senses of both men. Fergusson's ruddy face was white as a sweet and Snait trembled. They entered the room. Both cast their eyes towards the fire place, and both shuddered at the sight that met their gaze. Stretched at full length upon the rug, lay old Richard Whittaker. His grey head rested on a corner of a fender, his face was turned, his eyes were wide open, his hand dropped, and his lips were ashen. No need to ask if he were dead. Snait crept up to the body and examined it with frightened eyes. "Why, he has been murdered!" he said in an awe struck whisper. It is no fit. Look here! And he pointed to a great cut in the old man's waistcoat, through which the blood was oozing still. In less than an hour the police were on the scene. The Moated Grange, in which no stranger foot had trod for years, was now full of

people, who, on one pretext or another, contrived to get admission to the scene of crime. The boat was constantly coming and going across the river. The bank on the further side was lined with country people, who, after the manner of their class, hazarded the wildest guesses and found intense enjoyment even in the midst of awe and horror. Snait and Fergusson had hastened to the nearest police-station to report the crime. It was only a country station, but it so chanced that they found there a clever intelligent officer, who had just driven over from the neighbouring town. He was a detective; his name, Ferret. Taking two constables with him, he accompanied Snait and Fergusson to the Grange. His experienced eye at once saw that a murder had been committed. The theory of suicide, even if it had been otherwise tenable, was negated by the absence of the weapon with which the deed had been done. As soon as a medical man had arrived, and formally pronounced life to be extinct, the body was removed to an upper chamber. This done, Detective Ferret commenced his investigations in earnest. Having questioned Fergusson as to the state of the house when he left it, he carefully examined the premises, and came to the conclusion that an entrance had been effected through a scullery window, which had been left insecurely fastened. Fergusson was certain he had fastened the doors both back and front before he went away, and had found them fastened on his return. A letter lying open on the table in the parlour next caught the detective's eye. A startled look crossed his face as he read it. Thus it ran— "London, December 20th. "DEAR UNCLE RICHARD.—I beseech you to help me this once. Unless I can get a hundred pounds by Monday I shall be ruined. I swear to pay you back again in a few months if you will let me have it. I am coming down to Lincolnshire, and shall venture to The Grange. Surely you will not shut your doors upon me. At least see me, and hear what I have to say. "Your affectionate nephew, "REGINALD WHITTAKER." The detective turned to Fergusson. "There is a letter here from Mr. Reginald Whittaker. It says he intended visiting his uncle. Has he been?" "No, sir." "You are quite sure you fastened the boat up when you went away?" "Quite sure, sir." "And found it fastened up when you came back?" "Yes, sir." "Is there any other way of getting across the river?" "Well, sir, at one point it might be possible for one to wade across. When the water's low it isn't much above knee-deep there; and I believe it is pretty lowish now." "Come and show me the place." Fergusson lighted a couple of lanterns, gave one to the detective, and, carrying the other himself, led the way to the river's edge at the back of The Grange. Here's the place, sir, if anywhere," he said. The detective stooped and examined the moist, clayey soil. Footsteps were plainly discernible, footsteps which must have been made within the last two or three hours, for there had been a heavy shower in the afternoon which would have obliterated them had they been there then. "Get the boat, quick! We must look on the other side as well." They went to the other side and there found similar footprints on the bank. They were quickly lost, however, in the grass of the field. "We must have the measure of these," thought Detective Ferret. "When I can find the boots that made them, I shall nab my man. Slowly and thoughtfully he crossed the river, and made his way back to the house. He still carried the lantern, and as he passed into the house a small, glittering object, lying just within the hall doorway, caught his eye. He picked it up, eyed it narrowly, then drew forth his purse, and put it carefully inside. It was a gilded sixpence!

CHAPTER IV.

RUBY HEARS THE NEWS.

Ruby Moreland was a young lady who believed in exercise. Every morning of her life, wet or fine, she went for a walk immediately after breakfast. The morning after that evening on which she had met the tramp was singularly bright and fine. She set out on her walk with an elastic step; the frosty air had called twin roses to her cheeks; her eyes shone like stars. She was thinking of her adventure of the previous evening. She called it an adventure to herself, because the man's face had impressed her, and because she could not divest herself of a romantic fancy that he was a gentleman. She wondered whether he had discovered that her gift was but a gilded sixpence. She wondered whether he had felt very disappointed. She wondered—but her wonderments were suddenly cut short, for the man himself stood before her. He stepped from the shadow of a hedge, just as he had done last night, and stood before her with his hat in his hand, his head bowed with that nameless dignity and courtesy which marks a gentleman. Seen in the full daylight, Ruby discovered

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