

E. Phillips Oppenheim



*The Peer and
the Woman*

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BOOK I

PROLOGUE.

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Side by side with his dignified, handsome wife, Lord Bernard Clanavon, Earl of Alceston, stood receiving his guests in the spacious corridor which led into the brilliantly-lit ball-room of his town mansion. It was getting on toward midnight, but the stream of arrivals was scarcely yet lessened, and the broad marble staircase, lined with banks of palms and sweet-smelling exotics, was still thronged with graceful women in marvellous costumes and flashing jewelry, and tall, distinguished-looking men, some in gorgeous uniforms, with crosses and orders glistening upon their breasts, a few in court dress, and fewer still in the ordinary evening garb of civilians. For it was the first function of any social importance of a season which promised to be an exceptionally brilliant one, and nobody who was anybody at all in the charmed circle of London society would have thought of missing it. And so they trooped up the crimson-druggeted stairs in incongruous array—statesmen and peers, learned men and poets, men of the world and men of letters, the former with, the latter in most cases without, their womenkind; and very few indeed passed on into the ball-room without receiving some graceful little speech of welcome from their courteous host or charming hostess.

A politician, a diplomatist, and the head of a noble family, Lord Alceston was a very well-known and popular

leader of the world in which he lived. It would have been strange, indeed, had he been other than popular. Look at him as he bends low over the plump little hand of the Duchess of M—— and welcomes her with a little speech which in one sentence contains an epigram and a compliment. His face possesses the rare combination of an essentially patrician type of features and distinct expressiveness. There is nothing cold about his light blue eyes or his small, firm mouth, although the former are clear and piercing as an eagle's, and about the latter there lurks not the slightest trace of that indecision which so often mars faces of that type. The streaks of gray in his coal-black hair seem only to lend him an added dignity, and the slight stoop of his high shoulders is more the stoop of the horseman or the student than the stoop of gaucherie—rather graceful than otherwise, for, notwithstanding it, he still towers head and shoulders over the majority of the guests whom he is welcoming. He looks what he certainly is—an aristocrat and a man of perfect breeding: the very prototype of an Englishman of high birth. So much for his appearance—and enough, for he will not long trouble the pages of this story. Of his wife it is not necessary here to say more than that she looks his wife. She, too, is handsome, dignified, and aristocratic, and if society admires and reverences Lord Alceston, it adores his wife.

At last the stream grows a little thinner. A great many have arrived in a body from a ducal dinner-party, and when these have made their bow and passed on through the curtained archway to where the Guard's band is playing the most delightful of Waldteufel's waltzes, there comes a lull.

Her ladyship, closing her fan with a little snap, glances down the empty staircase and up at her husband. He stifles the very slightest of yawns, and, smiling apologetically, offers her his arm with a courtesy which, but for his charm of manner might have seemed a trifle elaborate.

"I think that we might venture now," he remarked suavely. "You are a little fatigued, I fear."

She shrugged her white shoulders, flashing with diamonds, and laid her delicate little fingers upon his coat sleeve.

"A mere trifle. Whatever does Neillson want here, I wonder?"

Lord Alceston paused, and, turning round, faced a tall, grave-looking servant, in a suit of sober black, who was advancing slowly toward him, making his way through the throng of liveried footmen who lined the staircase. He carried a small silver salver in his hand, upon which reposed a single note.

"Is that anything important, Neillson?" asked his master, frowning slightly.

"I believe so, my lord," the man answered apologetically, "or I would not have taken the liberty of bringing it now. The bearer declined to wait for an answer."

During the commencement of his servant's speech Lord Alceston's eyes had rested idly upon the superscription of the note which lay before him. Before its conclusion, however, a remarkable change had taken place in his manner. He made no movement, nor did he ask any question. He simply stood quite still, as though turned to stone, holding his breath even, gazing steadfastly down at

the one line of address on the note. It seemed to have fascinated him; he did not even put out his hand to take it from the salver until Neillson reminded him of it again.

"Will your lordship take the note?" he said in a low tone.

Lord Alceston stretched out his hand and took it after a momentary hesitation, which was very much like an involuntary shiver. Directly his fingers had closed upon it he seemed himself again.

He looked swiftly around to see that no one had observed his passing agitation, and was satisfied: The footmen standing in line were still absorbed, partly in their duties, partly in the contemplation of their calves. His wife had been struggling with a refractory bracelet, which she had only just adjusted. Neillson alone had been in a position to notice anything unusual.

"You did quite right, Neillson. You will excuse me for one moment?" he added, turning to the Countess. "This despatch may possibly require my immediate attention."

She bowed her head languidly, and, sinking down upon a settee, recommenced fanning herself. Lord Alceston moved a little on one side, crushing up the note which he had taken from the salver in his slim, delicate fingers. For a moment he hesitated, and seemed inclined to destroy it unopened. The impulse, however, passed away, and, standing back behind some tall palms, which half-concealed him from his wife, he tore it nervously open.

Whatever the contents might have been they could have consisted of only a very few words, for he seemed to master them at a glance. But he did not immediately return to his wife's side. He stood there for more than a minute, with his

back turned to her and the little troop of servants, and a very strange look in his face. One hand was pressed close to his side as though to ease some pain there, and the fingers of the other were locked around the half sheet of note paper which he had just received, crumpling it up into a scarcely recognizable mass. He had all the appearance of a man who has received a blow which for the moment has withered up all his faculties. His features were still impassive, but his face had a cold, numbed look, and all the light had died out of his eyes, leaving them glassy and dim. For a brief while he stood as motionless as a statue; then suddenly he shivered like a man awakening from a hideous nightmare, and moved his hand quickly from his side to his cold, damp forehead.

Lady Alceston, who could only see his back, and that imperfectly, began to wonder what was the matter. She rose and walked slowly over toward him. The sound of her rustling skirts trailing over the thick, soft carpet seemed to suddenly recall him from his abstracted state. He turned round slowly and faced her.

"It is necessary for me to write an answer to this note," he remarked quietly. "If my absence for a few minutes is observed, you will be able to make some excuse for me. The matter is really an important one."

She raised her eyebrows, but was too well bred to evince much surprise, or even curiosity.

"From Downing Street?" she inquired, nonchalantly. "I didn't notice the seal."

"Yes; from Downing Street," he answered. "It may take me some little time to answer, but you may rely upon my

being as expeditious as possible."

She turned away with a slight inclination of the head, and, leaving him, entered the ball-room. He moved forward and gravely held the curtain open for her, taking it from the hand of a servant who was stationed there; then he retraced his steps, and, leaving the anteroom by a private door, passed down a flight of stairs, through another door, and along a passage until he reached the apartment on the ground-floor which he called his study.

It was a great room, finely proportioned and handsomely furnished, lined with books from floor to ceiling—a worthy study even for Lord Alceston, scholar, author, and politician. He paced across the thick, dark carpet like a man in a dream, with fixed gaze and slow movements, and sank into a chair in front of a black ebony writing-table strewn with letters, and piles of correspondence, and blue-books. For a moment he sat bolt upright, gazing into vacancy, or rather at the thick crimson curtains which hung before him, then suddenly his head dropped upon his folded arms and remained buried there for nearly a quarter of an hour. When he looked up his face was scarred and lined, as though with some swift, terrible trouble—as though he were passing through some fierce ordeal.

He poured himself a glass of water from a carafe which stood at his elbow and drank it slowly. Then he set the empty glass down, and, leaning forward in his chair, pressed the knob of an electric bell in the wall opposite to him.

Almost immediately 'there was a soft knock at the door, and his servant Neillson appeared.

Lord Alceston looked at him fixedly, as though seeking to discover something in the man's face. If he had hoped to do so, however, he was disappointed, for it remained absolutely impassive. The only expression discernible was one of respectful attention. His master withdrew his searching gaze with a slight movement of impatience, and gave his orders with his eyes fixed upon the table before him.

"Get my ulster from my room, Neillson, and fetch me a hansom—to the mews door, of course."

"Very good, my lord."

Neillson was a perfectly trained servant, but he had not been able to conceal a slight start of surprise. Lord Alceston noticed it and frowned.

"Neillson," he said, "you will remember what I told you when you entered my service?"

The man bowed. "I do, my lord. I was to be surprised at no orders which you might give me and never to repeat them."

Lord Alceston nodded. "Very good; remember to obey them in the present instance.

"I shall do so, my lord." The door closed, and Lord Alceston was left alone for a minute. He looked carefully around, as though to assure himself of the fact, for the reading-lamp upon his desk was heavily shaded and was quite insufficient to dispel the gloom which hung about the vast room. Suddenly he rose and walked with swift silent footsteps to the furthest corner, in which stood a black oak chest with old-fashioned brass rings. He paused to listen for a moment—there was no sign of Neillson's return. Then

he drew a bunch of keys from his pocket, opened one of the lower drawers, and, pushing his hand back to the remote corner, felt about for a moment. Apparently he found what he wanted, for suddenly he withdrew his hand, transferred some object to his pocket and returned to his seat. Almost immediately Neillson reappeared, carrying the ulster under his arm.

"The hansom is at the mews door, my lord," he said, holding up the coat.

Lord Alceston rose and suffered himself to be helped into it.

"Very good. You fetched it yourself, I hope?"

"Certainly, my lord. Is there anything else?"

His master buttoned his coat up to his ears, and drawing a slouch cap from the pocket, pulled it over his forehead. Then he hesitated for a moment.

"No, there is nothing else at present, Neillson," he answered slowly. "I shall lock this door, and if I am inquired for you can let it be understood that I am engaged upon an important despatch."

The man bowed and withdrew. Lord Alceston, drawing out his key from his pocket, followed him to the door and carefully locked it on the inside. Then, recrossing the room, he drew aside a Japanese screen and unlocked a small green baize door, which closed after him with a spring. He was then in a long dark passage, along which he passed rapidly until he emerged into a quiet side street, at the corner of which a cab was waiting. Without waiting to speak to the man, he stepped quickly inside and pulled down the window. The driver opened his trap-door and looked down.

"Where to, sir?" he asked.

It was nearly half a minute before Lord Alceston answered. Then he gave the address with some hesitation, and in so low a tone that he had to repeat it. The man touched his hat, closed the trap-door, and drove off.

Two hours had passed since Lord Alceston had left his wife's side, and he was back among his guests again. Certainly he was amply atoning for his brief desertion of them, for every one was declaring that he was one of the most charming of hosts. He seemed to be in all places at all times, and to be incapable of fatigue. Now he was the life and soul of a little group of gossiping politicians, now among a bevy of dowagers, telling a story which was just sufficiently risqué to awaken their keen interest without making them feel bound to appear unnaturally prudish, and consequently putting them all into a delightful temper. Now he was acting as his own master of ceremonies, and introducing exactly the right people to one another, and now he was walking through the mazes of a square dance with an old-fashioned stately dignity which many of the younger men envied. Wherever he went he seemed to drive gloom before him and to breathe gaiety into the dullest of the dull. Even his wife watched him admiringly, and wished that he would always exert himself as he was doing then, for there were times, as she well knew, when he was but a nonchalant host. But tonight he was excelling himself he was brilliant, dignified, and full of tact. She began to wonder, as she paced slowly through the rooms on the arm of a Grand Duke, and answered with sweet smiles but only partial attention his

labored commonplaces, whether that note from Downing Street had brought any good news. Visions of her husband at the head of the Cabinet, and entertaining for his party, began to float before her eyes, and she gave herself up to them until the growing coolness of her companion's manner warned her to abandon dreaming for the present and devote herself to her duties. But she made a mental note to inquire of her husband respecting that note at her earliest opportunity.

At last the spacious rooms began to thin. Royalty had come and gone; the perfume of exotics was growing fainter and fainter and the fairy lights were growing dimmer and dimmer. Faster than before all the plagues of Egypt do London beauties fly before the daylight after a night's dancing, and the guests were departing in shoals before the faint gleams of approaching morning. At last their hour of release had come, and Lord Alceston sought his wife.

"I have a letter to write for the morning post," he remarked. "With your permission I will come to you; room for a cup of tea in half an hour."

Lady Alceston, seeing that save for the servants they were alone, indulged in the luxury of a yawn before she answered:

"Do. I want to have a few minutes' talk. Don't be longer. Everything has gone off well, I think?"

"Thanks to your admirable arrangements yes, I think so," he answered courteously. And then, with the smile still lingering on his lips, he turned away and went to his library.

Apparently he soon forgot his wife's invitation, for the first thing he did was to order a cup of strong tea to be

brought to him at once. Neillson laid it down by his side on the table, and was about to depart when his master called him back.

"Neillson, I've lost the key of the baize door somewhere this morning. Send down to Bellson's the locksmith, as soon as you think that he will be up, and have another one made."

"Very good, my lord. Shall you require me again?"

Lord Alceston drew out his watch and looked at it. It was four o'clock. He hesitated with it still in his hand.

"If I do not ring for you in half an hour you can go to bed," he decided.

The door closed, and Lord Alceston was left alone. For a moment or two he sipped his tea leisurely. Then, drawing some paper toward him, he commenced to write.

He had covered two sheets of note paper and had commenced the third when he suddenly ceased writing and started violently. Leaning forward he pressed the knob of the electric bell, and then, half fearfully, he turned slowly round and glanced across the room. Save for the heavily-shaded lamp which stood on his table it was still unilluminated, and the greater part of it was enveloped in shadow, for the closely-drawn curtains completely shut out the struggling daylight. Lord Alceston drew the shade from his lamp with fingers which trembled a little and held it high over his head while he looked searchingly around.

There was a soft knock at the door, and Neillson entered. Lord Alceston put down the lamp with an unmistakable gesture of relief.

"Neillson," he said, quietly, "there is some one in the room."

Neillson looked around and then back at his master incredulously.

"Some one in the room, my lord!" he repeated. "Impossible! I beg your lordship's pardon," he added confusedly, "I meant—"

"Never mind what you meant, Neillson," interrupted his master. "Look behind that screen."

Neillson approached the screen very gingerly and peered around it.

"There's no one there, my lord," he declared, with relief. Side by side they walked round the apartment, Lord Alceston holding the lamp above his head. They discovered nothing. Obviously, save themselves there was no one else in the room. Lord Alceston resumed his seat and set the lamp down.

"It's a very strange thing," he said, in a low tone. "I'm not a nervous man, and my hearing is remarkably good. I could have sworn that I heard a shuffling footstep. Neillson, fetch my revolver from my room, and see that all the chambers are loaded:"

Neillson withdrew, and during his brief absence Lord Alceston sat round in his chair with his eyes restlessly wandering about the interior of the apartment. Presently Neillson reappeared and silently laid a small shining revolver on the desk by his master's side.

"Anything further, your lordship?"

"No, you can go to bed now! I suppose it must have been fancy. Just see, though, whether the baize door is securely

locked."

Neillson crossed the room and tried it.

"It is locked, your lordship," he declared.

"Very good; you can go."

The door closed, and Lord Alceston, after one more furtive glance around, slowly finished his tea, drew the revolver close to his side and recommenced writing. He had barely finished another page, however, before his pen suddenly stopped upon the paper and his heart gave a great throb. Again he heard, this time without the possibility of any mistake, and close behind him, that low, stealthy sound. He dropped his pen and stretched out his shaking fingers for the revolver; but even when his hand had closed upon it he could not turn round. A cold horror seemed to have stolen over him, freezing his blood and numbing his limbs. All his sensations were those of a man in a hideous nightmare; but this was no nightmare.

Again came the stealthy sound of a cat-like tread close to his chair. A hot breath upon his neck, and then, as life flowed suddenly again into his veins, and he strove to cry out, a handkerchief was pressed into his open mouth and he felt his senses reel before the swift, deadly influence of the chloroform with which it was soaked. Still he struggled for a moment, half turned round in his chair, and caught a glimpse of a pair of burning eyes fixed upon his, and read murder in them.

"You!" he gasped. "You!"

One arm seized his, and held them from behind. A swift gleam of blue steel flashed before his eyes; a sudden pain. It was over in a moment.

There was a brisk sale for the evening papers on the following day. All down the Strand and round Trafalgar Square the eager newsboys were shouting out their terrible tidings, and for the lover of sensation there was very good value indeed in exchange for his penny. Placards leaned against the walls, were spread out upon the pavement, and were almost thrust into the faces of the ever-hurrying throngs of passers-by, and this is what they announced:

AWFUL MURDER OF
THE EARL OF ALCESTON!
and a little lower down—
ANOTHER TERRIBLE MURDER
IN THE EAST END!

An immense sensation was created this morning in all circles by the rumor, which has unhappily proved too true, that the Earl of Alceston had been found at an early hour this morning in his library with his throat cut and quite dead. On inquiry at Grosvenor Square this morning, our representative was put in possession of such facts as are already known. Briefly, they are as follows:

It seems that during the holding of a reception and ball last night Lord Alceston received a letter, the origin of which is at present a mystery, which compelled him to absent himself for some considerable period from his guests. Later on in the evening, however, he rejoined them, and it was universally remarked that his lordship had never appeared in better health or spirits. Nothing further happened, or has since happened, to connect the receipt of this letter with the fearful crime which we have to report. After the departure of

his guests, his lordship went straight to his library, promising to join his wife and take tea with her in half an hour. All we have been able to gather of what subsequently occurred is, that about nine o'clock this morning, as she had seen nothing of her husband, and had not heard him go to his room, Lady Alceston sent her maid to make inquiries. She went in company with a footman at once to the library, and, being unable to procure admission or to obtain any reply, summoned help, with the result that the door was forced open and the terrible spectacle disclosed of Lord Alceston leaning forward on the writing-table, with his clothes and face covered with blood and his throat cut completely round from side to side.

Although we are not at liberty, for obvious reasons, to state more at present, we understand that further startling disclosures have been made to the police by members of the household, but that at present there is no clue to the murderer.

1.30 P.M.—His late lordship's valet, Philip Neillson, is believed to have absconded, not having been seen or heard of this morning.

2 P.M.—A warrant has been issued for the arrest of the man Neillson on suspicion of having been concerned in the murder of his master, the Earl of Alceston. The accused has not yet been found.

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4 P.M.—It is now ascertained beyond doubt that Neillson has absconded. The police are making every effort to trace him, and are confident of success.

The deceased earl was the third son of Lord Rupert Clanavon, Earl of Alceston, from whom he inherited the title

and estates, and was the sixth peer. During his youth he held a commission in the Second Life Guards and served with distinction through the Crimean campaign. On the death of his two elder brothers, however, his lordship left the army, and, taking his seat in the House of Peers, devoted himself to politics. His lordship was created a K. C. B. in 18—, was a member of the Privy Council, and quite recently his name was mentioned as the probable successor to Lord H—in the Cabinet. The deceased peer was married in 18—to the Lady Margaret Agnes Montand, only daughter of the Earl of Montand, and leaves an only son, Lord Bernard Clanavon, who succeeds to the title and entailed estates.

Below, cast almost into insignificance by such a heinous crime as the murder of a peer of the realm, was a short paragraph headed:

ANOTHER TRAGEDY IN THE EAST END.
MURDER OF A WOMAN IN A LODGING-HOUSE.

Just before going to press information came to hand of another awful murder in Riddell. Street, Bethnal Green Road. On being called, according to custom, by the proprietress of the lodging-house, a woman who went by the name of Mary Ward was discovered lying across her bed quite dead, and stabbed to the heart by some sharp instrument. The deceased woman was known to have been visited by three men during the early part of the night, the latter of whom left hurriedly, but no struggles or cries of any sort were heard, and no suspicion was entertained of foul play. It is not known whether any of the other lodgers will be able to identify or give any description of either of the men alleged to have visited the deceased. Failing this, it seems highly

probable that this crime will be another addition to the long catalogue of undiscovered murders in this locality. We are not at present in a position to state definitely whether there is anything to justify the supposition that this most recent crime is by the same hand and for the same purpose as others committed in this neighborhood, as the police are maintaining a strict reticence in the matter.

And so for one night, at least, Londoners had plenty of horrors to gorge themselves upon and to discuss eagerly in public-house and club, railway carriage and omnibus, restaurant and street corner. Two murders in one night, and both wrapped in mystery! What food for the sensation monger, what a fund of conversation for the general public—carmen in their public-houses, society at their clubs and social functions. Pleasure seekers, dining and supping at their favorite restaurants, were ready with their solemn expressions of horror and their more or less absurd theories. A million tongues were busy with this one subject, bandying backward and forward the name of the peer and the name of the woman. Truly there is fame in death!

In his stately bedchamber, on snowy sheets, pillowed with lace, and strewn with flowers, his fine face white and rigid with the calm of death, lay Bernard, Lord Alceston, Earl of Harrowdean; and on a coarse straw mattress, barely covered over by a ragged, none too clean, coverlet, in a Bethnal Green lodging-house, lay the woman who had called herself Mary Ward. For him there were mourners, at least in name, and loud in lament—for her there were none. But, after all, what did it matter? Around him, as around her, the

great world of London revolved without change in its mighty cycles of vice and misery, pleasure-seeking and fortune-spending, and if more voices were lowered at his name than hers, more tears dropped over his damask sheets than over her ragged coverlet, what matter? Whose was the profit?



BOOK II

I.—LORD CLANAVON'S TRAVELLING COMPANION.

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"'Pon my word you're a very amusing fellow."

The person addressed flushed slightly as though offended by the patronizing tone in which these words were carelessly spoken. But his annoyance, if indeed he felt any, was evidently short-lived, for he answered back readily enough, with a little laugh:

"Glad you think so, very glad. It isn't every day, you see, that a poor fellow like me has the chance of amusing a milord—especially an English one."

"Milord" arched his eyebrows, and not having detected the faint tinge of sarcasm in the other's tone, put this remark down to pure snobbishness. So he withdrew a little further into the corner of the comfortable first-class railway carriage, of which the two men were the only occupants, and remained silent for a few moments, idly strumming upon the window panes with his fingers.

"How did you know my name?" he asked, abruptly, turning again toward his fellow-passenger.

"I didn't say that I did know it," was the reply. "I heard your servant call you 'my lord' on the boat, and there's a coronet on your bag there, unless my eyes deceive me, which they very seldom do. *Voilà tout.*"

"Did you cross from Calais then? I didn't see you."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Very likely not. In fact, it would have been very strange if you had seen me, considering that I was in my cabin all the while."

"Sea-sick?" inquired "milord" contemptuously.

"Yes, sea-sick," was the unhesitating admission of his *vis-à-vis*. "I've never crossed yet without being sea-sick."

The frankness of the confession was not without its effect upon the person to whom it was made. "Milord," although he was a yachtsman and a born sailor, and had all a healthy young Englishman's contempt for effeminacy in any shape or form, smiled indulgently.

"Sorry for you. I was myself once, in the Bay of Biscay when I was eleven years old, and I haven't forgotten it. Deuced uncomfortable sensation it was."

The difference between these two men, whom chance had thus thrown together on their journey from Dover to Waterloo, was very marked indeed. "Milord" was a typical young British aristocrat, with long straight limbs, smooth, fair face, a little tanned by exposure to all sorts of weather; well-cut features, about which there hovered a slight vacuity of expression common among young men of the higher orders who have nothing particular to do with themselves, and which was perhaps a little heightened by the single eye-glass which obscured one of his clear blue eyes. He was dressed in a light check travelling suit, colored shirt, with a white silk tie, and a small bunch of Parma violets in his buttonhole. He wore no gloves, and his hands, though shapely, were hard and brown. A well-worn tobacco-pouch was open by his side, from which he had recently

replenished the deeply-colored meerschaum pipe which he was smoking. Taken as a whole, his appearance was distinctly aristocratic, with a dash of the Bohemian. At any rate, no one could possibly have mistaken him for anything else but a gentleman.

His companion was a man of an altogether different stamp. His hair and mustache, once jet-black, were plentifully besprinkled with gray, and his small oval face was deeply lined. His features, though not striking, were refined and delicate, and his prominent forehead and deep clear eyes gave him somewhat the air of a student, which, however, his restless, almost flippant, manner in a measure contradicted. His manners, indeed, were the least pleasing part about him—alternately nervous and inquisitive, labored and careless. He was ill, almost shabbily, dressed, and many little details about his person and *tout ensemble* were obnoxious to his more distinguished fellow-passenger. Still, he had told some funny stories and had made himself very amusing without attempting to be familiar, and Lord Clanavon, whom two things—railway travelling and his own company—always bored exceedingly, felt faintly grateful to this stranger of doubtful appearance for relieving the monotony of his journey, and decided to tolerate him for the brief remainder of it.

"You didn't come up from Paris, did you?" he inquired carelessly.

"Yes."

"And you were on the boat, too? Seems queer I didn't see you somewhere about."

"I was below most of the time on the boat," the other reminded him.

"Ah, yes. I suppose that was it. I thought I'd watched every one on board at Calais, too. There was a bit of a crush, though, and I must have missed you. Hallo! isn't that your ticket on the floor?" he added, pointing to it with his foot.

The other stooped forward quickly and picked it up. But Lord Clanavon's eyes were keen, and the ticket had fallen upon its back.

"Why didn't you book through from Paris?" he asked curiously. "That ticket's only from Dover, isn't it?"

"That's all. The fact is, I lost my ticket somewhere, and had to re-book from Dover. A nuisance, but it couldn't be helped."

There was a brief silence, during which Lord Clanavon yawned several times, and as his companion had ceased to be amusing, he picked up a sporting paper and studied it for a few minutes. Then the train ran into Waterloo, and he rose and stretched himself with an air of relief.

His fellow-passenger was the first to alight. Lord Clanavon returned his parting salute with a slight, condescending nod, then stepped out of the carriage himself, and, lighting a cigar, looked around for his servant. In a moment or two he came hurrying up.

"Bring out my traps and take them round to Grosvenor Square in a cab, Burdett," he ordered. "I shall walk. What the mischief's the matter with you?" he added, in an altered tone, looking hard into the man's face; "you look as though you'd seen a ghost."

"It's—nothing particular, my lord," Burdett answered plunging into the carriage and busying himself folding up papers and collecting his master's belonging "It was rather a rough passage, my lord, and I think must have upset me a little."

Lord Clanavon, one of the most truthful young men in the world, accepted his servant's explanation at once though he glanced again with some curiosity into his pale, averted face.

"I should have thought that you would have been used to it by now," he remarked. "There's some brandy in that flask on the seat. Help yourself, if you feel bad."

"Thank you, my lord," Burdett answered in a low tone; but instead of doing so he ceased for a moment in his task and watched his young master's retreating figure with tears in his eyes.

"I ought to have told him," he groaned; "but dare not. Oh! poor Mr. Bernard! Whatever will he do when he knows!"

II.—A BITTER WELCOME.

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Lord Bernard Clanavon was a young man who had earned for himself the reputation of extreme eccentricity. Even his father and mother, whose only and very much spoiled son he was, found themselves often forced, to admit that he was odd. He had none of the vices and very few of the habits, of other young men of his class, which was all very well as far as it went; but it had its disadvantages. London life bored him, and the country, except during certain months of the year, was still less to his taste; consequently he spent a good deal of his time abroad; and, being difficult to suit in the matter of companionship, he spent most of it alone. Another of his peculiarities was that he detested having letters, and never, unless compelled, wrote them. To escape from a correspondence which, had his whereabouts been known, would have been inevitable, he made a point of never giving an address even to his own people, simply telling them the date of his return, to which he was always faithful.

A month ago he had left London for Rome, with the remark that he would return on June 15, and at four o'clock in the afternoon of that day he was strolling over Waterloo Bridge on his way westward. A little distance behind, on the opposite side of the road, followed his late travelling companion.

It was a fine afternoon, and the Strand was thronged with foot passengers and the streets with a ceaseless stream of vehicles. Lord Clanavon was evidently enjoying his walk.

Head and shoulders taller than most of the crowd, he walked leisurely along, still smoking, and every now and then pausing to look in at a shop window or read the placards outside a theatre. The newsboys, who lined the gutters on the street, were making the air vibrate with their hideous news, but, partly on account of the great roar of traffic and partly owing to habitual inattention, he walked on serenely indifferent to their voluble cries. Close behind was his travelling companion, who watched him eagerly each time he passed one of the little knots of newspaper sellers, and whose face was gradually becoming savagely overcast. At last the blow fell. Close to Charing Cross Lord Clanavon paused with the evident intention of crossing the road, and as he stood on the curbstone waiting for an omnibus to pass, his eyes fell upon a placard which was thrust almost into his face by an eager newsboy, and his ears were salute at the same time by the cry which was echoing a down the Strand:

"Hawful tragedy in the West End! 'Orrible murder of the Earl of Harrowdean! Full particulars!"

For the space of fully thirty seconds Lord Clanavon stood perfectly still on the edge of the pathway as though turned into a figure of stone. Then a ghastly paleness crept into his cheeks, banishing all his ruddy manly color, and he swayed backward as though about to fall. The roar of the passing vehicles and the babel of talk and street shouts around seemed to come to him from a far-off distance, and the ground appeared to slide away from under his feet. Then came a darkness before his eyes, a sudden tightening of the brain, and at last unconsciousness. It was the first swoon of