

***FERGUS
HUME***

A silhouette of a person standing on a wooden hand truck in a room with horizontal blinds, illuminated by warm light.

***THE WOODEN
HAND***

Fergus Hume

The Wooden Hand

A Detective Story

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CHAPTER I

MISERY CASTLE

"Ah well, Miss Eva, I 'spose your pa'll come home to spile things as he allays have done. It ain't no wonder, I ses, as you sits moping by the winder, looking double your age, and you only twenty, as has no right to look forty, whatever you may say, though I took my dying alfred-david on its blessed truth."

This slightly incoherent and decidedly pessimistic speech was moaned, rather than spoken, by a lean-bodied, hard-faced, staring-eyed woman to a pretty girl, who did not look at the speaker. And small wonder. Mrs. Merry--inappropriate name--was unattractive to the eye. She was angular, grey-skinned, grey-eyed, grey-haired, and had thin, drooping lips almost as grey as the rest of her. In her black stuff gown--she invariably wore the most funereal dresses--with uneasy hands folded under a coarse apron, she stood before Eva Strode, uttering lamentations worthy of Jeremiah at his worst. But such dumpishness was characteristic of the woman. She delighted in looking on the black side of things, and the blacker they were, the more she relished them. Out of wrong-doing, and grief and things awry, she extracted a queer sort of pleasure, and felt never so happy as when the worst came to the worst. It seemed unfit that such a walking pageant of woe should be called Merry.

Eva, already depressed by the voice and sentiment of this lamentable dame, continued to look at the gaudy

hollyhocks, even while she answered calmly, "I expect my father is the same as he was when he went to South Africa five years ago. I don't hope to find him an angel. I am certain he has not changed."

"If you're thinking of black angels," said the lively Merry, "you can have satisfactions from thinking him Beelzebub, for him he are."

"Don't call my father names. It does no good, Mrs. Merry."

"Beg pardon, miss, but it do relieve the heart and temper. And I will call him a leper, if that's a name, seeing as he'll never change his spots, however persuaded."

"What's the time?"

Mrs. Merry peered into the dial of a clock on the mantelpiece. "You might call it six, Miss Eva, and a lovely evening it is, though rain may spile it unexpected. Your pa 'ull be seated at the table in the next room at eight, let us hope, if nothing do happen to him, and I do pray on my bended knees, Miss Eva, as he won't growl at the meal, his habit allays when your poor dear ma--her ladyship was alive. Ah well," said Mrs. Merry with emphasis, "*she's* an angel now, and your pa ain't likely to trouble her again."

"Why, don't you think my father may come home? I mean, why do you fancy anything may happen to him?"

"Oh, I ain't got no cause, but what you might call the uncertainties of this vale of tears, Miss Eva. He have to drive ten mile here from the Westhaven station, and there's tramps about them lonely roads. Coming from South Africa, your pa 'ull naturally have diamonds to tempt the poor."

"I don't know what he has got," said Eva rather pettishly. "And no one, save you and me, know he is returning from Africa."

"No one, Miss Eva?" questioned the woman significantly. Miss Strode coloured. "I told Mr. Hill."

"And he told his pa, and his pa, who have a long tongue, told all the village, I don't doubt. If ever there was a man as fiddled away his days in silliness," cried Merry, "it's that pink and white jelly-fish as you call Hills."

"Hill," corrected Miss Strode; then added colouring: "His son doesn't take after him."

"No," admitted the other grudgingly, "I will say as Mr. Allen is a tight lad. His mother gave him her blood and sense and looks; not that I say he's worthy of you, Miss Eva."

"Mrs. Merry," said Eva quietly, "you let your tongue run on too freely about my friends."

"Not the father Hills, if I die in saying it. He's no friend of yours, seeing he's your pa's; and as to Mr. Allen, I never had a sweetheart as I called friend, when you could call him something better."

Eva took no notice of this speech, but continued, "You are my old nurse, Mrs. Merry, and I allow you to talk openly."

"For your good, Miss Eva," put in Merry.

"For my good, I know," said the girl; "but you must not run down Allen's father or mine."

"As to *his* father, I say nothing but that he's a drivelling jelly-fish," said Mrs. Merry, who would not be suppressed; "but your own pa I know, worse luck, and I don't think much of him as a man, whatever I say about his being Beelzebub,

which he is. Fifty years and more he is, fine-looking at that, though wickedness is in his aching bones. Not that I know of their aching," explained Mrs. Merry, "but if sin would make 'em smart, ache they do. You've been happy with me, Miss Eva, dear, in spite of a humble roof and your poor ma's death, four and a half year back. But your pa's come home to make trouble. Satan let loose is what I call him, and if I could stop his coming by twisting his wicked neck, I would."

"Mrs. Merry!" Eva rose quickly and flushed. "You forget yourself."

"There," said Mrs. Merry, casting up her eyes; "and I fed her with my own milk."

Eva, who was tenderly attached to the angular, dismal, chattering woman, could not withstand this remark. "Dear Nanny," she said, comforting the wounded heart, "I know you mean well, but my father *is* my father after all."

"Worse luck, so he is," sobbed Mrs. Merry, feeling for Eva's hand.

"I wish to think of him as kindly as I can, and----"

"Miracles won't make you do that," interrupted the woman, dropping her apron from her eyes, and glaring. "Miss Eva, I knew your pa when he was a bad boy, both him and me being neighbours, as you might say, though I did live in a cottage and he in a Manor House not two mile from here. He and that jelly-fish of a Hills were always together doing mischief, and setting neighbours by the ears, though I do say as your pa, being masterful, led that jelly-fish away. Then your pa ran away with Lady Jane Delham, your ma, as is dead, and treated her shameful. She come here to me, as an old friend, for friend I was, tho' humble," sobbed Mrs.

Merry weeping again, "and you were born. Then your pa takes you away and I never set eyes on you and my lady till five years ago when he brought you here. To settle down and make you happy? No! not he. Away he goes gallivanting to South Africa where the blacks are, leaving a lady born and bred and his daughter just a bud, meaning yourself, to live with a common woman like me!"

"I have been very happy, Nanny, and my mother was happy also, when she was alive."

"Ah," said Mrs. Merry bitterly, "a queer sort of happiness, to be that way when your husband goes. I've had a trial myself in Merry, who's dead, and gone, I hope, where you'll find your pa will join him. But you'll see, Miss Eva, as your pa will come and stop your marrying Mr. Allen."

"I think that's very likely," said Eva sadly.

"What," said Mrs. Merry under her breath, and rising, "he's at it already is he? I thought so."

"I received a letter from him the other day," explained Eva; "knowing your prejudice against my father, I said nothing."

"Me not to be trusted, I 'spose, Miss Eva?" was the comment.

"Nonsense. I trust you with anything."

"And well you may. I fed you with my heart's blood, and foster sister you are to my boy Cain, though, Lord knows, he's as bad as his father was before him--the gipsy whelp that he is. Not on my side, though," cried Mrs. Merry. "I'm true English, and why I ever took up with a Romany rascal like Giles Merry, I don't know. But he's dead, I hope he is, though I never can be sure, me not knowing where's his

grave. Come now," Mrs. Merry gave her face a wipe with the apron, "I'm talking of my own troubles, when yours is about. That letter----?"

"It is one in answer to mine. I wrote to Cape Town three months ago telling my father that I was engaged to Allen Hill. He wrote the other day--a week ago--from Southampton, saying he would not permit the marriage to take place, and bade me wait till he came home."

"Trouble! trouble," said Mrs. Merry, rocking; "I know the man. Ah, my dear, don't talk. I'm thinking for your good."

It was hot outside, though the sun was sinking and the cool twilight shadowed the earth. The hollyhocks, red and blue and white and yellow, a blaze of colour, were drooping their heads in the warm air, and the lawn looked brown and burnt for want of rain. Not a breath of wind moved the dusty sycamore trees which divided the cottage from the high-road, and the crimson hue of the setting sun steeped everything in its sinister dye. Perhaps it was this uncanny evening that made Eva Strode view the home-coming of her father with such uneasiness, and the hostility and forebodings of Mrs. Merry did not tend to reassure her. With her hand on that dismal prophetess's shoulder, she stood silently looking out on the panting world bathed in the ruddy light. It was as though she saw the future through a rain of blood.

Misery Castle was the name of the cottage, and Mrs. Merry was responsible for the dreary appellation. Her life had been hard and was hard. Her husband had left her, and her son, following in his father's footsteps, was almost constantly absent in London, in more than questionable

company. Mrs. Merry therefore called the cottage by as dismal a name as she could think of. Even Eva, who protested against the name, could not get the steadfastly dreary woman to change it. "Misery dwells in it, my dear lamb," said Mrs. Merry, "and Misery it shall be called. Castle it ain't from the building of it, but Castle it is, seeing the lot of sorrow that's in it. Buckingham Palace and the Tower wouldn't hold more, and more there will be, when that man comes home with his wicked sneering face, father though he be to you, my poor young lady."

It was a delightful cottage, with whitewashed walls covered with creepers, and a thatched roof, grey with wind and weather and the bleaching of the sun. The rustic porch was brilliant with red roses, and well-kept garden-beds bloomed with rainbow-hued flowers seasonable to the August month. To the right this domain was divided from a wide and gorse-covered common by an ancient wall of mellow-hued brick, useful for the training of peach-trees: to the left a low hedge, with unexpected gaps, ran between the flower-beds and a well-stocked orchard. This last extended some distance, and ended in a sunken fence, almost buried in nettles and rank weeds. Beyond stretched several meadows, in which cows wandered, and further still, appeared fields of wheat, comfortable farm-houses, clumps and lines of trees, until the whole fertile expanse terminated at the foot of low hills, so far away that they looked blue and misty. A smiling corn-land, quite Arcadian in its peace and beauty.

Along the front of the cottage and under the dusty sycamore trees ran a high-road which struck straightly

across the common, slipped by Misery Castle, and took its way crookedly through Wargrove village, whence it emerged to twist and turn for miles towards the distant hills and still more distant London town. Being the king's highway it was haunted by tramps, by holiday vans filled with joyous folk, and by fashionable motor-cars spinning noisily at illegal speed. But neither motor-cars, nor vans, nor tramps, nor holidaymakers stopped at Wargrove village, unless for a moment or two at the one public-house on thirsty days. These went on ten miles further across the common to Westhaven, a rising watering-place at the Thames mouth. So it will be seen that the publicity of the highway afforded Eva a chance of seeing the world on wheels, and diversified her somewhat dull existence.

And it was dull, until a few months ago. Then Allen Hill came home from South America, where he had been looking after mines. The young people met and subsequently fell in love. Three months before the expected arrival of Mr. Strode they became engaged with the consent of Allen's parents but without the knowledge of Eva's father. However, being a dutiful daughter to a man who did not deserve such a blessing, she wrote and explained herself. The reply was the letter, mention of which she had made to Mrs. Merry. And Mrs. Merry prognosticated trouble therefrom.

"I know the man--I know the man," moaned Mrs. Merry, rocking herself, "he'll marry you to some one else for his ambitions, drat him."

"That he shall never do," flashed out Eva.

"You have plenty of spirit, Miss Eva, but he'll wear you out. He wore out Lady Jane, your ma, as is now where he will

never go. And was it this that set you moping by the winder, my dear lamb?"

Eva returned to her former seat. "Not altogether." She hesitated, and then looked anxiously at her old nurse, who stood with folded arms frowning and rigid. "You believe in dreams, Mrs. Merry?"

"As I believe that Merry was a scoundrel, and that my boy will take after him, as he does," said the woman, nodding sadly; "misery ain't surer nor dreams, nor taxes which allays come bringing sorrow and summonses with 'em. So you dreamed last night?"

"Yes. You know I went to bed early. I fell asleep at eight and woke at nine, trembling."

"Ah!" Mrs. Merry drew nearer--"'twas a baddish dream?"

"A horrible dream--it was, I think, two dreams."

"Tell it to me," said the old woman, her eyes glittering.

Eva struck her closed fist on the sill. "No," she cried passionately, "it's impossible to tell it. I wish to forget."

"You'll remember it well enough when the truth comes."

"Do you think anything will come of it?"

"It's as sure as sure," said Mrs. Merry.

Eva, less superstitious, laughed uneasily, and tried to turn the subject. "Allen will be at the gate soon," she said. "I'm walking to the common with him for an hour."

"Ah well," droned Mrs. Merry, "take your walk, Miss Eva. You won't have another when *he* comes home."

"Nurse!" Eva stamped her foot and frowned. "You make my father out to be a----"

"Whatever I make him out to be, I'll never get near what he is," said Mrs. Merry viciously. "I hate him. He ruined my

Giles, not as Giles was much to boast of. Still, I could have talked him into being a stay-at-home, if your pa--there--there--let him be, say I. If his cup is full he'll never come home alive."

Eva started and grew deathly pale. "My dream--my dream," she said.

"Ah yes!" Mrs. Merry advanced and clutched the girl's wrist. "You saw him dead or dying, eh, eh?"

"Don't, nurse; you frighten me," said Miss Strode, releasing her wrist; then she thought for a moment. "My dream or dreams," said she after a pause, went something after this fashion. "I thought I was in the Red Deeps----"

"Five miles from here," muttered Mrs. Merry, hugging herself. "I know the place--who better? Red clay and a splash of water, however dry."

"Ah, you are thinking of the spring!" said Eva starting; "it was there I saw--oh no--no," and she closed her eyes to shut out the sight.

"What was it--what was it?" asked Mrs. Merry eagerly; "death?"

"He was lying face downward in the moist red clay beside the spring of the Red Deeps!"

"Who was lying?"

"I don't know. I seemed to see the place and the figure of a man in dark clothes lying face downward, with his hands twisted helplessly in the rank grasses. I heard a laugh too--a cruel laugh, but in my dream I saw no one else. Only the dead man, face downward," and she stared at the carpet as though she saw the gruesome sight again.

"How do you know 'twas your father's corpse?" croaked the old woman.

"I didn't think it was--I didn't tell you it was," panted Eva, flushing and paling with conflicting emotions.

"Ah," interpreted Mrs. Merry, "some one he killed, perhaps."

"How dare you--how dare----? Nurse," she burst out, "I believe it *was* my father lying dead there--I saw a white-gloved right hand."

"Your pa, sure enough," said the woman grimly. "His wooden hand, eh? I know the hand. He struck me with it once. Struck me," she cried, rising and glaring, "with my own husband standing by. But Giles was never a man. So your pa was dead, wooden hand and all, in the Red Deeps? Did you go there to see, this day?"

"No, no," Eva shuddered, "it was only a dream."

"Part of one, you said."

Miss Strode nodded. "After I saw the body and the white glove on the wooden hand glimmering in the twilight--for twilight it was in my dream--I seemed to sink into darkness, and to be back in my bed--yes, in my bed in the room across the passage."

"Ah! you woke then?" said Mrs. Merry, disappointed.

"No, I swear I was not awake. I was in my bed asleep, dreaming, for I heard footsteps--many footsteps come to the door--to the front door, then five knocks----"

"Five," said the woman, surprised.

"Five knocks. One hard and four soft. Then a voice came telling me to take in the body. I woke with a cry, and found it was just after nine o'clock."

"Well, well," chuckled the old woman, "if Robert Strode is dead----"

"You can't be sure of that," said Eva fiercely, and regretted telling this dismal woman her dream.

"You saw the gloved hand--the wooden hand?"

"Bah! It is only a dream."

"Dreams come true. I've known 'em to come true," said Mrs. Merry, rising, "and to-morrow I go to the Red Deeps to see."

"But my father comes home to-night."

"No," said Mrs. Merry, with the mien of a sibyl, "he'll never come home agin to the house where he broke a woman's heart."

And she went out laughing and muttering of the Red Deeps.

CHAPTER II

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM

Eva Strode was an extremely pretty blonde. She had golden-brown hair which glistened in the sunshine, hazel eyes somewhat meditative in expression, and a complexion that Mrs. Merry, in her odd way, compared to mixed roses and milk. Her nose was delicate and straight, her mouth charming and sensitive, and if it drooped a trifle at the

corners, she had good cause for so melancholy a twist. Her figure was so graceful that envious women, less favoured by Nature, suggested padding: but these same depreciators could say nothing against her hands and feet, which were exquisitely formed. Usually Eva, cunning enough to know that her beauty needed no adornment, dressed in the very plainest fashions. At the present moment she was arrayed in a pale blue dress of some coarse material, and wore a large straw hat swathed in azure tulle. An effective touch of more pronounced colour appeared in the knot of red ribbon at her throat and the bunch of crimson roses thrust into her waistband. She looked dainty, well-bred, charming, and even the malignant female eye would have found little to blame. But the female eye generally did find fault. Eva was much too pretty a girl to escape remark.

This vision of loveliness walked demurely down the garden path to gladden the eyes of a young man lingering at the gate. He, eagerly expecting the descent of Venus, quickly removed his Panama hat, and looked at the goddess with admiring eyes, eloquent of unspoken praise. Eva, feeling, rather than meeting, their fervid gaze, halted within the barrier and blushed as red as the roses in her belt. Then she ventured to look at her lover, and smiled a welcome.

Certainly the lover was not unworthy of the lass, so far as looks went. Allen Hill was as dark as Eva was fair. Indeed, he more resembled a Spaniard than an Englishman. His oval face, smooth and clean-shaven save for a small, smartly pointed moustache, was swarthy, his eyes were wonderfully black and large, and his closely clipped hair might be compared to the hue of the raven's wing. His slim figure was

clothed in white flannels, so well cut and spotless that they conveyed a suspicion that the young gentleman was something of a dandy. He looked more like a poet than a mining engineer.

Yet an engineer he was, and had travelled over the greater part of the world with his eyes open. These looked languid enough as a rule, but they could blaze with a fighting light, as his associates in the lands at the back of Beyond knew. At thirty years of age Allen knew quite as much as was good for him, and knew also how to utilise his knowledge. In many lands he had seen fair women, but none had captured his heart as had this dewy, fragrant English rose.

Six months earlier the two had met at a garden party. Allen came and saw, and Eva--as women always do--conquered. The engineer's heart, being tinder, caught fire easily and began to blaze with a fiery flame not to be extinguished by reason. Eva herself, not being tame either, rather liked this Sabine courtship, and did not leave Allen long in doubt as to the way in which she regarded his audacious advances. The result was that in a few months they became engaged, and the flower-time of their love came almost as speedily as did that of Romeo and Juliet. But now, as Eva well knew, the common sense of the world was about to chill their ardour. She had this very evening to inform this eager, whole-hearted lover that her father refused to sanction the engagement. No easy task, seeing she loved the man with her whole heart and soul.

"My dear, my love," murmured Allen, as the gate closed behind the girl: and he would have embraced her in the

public road, but that she dexterously evaded his widely spread arms.

"Not here--not here," she whispered hurriedly, and with a fine colour; "it's too public, you stupid boy."

The stupid boy, cheated of his treat, glared up and down the road, "I don't see any one," he grumbled.

"Eyes at those windows," said Eva, waving a slim hand towards a row of thatched cottages, "and tongues also."

"I am not ashamed of our love. I wish the whole world knew of it."

"The whole world probably does," rejoined Miss Strode, a trifle drily; "if any one saw you with those eyes and that look, and--oh, you ridiculous boy!" and she shook her finger at him.

"Oh, you coquette. Can't we----"

"On the common we can talk, if that is what you mean," said Eva, turning away to trip up the dusty road; "the common," she cried with a backward look which should have drawn the young man after her at a fine pace.

But Allen lingered for a moment. Deeply in love as he was, he had his own ideas regarding the management of the fair sex. He knew that when a woman is sure of her swain she is apt to be exacting, so as to check his ardour. On the other hand, if the swain hangs back, the maid comes forward with winsome looks. Hitherto, Allen had been all passion and surrender. Now he thought he would tease Eva a little, by not coming immediately to her beck and call. Therefore, while she skipped ahead--and without looking back, so sure was she that Allen followed--the young man lighted a cigarette, and when the smoke perfumed the air,

looked everywhere save in the direction he desired to look. North, south, west looked Allen, but never east, where could be seen the rising sun of his love. But passion proved to be stronger than principle, and finally his eyes fastened on the shadowy figure of Eva pausing on the edge of the common. She was looking back now, and beckoned with persuasive finger. Allen made a step forward to follow the siren, then halted. A strange feeling took possession of him. Allen's mother was Scotch, and having the impressionable Celtic nature, he was quick to feel the influences of that unseen world which lies all round, invisible to dull eyes, and unfelt by material souls. At the moment, in spite of the warmth, he had what the Scotch call a "grue," and shivered where he stood. At his back sank the sun red and angry, peering through lines of black cloud suggestive of prison bars. The scarlet light flooded the landscape in a sinister manner, and dyed the flitting figure of Eva in crimson hues. She looked as though bathed in blood, and--as she was now speeding towards the trysting place--as though she fled from justice. Also, she ran from the red west into the gloom of the east, already shadowy with the coming night. Was there no parable in this? considered Allen, and shivered again.

"Indigestion," thought Allen, striving to throw off that weird feeling and trying to explain it in the most commonplace way. But he knew well that he had never in his life suffered from indigestion, and that the feeling--which had now passed away--was a hint of coming evil. "To me, I hope," murmured the young man, stepping out briskly, "not to Eva, poor darling."

When he joined the girl, he was quite his old fervid self, and felt his premonitions pass away in the charm of the hour. Even the sunset was less scarlet and more of a rosy tint like his new thoughts. He threw himself at the feet of his beloved, cast away his cigarette, and took her hand within his. For the moment Dan Cupid was king.

But was he? Eva did not appear to think so. She allowed her hand to remain in Allen's warm grip, but he felt no responsive pressure. The two were seated on a rustic bench within a circle of flowering gorse. The sward was green and smooth, worthy of the dancing feet of Titania's elves, and perhaps it might have been one of their ballrooms the lovers had invaded. In that case it would certainly prove unhappy ground to them. The fairies do not like mortals, however loving, who intrude on their privacy. The elves, however, not yet awakened by the moon, made no sign, and in that still place no sound could be heard. Overhead was the flushed sky, underfoot the emerald sward, and there were the lovers supplied with an admirable stage on which to play their parts. Allen was willing enough, and looked up adoringly into the face of his Juliet. But Eva's gaze was fixed on the orange-hued blossom of the gorse with a far-away look. And when she spoke, it certainly was not of love.

"Allen," she said, in a calm, level voice, "we have known each other for nearly a year."

"Call it a century," said Allen, kissing her hand. "I love you and you love me. Why talk of time? Love like ours lives in eternity."

"Hum," said Eva, although the ejaculation was not a pretty one, the question is, "Will it live at all?"

"Eva!" He raised himself on his elbow and stared; but the girl continued to speak without looking at him.

"Do you know my history, Allen?" she asked; then without waiting for his reply, went on in a passionless way: "My father is the last Strode of Wargrove. The manor house of our race is only a few miles away, and there the Strodes lived for centuries. My grandfather, however, was an extravagant man, and lost all the money. When my father returned from Oxford to take up his position in the world, he found that his father was dead and that the estate would have to be sold to pay the debts. In that way, Allen, the manor passed from our family."

"I have heard something of this, Eva," said the perplexed young man; "but why waste time in telling me of it now?"

"You will find the time will not be wasted," rejoined Eva, glancing down with something like pity; "let me go on. My father, brought up in a luxurious way, took what money there was left and went to seek work in London. He speculated, and knowing nothing about speculation he lost everything. Then your father, who was his friend at school and college, lent him some thousands, and my father, to better his position, married Lady Jane Delham, daughter of the Earl of Ipsen. I understand that the money which she brought with her, was lost also--in speculation."

"But why did your father speculate so much?" asked Allen.

"His one desire was to buy back the manor," said Eva. "He has much pride of race, and wants to end his days under the roof where he was born. But let me go on once more. The money was lost, and Lord Ipsen died. His title

went to a distant cousin, who did not like my mother, consequently there was no chance of my father getting more money in that quarter. I was born under Mrs. Merry's roof; but till the age of seven I lived with my mother in a small Hampstead cottage. My father went on speculating. Sometimes he made money, at other times he lost it; but always, he followed the will-o'-the-wisp of fortune, hoping to get back his old home. He then went to South America, and took my mother with him. I was placed at school, and until I was fifteen I never saw my parents."

"Poor Eva, how lonely you must have been!"

"I *was* lonely, and yet--having seen so little of my parents I don't know that I missed them so very much. My father stopped in Peru till I was fifteen, and my mother with him. He came back poor, but with sufficient money to speculate again. He therefore placed my mother and me in Misery Castle."

"Ridiculous name," muttered Allen uneasily.

"A very appropriate name," said Eva with some bitterness, seeing how unhappy Mrs. Merry is. "She had a bad husband and has a bad son. My mother was also unhappy. Meeting her again after all those years, I did my best to comfort her. But her heart was broken."

"Your father?" asked Allen in a low voice.

"Who else?" replied Eva, flushing, and the water came to her eyes. "Oh! Allen, I do not wish to speak ill, or to think ill, of my father; but--no," she broke off, suppressing herself. "I cannot speak from what I have seen, and I judge no one, let alone my father, on what I have heard. Mrs. Merry thinks badly of my father, and my poor mother--ah! my poor

mother! she said as little as she could. But her heart was broken, Allen; she died of a broken heart and a crushed spirit. I lost her five months after my father went to seek his fortune in South Africa, and since then I have lived alone with Mrs. Merry."

"Poor Eva!" said Hill tenderly, and repossessed himself of the hand which she had withdrawn. "But Mrs. Merry is good to you?"

"Very--very good," said Miss Strode with emphasis. "She was my nurse and foster-mother, Allen. When I was born my father came here for a time before taking the Hampstead cottage. Well, Allen, that is my history. My father all these five years has paid Mrs. Merry for my board and lodging, and has sent home pocket-money for me. But all that time he has never written me a tender. letter."

"Not even when his wife died?"

"No. He wrote a few words of sympathy, but not those which a father should have written to a motherless girl. From what I know of him, and from what Mrs. Merry says, he is a hard, cold, self-concentrated man. I dread his coming more than I can tell you, Allen."

"If he ever does come," said the young man softly.

Eva started and looked down. "What do you mean by that?" she asked anxiously.

Allen met her gaze frankly and laughed. "Oh, you need not disturb yourself, my dear," he said with a shrug, "only you know my father and yours were always chums. Why, I don't know, as my father is certainly not the kind of man to suit such a one as you describe Mr. Strode to be. But they were chums at school and college, and my father knows a

lot about yours. When I mentioned that your father was expected to-night, my father--it was at breakfast--said that Mr. Strode might not arrive after all. I did not ask him what he meant."

"Could Mr. Hill have heard from my father?"

"I can't say, and even if he did, I don't know why my father should suggest that Mr. Strode would not come home. But, Eva, you are pale."

"I feel pale," she said in a low voice. "Allen, sit beside me. I want to talk seriously--to tell you a dream."

The young man, nothing loath, promptly seated himself by her side and slipped a strong, tender arm round her slender waist. Eva's heart beat stronger when she found herself in such an assured haven. It seemed as though Allen, noble and firm and loving, would be able to shelter her from the coming storm. "And the storm will come," she said aloud.

"What is that?" asked Hill, not catching her meaning.

"It is my dream," she answered; and then, with her head on his shoulder, she told about her vision of the night. Allen was inclined to make light of it.

"You superstitious little darling," he said fondly, "the dream is easily accounted for. You were thinking of your father, and, being anxious about his arrival, dreamed what you did."

Eva released herself, rather offended. "I was thinking of my father, I admit," she said, "but I was not at all anxious. My father has been all over the world, and in wild parts, so he can look after himself very well. Besides, I never thought

of the Red Deeps. And remember, Allen, I saw the right hand, gloved."

"That would seem to intimate that the dead man you saw in your dream was Mr. Strode," said Allen, kissing her; "but it's all nonsense, Eva."

"You don't think anything will happen?" she demanded, anxious to be reassured after Mrs. Merry's gloomy talk.

"No, I don't. I have known of lots of dreams quite vivid which never came true. I'm not a scientific chap," added Allen, laughing, "or I would be able to prove that this dream is only a reflex of your waking thoughts. Mr. Strode will arrive all right."

"And then we must part," sighed Eva.

This time it was Hill who started, and his face flushed. "I don't quite understand."

"You will soon. I told you the history of my life, Allen, so that I might lead up to this. I wrote to my father at Cape Town, telling him I loved you, and that Mr. Hill was pleased we should be engaged."

"My father was delighted," put in Allen quickly.

"So I said. My father never replied to my letter save in sending a cablegram stating he was coming home in the *Dunoon Castle*. When he was at Southampton, he wrote, saying I was not to think of marrying you, and that he would tell me of his plans for my future when he returned to Wargrove. He decided to remain for a week in London, and yesterday he wired that he was coming home to-night. So you see, Allen," Eva rested her head on her lover's shoulder, "he will part us."

"No!" cried Hill, rising and looking very tall and strong and determined, "he will never do that. What reason----"

"My father is a man who will refuse to give his reason."

"Not to me," rejoined the other hotly. "Mr. Strode will not dare to dismiss me in so easy and off-hand a fashion. I love you, Eva, and I marry you, whatever your father may say. Unless," he caught her hands as she rose, and stared deep into her eyes, "unless you leave me."

"No! no! I never will do that, Allen. Come what may, I'll be true."

Then followed an interlude of kisses, and afterwards the two, hand in hand, walked across the common on their way to Misery Castle. It was not seven o'clock, but the twilight was growing darker. "Do you know what your father's plans are?" asked Allen, as they stepped out on to the deserted and dusty road.

"No. I know nothing save what I tell you. And my dream---"

"Dearest, put the dream out of your head. If it is any comfort to you, I'll go to the Red Deeps tonight. Do you think I'll find a dead body there?" he asked, laughing.

"Not if you go before nine o'clock. The dream was at nine last night."

"But your father will be home at eight, Eva?"

"I hope so," she murmured.

"You are so foolishly superstitious," said Allen, pressing her arm which was within his own; "you dear little goose, don't you see that if your father comes to Misery Castle at eight, he can't possibly be lying dead in the Red Deeps at nine. When did you last hear from him, Eva?"

"Yesterday morning. He wired that he would be down at eight this evening."

"Well then, he was alive then, and is stopping in town on business as you said. He will come to Westhaven by the train arriving at six-thirty and will drive over."

"The road passes the Red Deeps," insisted Eva.

"How obstinate you are, Eva," said Allen, contracting his forehead; "I tell you what I'll do to set your mind at rest; you know he is alive now?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I got that wire yesterday morning."

"Well then, I'll set off to the Red Deeps at once, and will get there just at eight. I may meet Mr. Strode coming along in the fly, and if so I'll follow it back to Misery Castle, so as to see him safely home. If I don't, I'll go to the Red Deeps, and if any attack is made on him, I'll be there to give him a hand."

"Thank you, Allen. I should be more at ease if you did that."

"Then it shall be done," said Allen, kissing her, "but I feel that I am encouraging you in superstitious fancies."

"My dream was so vivid."

"Pooh. Indigestion."

"Then Mr. Hill hinted that my father might not return."

"Well then, I'll ask him what he meant, and explain when we meet again."

"If we ever do meet," sighed Eva, stopping at the gate.

"You will be true to me, Eva?"

"Always--always--always. There--there," she kissed him under the friendly shelter of the sycamore and ran indoors.

Allen turned on his heel in high spirits, and set out for the Red Deeps. At first he laughed at Eva's dream and Eva's superstition. But as he walked on in the gathering darkness, he felt as though the future also was growing more gloomy. He recalled his own feelings of the girl's dress dappled with blood, and of her flying form. Again he felt the "grue," and cursed himself for an old woman. "I'll find nothing--nothing," he said, trying to laugh.

But the shadow of the dream, which was also the shadow of the future, fell upon him darker than ever.

CHAPTER III

THE NE'ER-DO-WEEL

Anxious to make the best impression on her father, Eva Strode ran up to her room to put on an evening gown. Mr. Strode supplied her liberally with money, for whatever his faults may have been, he certainly was not mean; therefore she possessed a fairly extensive wardrobe. She did not see Mrs. Merry on entering the cottage, as that good lady was occupied in looking after the dinner in the little back-kitchen. The table was laid, however, and after making herself smart, Eva descended to add a few finishing touches in the shape of flowers.

Cheered by the view Allen took of her dream, and still more by the fact that he had gone to the Red Deeps, Eva arranged many roses, red and white, in a great silver bowl which had belonged to her mother. As a matter of fact, Eva had been born in Misery Castle, and being sickly as a baby, had been christened hurriedly in the cottage out of the bowl, an heirloom of the Delham family. Mrs. Merry had taken possession of it, knowing, that if Lady Jane took it away, her husband would speedily turn it into money. Therefore, Mrs. Merry being a faithful guardian, the bowl was still in the cottage, and on this night Eva used it as a centrepiece to the prettily decorated table. And it did look pretty. The cloth was whiter than snow, the silver sparkled and the crystal glittered, while the roses blooming in the massive bowl added a touch of needed colour.

There were evidences of Eva's taste in the small dining-room. Mrs. Merry had furnished it, certainly, but Eva had spent much of her pocket-money in decorating the room. Everything was charming and dainty and intensely feminine. Any one could see at a glance that it was a true woman's room. And Eva in her black gauze dress, bare-necked and bare-armed, flitted gracefully about the tiny apartment. Her last act was to light the red-shaded lamp which hung low over the table. The window she left open and the blind up, as the night was hot, and the breeze which cooled the room made the place more bearable.

"It's quite pretty," said Eva, standing back against the door to get the effect of the glittering table and the red light and the flowers. "If father is dissatisfied he must be hard to please," she sighed, "and from what Nanny says, I fear he is."

A quarter to eight, he'll be here soon. I'd better see when the dinner will be ready."

But before doing so, she went to the front door and listened for the sound of wheels. She certainly heard them, but the vehicle was driving towards, and not from, the common. Apparently Mr. Strode was not yet at hand, so she went to the kitchen. To her surprise she heard voices. One was that of Mrs. Merry, querulous as usual, and the other a rich, soft, melodious voice which Eva knew only too well. It was that of her foster-brother Cain.

This name was another of Mrs. Merry's eccentricities. Her husband, showing the brute within him a year after marriage, had disillusioned his poor wife very speedily. He was drunk when the boy was born, and still drunk when the boy was christened; Mrs. Merry therefore insisted that the boy would probably take after his father, and requested that the name of Cain should be given to him. The curate objected, but Mrs. Merry being firm and the curate weak, the boy was actually called after Adam's eldest son. Had the rector been at home such a scandal--as he regarded it--would not have occurred, but Mr. Quain was absent on a holiday, and returned to find an addition to his flock in the baby person of Cain Merry. The lad grew up handsome enough, but sufficiently wild and wicked to justify his mother's choice of a name. Yet he had his good moments, and might have improved had not his mother nagged him into wrong-doing.

"Well, Cain," said Eva, entering the kitchen, "so you're back?"