The Graven Image

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Chapter IV

“Sudden Death”

Auburn’s first letter to Mrs Burtrand, in which he begged for an interview, had received no acknowledgment of any kind; but his second—which indeed was of a bolder tone—was successful, and that in the course of thirty-six hours. There came an astonishingly civil note by the early morning post. The note agreed to an interview. The interview was appointed to take place at six o’clock in the evening of that day.

“The very worst thing that could happen now,” Mrs Burtrand had decided, as her mind cleared, and her fury crystallised into a more competent form of antagonism, “would be direct communication between them. A meeting would be fatal! There is a certain danger of one in his coming to see me; but this may be minimised. Six o’clock has found Jeanette at her practice ever since she came home from school, when we have not been engaged; and of late weeks she has been more regular than ever: her music has been a comfort to her, I suppose! So that danger may be minimised
by seeing him at six. There would be a far greater danger if I refused to see him at all. He would either write to Jeanette herself, or contrive to encounter her. He threatens as much; and if they were to come together now, no power on earth would part them again. But if it is hope he wants, a straw to cling to, a thread to hang on by—I think I know how to deal with him.”

So she wrote to him in a civil strain; and he was discovered by his friend Hattersley, who looked him up towards the close of the day—who had looked him up almost daily of late—dressing in the little bedroom that adjoined his studio.

“Going out? Come, that’s better!” cried Hattersley, quite delighted. “But you are a little late in starting. It has been a glorious day.”

“It’s an appointment,” Auburn answered, brushing his coat in a preoccupied way.

“Then I hope it’s a business appointment,” said Hattersley bluntly. “My dear boy, you’ve given way to this sort of thing long enough! For a month you have done nothing but sit here and eat your heart out: you look a perfect wreck: and you have thrown up the the finest opening a young man of your experience ever got. If what you suspect is true, she is not worth thinking about; if it is not true, you should live and work as though she loved you still; and then, if it ever came right again—as I keep telling you it may—you would be worthier of her than you ever were before.”
“I am going to see whether it is true or not,” returned Auburn, putting on his hat. “That is my appointment—it is with Mrs Burtrand. If I have been all wrong, I swear to you, Hattersley, I will try to do as you say. While she is free there is hope!”

Hattersley was silent as they turned down the gas in the studio and then went through the hall. But on the steps he said:

“And if you have been in the right?”

“Then God help me!” said Auburn. In a moment he was gone.

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On the ground floor, to the left as you entered the Burtrands’ house in town, there was an unnoticeable little room with a gas-stove in it. It was spoken of, with satire which cannot have been universally unconscious, as Mr Burtrand’s study. It was furnished with books which this gentleman had never opened; with a writing-table at which he had rarely written; with an arm-chair, of considerable width and depth and softness, in which, when in town during the hot weather, he had frequently slept away the golden afternoon. If it was anybody’s “study” it was Mrs Burtrand’s. She used the room for such purposes as the expression of her mind to the butcher or the baker, with accompanying threats, and for the reception of new or prospective servants. Mrs Burtrand changed her servants very frequently indeed, and the charm
was, that the new could not possibly be corrupted by the old, and “sit against the place,” in the few feet of hall that lay between the front door and the presence-chamber. This is a point on which mistresses of Mrs Burtrand’s stamp keep the keenest eye; they know (as, indeed, no one else can) that painstaking malignity of the serving tribe while lying under “their month”; and Mrs Burtrand, with the study door ajar, and her hallowed hand to her ear, was the happy circumventor of at least one favourite form of it. So she had made good use of the study many a time. But she found it a real blessing on the December evening when she received David Auburn there.

She did not rise from her chair. She was wearing the slightly hostile but entirely alert expression with which she received new servants; and the preparations were otherwise similar: the stove was in full blast, and the little room was in a blaze of gas-light—for the critical scrutiny of the visitor’s looks. Mrs Burtrand inclined her head a little—ever so little—and bade the young man be seated. That meagre bow alone differentiated the reception of David Auburn from that of the young persons from the registry office.

The door was shut, yet neither spoke. A moment’s silence was the natural thing. But overhead, in the drawing-room, Jeanette had begun her practice; it was impossible not to hear her, she had begun with an Étude of Chopin; and a visible spasm of pain showed plainly that Auburn heard, and
realised. He seemed strangely altered—as though his face had shrunk, and his eyes grown bigger and blacker.

“You say you have a question to ask me,” said Mrs Burtrand blandly. “I am ready to hear it.”

There was a sudden glitter in his searching gaze. “Are you ready to answer it?”

“I hope to be able to do so,” said Mrs Burtrand, with cool caution.

He did not speak.

“When you think fit to ask your question,” she added.

His face worked, his lips moved, but he uttered nothing.

“I am waiting,” remarked Mrs Burtrand, with ostentatious patience, her placid eyes turned full upon his anguish.

Auburn had mechanically taken a seat. He now got up, stepped forward, and stood sideways before the stove—his head bent, his hands locked behind his back. Steam rose up from the skirt of his overcoat, which was wet from the rain.

“Does she care for anyone else?” he asked—quite quietly, in the end.

Mrs Burtrand was a little startled. This was not exactly the question she had anticipated.

He repeated it. She dropped her eyes, shrugged her well-upholstered shoulders, and wagged her head once, from left to right obliquely.
“Does she care for anyone else?” he asked for the third time, in a louder voice: which trembled.

The answer came with all apparent reluctance:

“Yes!”

Upstairs Jeanette was playing Beethoven—the first bars of the Moonlight Sonata. Auburn knew the thing, though not by name. He was no musician, but he had loved Jeanette’s music—would sit beside her, listening and watching, by the hour. He had not thought to listen to Jeanette’s music any more.

“You say she does care for some one else!” he said, in a low, repressed tone.

“She does—I am afraid,” said Mrs Burtrand, with lowered eyes. Her fair smooth face had flushed a little. He thought she must be blushing for Jeanette!

“I was sure of it!” he exclaimed, but still very quietly. “I have been sure of it ever since that afternoon when I came here last, though I did not think of it at the moment, when sense and soul were absorbing her for the last time. I couldn’t think of it then! I could only see that she had stopped caring for me: nothing beyond that. But the other conviction came soon enough: I saw my—successor: and I have been sure ever since. Thank God it has been a conviction! Certainty makes it easier, not harder, to bear. It has already turned my days into night, my nights into hell, my life—”
His voice had risen like the rising wind: he checked himself by a strenuous effort. In the pause, the strains of the Moonlight Sonata came softly, sweetly, from the room above. He added in an abrupt hard way:

“Are they engaged yet?”

For the second time Mrs Burtrand felt startled. She had to consider: and she quickly saw that to lie hard, on this point, would be highly indiscreet. The art of lying is to know when not to lie, and to make the most of these moments. With skilful manipulation a single drop of pure fact may be made to tincture a pint of barefaced falsehood. Mrs Burtrand possessed both the requisite skill, and the presence of mind to use it to the very best advantage. The blue eyes raised to the pale, passionate face of Auburn were guileless as those of an infant in arms.

“No,” she said slowly; “they are not engaged.”

“You lay a stress on the last word!”

“Did I?” said Mrs Burtrand lightly.

“You did!” he cried. His wild eyes flashed into her soul. Her glance fell. “Well, it was unconscious, I am sure.”

“You mean that they soon will be engaged! Why don’t you say what you mean?”

Mrs Burtrand was still considering. If she had said they were engaged, there would have been the danger of his wait-
ing to reproach Jeanette: when all would have come out: with fatal results. But in leading him to suppose that one day, before long, they would be engaged: that they understood one another, and were, in fact, only waiting for a decent interval to elapse: that danger, also, would be minimised, if not virtually removed. This, then, was the line to take. For the moment, however, Mrs Burtrand felt that this young man must not be allowed to bully her just as he pleased; she laid her fingers on the bell-handle; and held them there, the diamonds glittering.

“I did not permit you to come here to speak to me in this manner,” she said sternly. “I never heard of such a tone to take with a lady! You will force me to ring.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Auburn wearily. He sat down again, and the spirit was gone out of him. He leant forward, laying his head on one hand. His fingers made white bars among the black masses of his hair.

Jeanette, up above, had drifted into Mendelssohn. Her practice permitted a catholic range—but was she practising at all? There was a wealth of light and shade and feeling in her playing this evening—a subtle, moving abandon—which she but rarely rose to. Her mother fancied she must be playing “without her notes”; dared say that she was sitting in the firelight only; and wondered, with a resentful sneer, whether there were tears in her eyes—Jeanette was such a little fool, hard where she should be soft, and soft where
there was nothing in the world to be soft about! All the same, her own foot was beating time unconsciously, in the little room below. But David, with his head upon his hand, had ceased to hear.

Yet he was the next to speak.

“Then it is true; and she loves him; and my last hope is gone! My last hold on everything I have grown to care for and try for during the last two years—is gone. My last hold on the little bit of my life that was less ignoble than the rest of it, that’s gone too! I am as I was before I knew her; as I was before I came back to England for good. For good, if you please! Oh, if she had only ceased to care for me—that and no worse—I could have borne it! I would have worked, I would have gone on working with the love of her in my heart, I would have lived as Hattersley said, as though she loved me still—if only that had been all! But not now; not when she has been so false; not when she has gone from me to him so quickly—from the poor devil to the rich man! I am not man enough to do all that now. No! She is false and I hate her, the world is false and I hate it! I have had enough of it. I give in. I had none of her natural strength, and I know it, but with her love and help and example I might have become different. God help me, I was different. But now it is all over. She is strong, but false and cruel and calculating. I go back to what I was before I loved her. I give in!”
Strong spirits that stagger on under a cross may move the soul to veneration; but those who droop to be crushed still touch it with compassion. And little, lying hearts, like Mrs Burtrand’s, can pity more easily than admire; for pity is a villain’s virtue. Mrs Burtrand had not much of it; but she had enough to bother her, rather, when she heard the deep sob in Auburn’s voice—when she beheld him unsexed by tears.

She cast about for a word of consolation.

“Surely,” she said a little nervously (for the idea that consequences might make her respectable fraud a crime, which suddenly occurred to her, was a very disagreeable one), “surely you don’t dream of doing anything dreadful? No, I am sure you are going to stick to your work, and get over it! You have begun so splendidly you know; you are sure to do well. Why it was only the other day—that dreadful day—you told us of your commission. That seemed so capital! Surely you will go on, and get other commissions, and better prices, now that you have begun so well?”

She spoke anxiously; and indeed, at the moment, she did feel anxious: he looked so desperate, and if he did anything desperate how terrible it would be—for her! To be fair, however, this was but one thought. She was really moved to compassion—even she. She had spoken words of sympathy, according to her lights. Though her lights, as ever, showed
her the mean material side, she had said the most comfortable words she could think of.

Auburn laughed her to scorn, at once bitterly and gently.

“Do you suppose I wanted that commission? Then I should not be here tonight. I should have been as hard right through these weeks as I am now—and for ever. No! I got rid of that.”

He rose, crossed the room, and held out his hand.

“Goodbye!”

“Are you going?” An impulse made her hold his hand and speak kindly, she was thrilled with sorrow for him, she had seldom been so genuinely moved. “You need not hurry—if there is anything you would say?”

His miserable eyes seemed once more to flash through hers into her soul. And her eyes were actually wet; surely she was miraculously touched!

“Does she love him?” he whispered eagerly. “Are you sure?”

Mrs Burtrand dropped her his hand, and recovered her proper self in an instant. She had felt for him; but still she must lie to him; and she hated him now for making her lie once more and hate herself. Had he only left well alone, she would have looked back to her part in the interview with pleasure and with pride. He had established such a glow at her heart as had not been there for years. If only for quench-
ing that glow, and stifling a new sensation at its birth, she would show him no mercy now.

"There is no doubt of it," she said coldly. "Since you press the matter, they have both confided in me! You must just try to get over it."

He left the house in a state of quiet desperation. Life and death was a toss-up. Latterly reckless, he was ready for anything. Again he stood still on the pavement. His breathing became thick and hard. He was wondering whether Pelham Warburton would drive up again, swearing to choke him if he did! But there were no cab-wheels in the square, the fine rain fell noiselessly on the pavement, there was no sound of any kind, as he listened, but Jeanette’s music in that upper room with the flickering light before the blinds.

Still Mendelssohn! So he thought, but he was never sure of these things. No matter what it was, it softened him. Past happiness and future woe were drawn in and concentrated into a present pain that was more than half an ecstatic joy. He was listening for the last time to her deft, soft handiwork. He was feeling the spell of her presence, her pervading sweetness and purity, for the last time. It was the last link; no need to break it in haste.

Suddenly she stopped. He felt the agony of bandages torn from a healing wound. But in another minute, before he realised what it was, she was in the middle of the only piece he knew by name, the one thing that appealed to him more
acutely than any other, because tender and simple and sweet; the one thing she had made him really love—in those days that were still so fresh, yet now the old days; the thing that had once been a pretty jest between them, because she had tried to tire him of it, and failed! It was the ‘Schlummerlied’ of Schumann.

He clasped the wet iron palings. What gave her the heart to play that? How could she bear to play that, when every note must ring in him she had loved so well, so lately? She must have no heart: no shame: no feeling: or she could not play that old thing through to the end. And he was right, she could not do it, the ‘Schlummerlied’ stopped midway!

His soul leapt. The woman had been wrong, or lying. Jeanette loved him still! She would not go on because the association overpowered her. It hurt her, it cut her to the heart; she loved him still! He rushed up the steps and seized the bell. He would push past the servant, bound up the stairs, into the room, into her arms!

He was distraught. His mind was weak for want of sleep, his body for want of exercise. His soul was in the balance, swinging this way and that with each settling note. And a note now turned the scale. From those windows with the flickering light, from the same piano, from under those same fingers, came the jarring crash of something that was popular, common, and on half the organs in London!
His fingers fell from the iron knob. He did not quite know Jeanette, after all. He did not know her peculiar trick of doing violence to her feelings when the feelings went against their principles; how should he? He did not know her innate proneness to sentiment: for she had only let him see her cultivated hatred of it. He little thought that the keys up there were slippery with her tears!

He walked away. They had been very near to each other. Between them now there was the Great Gulf fixed. A note had turned the scale that held his soul.

He went home, made a flaring light in the studio, and fetched a razor. In his mad haste he overturned a small table, and a shower of pipes and brushes clattered to the floor, with saucer full of ashes, which was smashed. He now raised upon the easel the portrait he had painted of her he had loved, and slit the canvas into strips, making the first savage cut across her snowy throat. He hacked on until the wooden frame was empty. The fallen strips of canvas he trampled on and kicked aside with his muddy boots.

When he had finished, the razor was left open in his hand; he shut it mechanically; then opened it again, and gazed at the blade with glassy eyes.

He seemed to make up his mind. He took a shilling from his pocket, and poised it on his thumb-nail.

“Heads for Death,” he whispered. “Tails for hell upon earth!”
The coin spun high under the sky-light, was lost to sight, then rang upon the floor and rolled away.

He took a candle, muttering “Sudden death!”

He groped upon his knees, the open razor held tightly in his right hand, the dripping candle in his left. He had difficulty in finding the shilling; it had rolled among the litter of the fallen table; it had settled in a little heap of white ashes from the broken saucer. It was coated, it was impossible to see which side was uppermost.

Without touching the coin, he bent lower, craned his neck, and blew away the ashes. The upper side was a tail!