

ten a book on Notre Dame. Impossible to do anything with it. Hugo had monopolized the subject. That's how we pay him out."

"Well, then," continued my husband, smiling. "I won't quote Shakespeare. But you must not deprive yourself of sleep. It is most unwise. And another thing, light is a great essential to health. Where the sun does not enter the doctor will, you know." This, glancing at the darkened panes.

"Ah, you're wondering why we have shut out the view, 'the beautiful view,' of which our landlord spoke so much. No, we don't care for views. Mort says that he takes no pleasure in views, for distance suggests still greater distance and the Eternal Beyond—an incomprehensible problem with which he has always been unwilling to perplex his brain. I agree with him. A good stone wall or a dirty window pane has ever sufficed my eyes to rest upon; for I am then at liberty to imagine things beyond as far more beautiful than what there really is as the landscapes of my imagination are more beautiful than those one really sees."

"I am sorry I can't offer you any tea," she continued almost in the same breath. "We have only one teapot, and my husband keeps his cigars in it."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask," I said, "what work Mr. Mort is at present engaged on? I am anxiously looking forward to it. I cannot tell you with what pleasure I read his last book."

"He is writing a series of 'Letters from Heaven,'" she answered. "They are masterpieces."

She was about to add something when my husband rose. He was evidently afraid that something blasphemous was about to follow.

"Well," he said, as he took his leave, "I don't read novels as a rule, but I shall make a point of getting that one from Mudie's. It is a subject full of interest to me as a clergyman. Good-day, Mrs. Mort."

"What a relief to be out of that house!" I said, as we stepped into the road. "Do you think the woman is mad?"

"Mad, certainly not; but very eccentric. I wonder what the husband is like."

"If he is only visible between ten at night and nine in the morning," I answered, "we are not very likely ever to know. We can't call on him during those hours."

Mrs. Mort never returned our call, nor did she ever appear at our church, and, what was stranger, neither she nor her husband was ever seen to leave Sea View Villa or to take a walk in the village. The door of their house was always closed. The tradesmen were spoken to through a spyhole. Our grocer told me that he had been ordered to leave his basket on the doorstep whenever he came, and to return next day for fresh orders and payment. He always found his empty basket waiting for him where he had left it, and by its side an envelope containing his money and a written list of the things he was to bring the next time he called. Similar instructions had been given to the other tradesmen. The tax gatherer, by an arrangement made with Mr. Dale by Mrs. Mort on signing the lease, was paid by the Squire's steward.

This extraordinary conduct intrigued us greatly, and was the subject of interminable conversation between ourselves and the Dales whenever we met. These, by the way, had met with a reception similar to ours on calling at Sea View. Their call had never been returned. I am ashamed to say we made some very unfair suppositions about the strange lady and her mysterious husband. This was, no doubt, because we were all disappointed in our hopes of having a pleasant addition to our small society at Sandville. We forgot to make allowances for people whose profession exacted privacy and retirement, nor did we remember that the Mort's, having lived for many years on the Continent, were most probably quite unaware of the usages of English society. Mr. Dale seemed very annoyed at the conduct of his new tenants, and openly regretted having let them his house. His maiden sister spoke of Mrs. Mort as an "Irreligious Ghoul," while Mrs. Dale strongly modified her opinion of the lady whom, when signing a nine years' lease of her house, she had found "charming, though peculiar."

Our bad example was naturally followed by the villagers, but unfortunately these did not confine themselves to verbal speculations. Unable to satisfy their curiosity by a variety of spying round the premises of the villa they revenged themselves by declaring war against its invisible inhabitants. Of an evening, groups would form outside its gates, and cries, insulting or mirth-provoking, would be uttered. This soon became a regular habit. They called it "drawing the badger." On one occasion one young man went so far as to throw a dead cat up against one of the windows on the first floor. It broke the pane and fell through into the room, amid the shouts of those present. Suddenly the window was pulled open and Mrs. Mort appeared. She looked very angry.

"Hurrah, hurrah!" screamed the yokels. "We've drawn one badger. Now for the other!" But the laughter occasioned by this sally was soon checked when it appeared that Mrs. Mort was commencing reprisals. The dead cat was first buried back, and this was followed by a brisk fire of various books, flung with unerring aim by the incensed lady. These volumes, which were all from various editions of Shakespeare's works, gave the yokels some smart raps about the ears. It is doubtful how far this scandal might not have gone had not my husband happened to come up at that moment. He was indignant when he heard what had occurred, and sharply rebuked his parishioners, many of whom had their hands full of mud and stones which they had just picked up to carry on the siege. Indeed, so strongly did he express his displeasure at such molestation of harmless and unoffending people that from that day forth the nightly scenes outside Sea View Villa ceased.

After this the general curiosity, for want of ailment, appeased itself, and gradually we ceased to occupy ourselves about either Mrs. Mort or her husband.

A few weeks later a cousin of mine came to spend part of the Oxford vacation with us. We naturally told him about the affair, which greatly interested him.

He vowed that he would "draw that badger" the same evening. "What a lark!" he cried. "I never thought when I came down here that I should find such an adventure waiting for me. Old Mort, too! I am a great admirer of his, but I didn't think he was a 'crank.' From his books, one would think him a very jolly, jovial sort of a fellow."

Both my husband and I endeavored to persuade him to leave these people alone, but to no purpose. Charlie had made up his mind, and, having matured his plan of attack, sallied forth at eleven o'clock in the evening, and made his way to Sea View Villa.

We awaited his return with considerable anxiety. There was so much mystery attaching to the house, and Mrs. Mort was so eccentric in her behavior, that we really felt afraid lest evil should befall him. It was therefore no small relief to us to hear him ring at the door about an hour later. I rushed out to meet him, and was delighted to see him safe and sound, though looking rather pale.

"Well?" I asked anxiously. "It's all right," he answered. "I've seen him. But what a guy he is! He scared me out of my wits."

I took him up to my husband's study, and begged him to tell us all about what he had seen, and how he had managed to come face to face with our invisible parishioner.

"Yes," he answered; "but you must let me smoke a cigar while I talk—my nerves are rather shaken. You won't mind, Mary?"

I gave my consent readily, and, when he had lighted his cigar, he began. "I knocked several times at the door before I got an answer from within. At last I heard a heavy step coming down the stairs, and presently a gruff voice asked me, through the spy hole, who I was, and what I wanted."

"I have come down from Jones, Wilson & Co.—Mort's publishers, you know," I answered. "It is on most important business. I must see him at once."

"What is this business?" asked the voice. "I can only tell it to Mr. Mort himself. I repeat, it is very important. I have, besides, to hand him a check."

"The door was then opened, and I entered a perfectly dark hall.

"Have you any matches about you?" asked the woman, for woman I distinguished the person to be.

"No," I said.

"Well, then, go in there," she said, pushing me into a room one side of the passage.

"This room was faintly lighted by what looked like moonlight passing through panes of red glass."

"The drawing room," I interrupted.

"You remember, John. Go on, Charlie."

"It had a most ghastly effect, I can tell you, and I began to regret having come

The woman stood at the door for some time without speaking.

"At last she said, 'I will send Mr. Mort down to you. But you must stay in the dark. His eyes won't bear the light.'

"With these words she went up stairs. I felt very uncomfortable, and began feeling in my pocket for a light. I cannot tell you how glad I was to discover a couple of fuses in the lining of my waistcoat.

"I heard her walking slowly up the stairs, and then in the room above my head. Then there was a sound of voices, as of a man and a woman talking, but I could not distinguish what was said very clearly. The man seemed to ask, 'Who is it? what does he want?' the woman's answers were inaudible.

"Presently I heard steps on the stairs, a heavy slow tread. It was Mr. Mort. On the landing he began to whistle, and came whistling into the room.

"I was sitting on a chair opposite the door, and I saw him come in. It was a tall stout figure, and what greatly surprised me was that he wore a hat.

"I could see neither his face nor his dress, but I can assure you this tall, black figure, wearing a hat, was of no very comfortable aspect as I saw it pass through that mysterious light.

He crossed the room, whistling all the while, and sat down with his back to the window, the curtains of which he arranged so as to completely conceal his person.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked in a very deep voice. I hope your business is important. Otherwise you may get into trouble for disturbing me at this hour. Come, what is it?"

"I had prepared my answer, and said, 'We have had an offer of two thousand dollars from White's of New-York for the advance sheets of your next novel. We are to cable reply. I have been sent down to consult you, and, at the same time, to ask you when it will be ready. We are very anxious to get the manuscript in hand at once.'

"Mr. Mort made no answer, and the perfect stillness of the house, the awful light that shone through the window, and the dim outline of that mysterious figure among the curtains, produced together an effect that was decidedly unpleasant to my nerves. I decided that my joke had gone far enough. But I could not go away without seeing our author; that would have been a fiasco. So I dropped a shilling on the floor, pretended to grope for it, and struck a fusee.

"With a cry that chilled me to the bones, the figure sprang at me, with its arms out. Of course I was not going to stand any violence, author or no author, so I pushed my chair in between his legs, and down he came, such a cropper! Meanwhile I rushed out into the passage, opened the door some how, and ran all the way here. And jolly glad I am to be out of that house."

"But didn't you see him after all?" I cried.

"Oh yes," answered Charlie; "I just had a glance as I dropped my fusee, when he rushed at me. But that glance was quite enough. It was like concentrated Bedlam."

"Well, describe him to us, Charlie," said my husband, who seemed as much interested as I myself was.

"A tall, fat man, with a red face, beardless and whiskerless. He had a top hat on. His hair was short and like rats' tails."

"John!" I cried horror-stricken; "why, that's Mrs. Mort."

"This is a very serious matter," said my husband. "It seems as if our first suspicions were correct. I hardly know what to think. We must go round to Squire Dale the first thing in the morning, and tell him what we have heard. He is a magistrate and will know how to act."

"Perhaps she has murdered him," I cried, "and has him in the house. Oh, John, how horrible!"

"Don't jump at conclusions like that, Mary," said my husband. "I don't know what to think, but I am convinced the matter ought to be investigated. Come, let us get to bed. We will speak to Dale in the morning."

I did not close my eyes all that night, but kept thinking of that horrible woman and fancying all kinds of dreadful things about her and her house.

Immediately after breakfast next morning we went round to the Grange. Mr. Dale, when he heard Charlie's story, was most resolute. He decided to draw out a search warrant, and to enter the premises, by force if necessary. When the village constable, whom he sent for, had arrived, he set out with him and my husband. Charlie was anxious to accompany them, but I felt so nervous that I insisted on his escorting me home. Mrs. Dale was ill at the time, so I did not want to let her know what had happened.

We waited at the vicarage with the greatest impatience for John's return. Charlie behaved horridly, and filled my head with the most gruesome fancies. I cannot imagine where he could have heard all the dreadful stories he told me. He decided that Mrs. Mort had killed her husband, and that the dead body was stuffed up the parlor chimney. At last, seeing how frightened I was, he tried to calm me by laughing at himself.

"No, Mary," he said; "I've got it now. The old lady keeps her husband chained up in the back kitchen, on bread and water, and only lets him out when he has finished a book. She finds that that is the only way to make him work."

I could not help smiling at this idea, but nevertheless was mightily curious to hear what my husband would have to tell. He returned about noon, and we met him at the gate.

I saw at once by his face that my silly fears had been unfounded. He laughed heartily, as he glanced at my pale cheeks and scared expression.

"Don't be frightened, little woman," he said, taking my arm. "It's nothing so very dreadful, after all. We had great work to get into the house, and it was only when the Squire threatened to have the door broken down that Mrs. Mort let us in. I never saw a woman look so furious. Mr. Dale was very polite, but said that, as there were all kinds of rumors afloat, he had felt it his duty to ask to see Mr. Mort in person."

"You can't; he's busy," answered Mrs. Mort.

"I am sorry to say," said the Squire, "that I must insist on disturbing him. There is a suspicion, ridiculous enough no doubt, of foul play on your part, Mrs. Mort. Kindly assist me in clearing this matter up, for once and all."

"I can't; he's asleep. Call again," she snarled.

"You are prevaricating," answered the Squire. "I must search the premises. Constable, attend to this lady while we go up stairs."

"Mrs. Mort threw herself on the ground before him, and clasping his knees, besought him not to do so—not to wake her James, but to call again."

"This, of course, only confirmed the magistrate's suspicions, and, handing the lady over to the constable, who locked himself up with her in the famous drawing room, he went up stairs, accompanied by me.

The first room we came into was furnished with a bed, a table, and a chair. The table was fitted with writing materials, and covered with pages of manuscript. A pile of books was heaped up in one corner. All the other rooms were quite empty, and, though we instituted a thorough search in all directions, we were unable to discover any trace of Mr. Mort, or of his mortal remains.

At last we descended to the drawing room. We found Mrs. Mort at the piano. She was playing the Dead March in "Saul." The constable tapped his head significantly as he let us in.

"I ask you for the last time, Mrs. Mort," said the Squire very gravely, "to tell me where your husband is, or what has become of him. We have searched the house all over, and can find no trace of him."

"I tell you he's writing his 'Letters from Heaven,'" said the lady, without interrupting her performance on the piano. "He's out; you can't see him."

"Constable, arrest that woman," cried Mr. Dale. "You must, excuse me, madam, but I must do my duty. You will be kept in custody on suspicion of murder until we have found your husband, or until you have accounted for his absence in a satisfactory manner. Wilson, wait here till I send my brougham round. You will come on in it to the Grange. I am anxious to avoid scandal."

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Mort, "if it's as serious as all that I had better explain. Mort's dead."

"Ah!" said the Squire. "And when and how?"

"Naturally enough," answered Mrs. Mort. "He died of serous apoplexy in Paris six months ago. If you will look in the drawer of my writing table up stairs you will find the *acte de décès* from the Paris register office, as well as the French doctor's certificate."

"The Squire ran up stairs, and presently returned with the documents in his hand.

"I am glad to see that we have been mistaken," he said, "and I am very sorry this should have occurred. But perhaps, madam, you will explain—"

"I shall explain nothing at all," snarled the lady. "You have no right to ask me. I don't blame you, but that young imp of Satan, who came here last night, (That's you, Charlie.) And if you have done both—perhaps you'll all get out of the house."

"We retired considerably crestfallen, but greatly relieved at the unexpected dénouement of what we had thought would turn out a tragic affair. But Dale is firmly resolved to have the woman out of the house in a week's time. How he will manage it I don't know."

"But," I cried, "it seems to me as mysterious as ever. Why should she conceal her husband's death, and make people believe he was still living with her? What motive can she have had?"

"I fancy," answered my husband, "though, mind, it's a mere supposition, that Mrs. Mort was anxious not to lose the benefit of her husband's popularity as a writer. The name of James Mort was worth to her a clear £2,000 a year. As he lived abroad most of his life, and consequently, was not known in English society, it was an easy matter to conceal his death. Mrs. Mort had always acted as his secretary, was familiar with his style, ideas, and projects and has doubtless literary ability of her own. Nothing easier, then, for her than to carry on her husband's work and to pass off her own productions as his on his publishers, who only knew him by his writing. She had probably an ambition to satisfy; and besides, £2,000 a year is not to be despised. I am not sorry that she has been found out, as the execution of her plan would, sooner or later, have got her into trouble."

"In short," said Charlie, "our parish mystery turns out to be a simple case of—"

"The wife, resigned to Heaven's will, Now carries on the business still!"

—Belgravia.

OUR PARISH MYSTERY.

No one would ever have thought that our little village in Kent was destined to immortality. It was one of the most commonplace of English hamlets, inhabited only by fishermen and farm laborers. Our Vicarage, the Grange, and a pretty little cottage, called Sea View, were the only respectable houses in the place. On our arrival at the parsonage Sea View cottage was to let, and so all the society that was to be had was that of the Grange people, the Squire and his family. Now, though Mr. and Mrs. Dale were excellent people in their way and very hospitable there was certainly some excuse for our wishing for an occasional change of society, and all the more so that we had come to Sandville from one of the most fashionable towns in the north of England. It was therefore with great pleasure that we heard one day from Mrs. Dale that Sea View cottage had at last found a tenant.

"And more than a mere tenant," added the Squire, radiantly; "a person of great distinction. Sea View will become as famous as Rydal Mount. I consider that that piece of house property has trebled in value since I signed the lease with Mrs. Mort."

"Mort?" I cried. "You don't mean James Mort, the author of 'Georgette'?"

"The same," answered Mrs. Dale, smiling, no doubt at my having confessed myself a reader of novels; "the great novelist. He has taken the house for nine years."

"Have you seen him? What is he like?" I asked anxiously.

"No. We have only seen his wife. She came over from Dover yesterday. They have just arrived from Paris, where Mr. Mort has been living. He was too fatigued to accompany her. The passage from Calais had greatly upset him. Mrs. Mort seems a charming person, though rather peculiar."

"And when are they coming to live here?"

"As soon as the house is in order. We have got the men in now. Jobson promised to have it ready in a fortnight."

About three weeks later my husband and I called on our new parishioners. We were received by Mrs. Mort, who answered the bell herself.

"The parson and his wife, I should say from your look. Come in. I don't keep a servant, you see. Don't make a noise. This way, please."

I was somewhat astonished at this welcome, which was gruffly and abruptly spoken. My husband, I could see from his preternaturally solemn expression, was making a violent effort to control his laughter. Certainly Mrs. Mort cut a very comical figure. She was a tall, fat woman, with a very red face, and was dressed in a black gown, that might have been made in Paris under the First Empire. The waist came up to close beneath the breast, and was circled with a flowing white sash. Her hair was cut quite short, like a man's.

Suppressing our laughter as best we could we followed her into the drawing room. We were surprised to find that the windows, which commanded an excellent view of the sea, had been plastered over with red paper, which completely hid the outside, and cast a lurid and unpleasant light over the interior of the room. The furniture consisted of a sofa covered with black stuff, two arm-chairs on suite, two other chairs, a piano, and a round table. There was no carpet on the floor, and the walls were simply white-washed. The ceiling was stuck over with black paper. On the table were various books, which I recognized, by their titles, as Mr. Mort's work. A picture, with its face turned to the wall, hung over the piano. Over the door was fixed a bracket, on which stood a large plaster-cast bust the head of which was extinguished under a paper fool's cap.

"We'll take the weather for granted," said Mrs. Mort, motioning to us to sit down. "Let's talk of something else."

My husband behaved like a darling. I am certain that if I had opened my mouth at that moment I should have burst into fits of laughter. He saw this and came to the rescue.

"We hope you are comfortably settled in your new home, Mrs. Mort," he said. "How do you like Sandville?"

"Sandville? Oh, yes. Know nothing about it," retorted the lady.

She had not sat down, but was standing with her back to the wall, with her hands behind her.

"You have not had time to see the place yet," continued my husband. "It is quiet, but very charming. There are some delightful walks by the seaside. It is just the place for a literary man. Mr. Mort will be delighted with it."

"Oh! will he?" answered his wife.

"By the way, how is he?" I asked. "We had hoped to see him. I trust he is not unwell."

"No, he's asleep."

"Asleep? I presume he has not yet recovered from the fatigue of his journey."

"No, it isn't that. He always sleeps in the day. He works at night. It is an imitation of Balzac. Balzac, you know, used to go to bed at six, and get up at twelve. Mort goes to bed at nine in the morning, and gets up at ten in the evening. He has his tub then, and his breakfast, and begins writing immediately afterward; when I say writing I mean composing. He dictates, I write. I have been his secretary for years. Ever since he started as a novelist, in fact."

"You must find it very fatiguing work," I said. "I hope you get your proper sleep."

"Yes. I lie down on that sofa for an hour or so in the morning. That's all the sleep I want."

"How very unhealthy," said my husband. "Believe me, Mrs. Mort—I am something of a doctor—this is most imprudent conduct. You cannot run contrary to the laws of health in this way without incurring the penalty. Sleep is the first necessity—"

"Don't quote Shakespeare on that subject," interrupted Mrs. Mort. "He's not appreciated in this house. You see him there, extinguished."

She pointed to the bust over the door.

"That's Mort's idea. It is rather spiteful. He says that William Shakespeare took all the ideas and left nothing for posterity to write about. That picture, with its face to the wall, is Victor Hugo's. Mort had writ-