

## The Curse of the Catafalques.



I THINK I may safely say that, until the strange event which I am now about to relate, I had never been brought into close contact with anything of a supernatural character. I may have been so, of course; but if I was, the circumstance made no lasting impression upon me. In the Curse of the Catafalques, however, I experienced a horror, so weird, so altogether unusual, that I fear it will be some time before I can wholly forget it. Indeed, I have not been really well ever since.

I was not a success at home; in my anxiety to please a wealthy uncle upon whom I was practically dependent, I had submitted myself to a series of competitive examinations for a variety of professions, but had failed successively in all. I found afterwards, too late, that this was partly due to the fact that I had omitted to prepare myself by any particular course of study, which it would seem is almost indispensable to success in these intellectual contests.

This was the view which my uncle himself took of the case, and conceiving that I was by no means likely to retrieve myself by any severe degree of application in the future—in which he was perfectly right—he had me shipped out to Australia, where he had correspondents and friends who were to put things in my way.

They did put all manner of things in my way, and, as was only to be expected, I came to grief over every one of them. So at last, after giving a fair trial to every opening provided for me, I became convinced that my uncle had made a grave mistake in believing that I was suited for a colonial career. I resolved to return home and tell him so, and give him one more opportunity of repairing his error. He had failed to understand my capabilities, but I did not then (nor do I now) reproach him for that. It is a difficulty which I have felt myself.

I now come to the period at which my story begins. I had booked my passage home by one of the Orient Line steamships from Melbourne to London, and, going on board about an hour before the ship was to leave her moorings, I made my way at once to the state-room which I was to share with a fellow-passenger, and found the fellow-passenger there before me. My first view of him was not reassuring: he was a tall cadaverous young man of about my own age, and when I came in he was rolling restlessly upon the floor and uttering hollow groans in a really painful and distressing manner.

I did my best to encourage him. "This will never do," I said: "if you're like this now, my good sir, what will you be when we're fairly

started,?—you must reserve yourself for that. And why roll? The ship will do all that for you by-and-by.”

He explained, with some annoyance, I thought, that he was suffering from mental agony—not sea-sickness. The possession of my fellow-creatures’ secrets has always a certain degree of interest for me, while it seldom proves unremunerative; so by a little careful questioning I soon discovered what was troubling my companion, whose name, as I also learned, was Augustus McFadden.

His story was shortly this: He had lived all his life in the Colony, where he was doing very fairly, when an eccentric old aunt of his over in England happened to die. She left him nothing, but gave the bulk of her property to a young lady, the daughter of a baronet of ancient family, in whom she was interested. No conditions were attached to the gift, but the testatrix stated it to be her earnest desire that the lady should, if possible, accept the hand of her nephew Augustus, should he come over to England and offer it within a certain time, and she had also communicated, by letter, her wishes in this respect to McFadden shortly before her death.

“Chlorine’s father,” said McFadden—“Chlorine is *her* name, you know” (I thought it was rather a bilious kind of name)—“Sir Paul Catafalque, wrote to me, inclosing his daughter’s photograph, and formally inviting me in her name to come over and do my best to carry out the last wishes of the departed—he added that my aunt’s executors would shortly forward me a packet, in which I should find certain explanations and directions for my guidance. . . . I did not wait for its arrival—I felt that my poor aunt’s wishes were sacred—the photograph was an eminently pleasing one—and so,” he added, with a heavy sigh, “I wrote at once to Sir Paul, accepting the invitation—miserable wretch that I am, I pledged my honour to present myself as a suitor! and now, now here I am actually embarked on this desperate errand!”

Here he seemed inclined to begin to roll again, but I stopped him. “Really,” I said, “I think in your place, with a fair chance of obtaining a baronet’s daughter of pleasing appearance with a large fortune, I should try to bear up.”

“You think so?” he groaned. “You don’t know all! After I had despatched that fatal letter, the packet with my aunt’s instructions arrived. When I read the hideous revelations that packet contained, and knew the horrors to which I had unintentionally pledged myself, my hair stood on end (it is still on end—feel it)—but it was too late! Here I am, engaged to carry out a task from which my inmost soul recoils. If I dared but retract!”

“Then why in the name of common sense don’t you retract?” I said. “Write and say you have changed your mind, regret that a previous engagement deprives you of the pleasure of accepting—all that sort of thing.”

“I would,” he said, “but I am ashamed—her photograph is that of

a being whose contempt it would be agony to me to feel I had incurred. And, if I backed out of it now, she would despise me, wouldn't she?"

I owned that it was very likely indeed.

"You see my dilemma—I cannot retract; on the other hand, I dare not attempt to carry out my undertaking. The only thing that could at once save me and my honour would be my death on the voyage out—she would not suspect my cowardice then, my memory would be sacred to her!"

"Well," I said, "you can die on the voyage out if you like—there need be no difficulty about that. All you have to do is just to slip over the side some dark night when no one is looking at you. I tell you what," I added (for I began to feel an odd sort of interest in the poor weak creature): "if you don't find your nerve equal to it when it comes to the point, I'll give you a leg over myself!"

"I never intended to go as far as that," he said, rather pettishly and without any sign of gratitude for my offer. "It would be quite enough if she could be made to believe that I had died. I could live on here as before, happy in the thought that she was cherishing my memory, instead of scorning it. But then how can she be made to believe it? That's the difficulty."

"Precisely," I said; "you can't very well write and inform her that you died on the voyage. You might do this, though—sail to England as you propose, and then seek her out under another name and break the news to her."

"I might do that, to be sure," he said, with some animation; "I certainly should not be recognised—she has no photograph of me—I never have been photographed . . . but no," he added with a shudder, "it's no use—I can't do it, I dare not trust myself under that roof! I must find some other way. Listen," he said, after a short pause; "you have given me an idea—you are going to London . . . they live near it, at a place called Parson's Green. Can I ask a great favour from you? Will *you* seek them out and, as a fellow-voyager of mine, call upon her? I do not ask you to tell a positive untruth—but if in the course of the interview you could contrive to convey the impression that I had died on the passage home, you would be doing me a service I can never repay."

"I should much prefer to do you a service that you *could* repay," I could not help suggesting.

"She will not require strict proof. I could give you papers and things that would abundantly convince her you came from me. You will do me this great kindness—say that you will?"

I hesitated for some time; not so much from conscientious scruples, as from a disinclination to give myself so much trouble for an entire stranger, gratuitously—but McFadden used arguments that have always had considerable weight with me, and so at last I consented to execute this little commission for him—and a consideration.

“The only thing now is,” I said, when this was settled, “how would you prefer to pass away? How would it be if I made you fall over and be devoured by a shark? That would be picturesque and striking, and I could do myself justice over the shark. I should make her weep considerably!”

“That will not do at all!” he said irritably. “Chlorine is a girl of delicate sensibilities—it would disgust her to picture any suitor of hers spending his last conscious moments inside a beastly repulsive thing like a shark. I do not wish to be associated in her mind with anything so unpleasant. I will die, sir, of a low fever (of a non-infectious type), at sunset, gazing at her portrait with my fading eyesight, and breathing with my last gasp a tender prayer for her welfare—she will cry more over that, sir!”

“I think I could work that up very effectively—it ought to be touching,” I said; “but if you are going to expire in my state room, I think I ought to know a little more about you than I do now. We have a little time yet before we sail; perhaps you would not object to spend it in coaching me up in your life’s history?”

He did more than that—he supplied me with several documents to study on the voyage, and even abandoned to me the whole of his travelling arrangements, which proved very complete and serviceable.

And then the “All ashore” bell rang, and McFadden, as he bade me farewell, took from his pocket a bulky packet: “You have saved me!” he said. “Now I can banish every recollection of this miserable episode. . . . I need preserve my poor aunt’s directions no longer. Let them go, then, with the rest of it!” And, before I could prevent him, he had fastened a heavy jack-knife to the parcel, and dropped it through the cabin-light into the sea.

He went ashore, and I have never seen him or heard of him since; but during the voyage I began to think seriously over the affair, and the more I thought of the task I had undertaken, the less I liked it.

I was on my way to harrow up a poor young lady’s feelings by a perfectly fictitious account of the death of this poor-spirited creature, who selfishly chose thus to spare his reputation.

It was not a pleasant commission, and had McFadden’s terms been a degree less liberal I doubt if I could have brought myself to undertake it. But it struck me that Chlorine might prove not inconsolable under judiciously sympathetic treatment; and then she was wealthy, and lost none of her wealth by not marrying McFadden.

On the other hand, I had not a penny, while my prospects might not appear roseate in her parents’ eyes.

I studied her photograph; it showed me a pale, pensive, but distinctly pretty face, without much strength of character, pointing to a plastic nature which it would not be difficult for a man of my personal advantages to win and subdue had I the recommendation, like McFadden, of an aunt’s dying wishes.

In McFadden's place, favoured by the romance which invested the whole affair, Chlorine's money would have been mine in a month !

Then came the thought—why should I not procure myself these advantages ?

Nothing was easier. I had only to present myself as Augustus McFadden (who was hitherto a mere name to them) ; the information I already had as to his past life would enable me to support the character respectably, and as it seemed that the baronet lived in great seclusion, I could contrive to keep out of the way of the few friends and relations I had in London until my position was secure.

The scheme gradually came to exert a strange fascination over me ; it opened out a far more manly and honourable means of obtaining a livelihood than any I had previously contemplated.

It could injure no one—not McFadden, for he had given up all pretensions, while his regard for his reputation would be more completely gratified than ever ; for I flattered myself that I should come nearer Chlorine's ideal of him than he himself could ever have done. He had resigned himself to be tearfully regretted for a brief period ; he would be fondly, it might be madly, loved—by proxy, it is true—but then that was far more than he deserved.

Chlorine would regain a suitor instead of hearing of his decease, while his mere surname could make no possible difference to her.

And it was a distinct benefit to *me* ; for with the aid of my assumed name and character success was almost a certainty.

So, after really less mental deliberation than might be expected, I made up my mind to personate the chicken-hearted McFadden—and if ever an unfortunate man was bitterly punished for a harmless, if not actually a pious, fraud, by a season of intense and protracted physical terror, I was that person !

## II.

After arriving in England, and before presenting myself in my new character at Parson's Green, I took one precaution, to assure myself that I was in no danger of throwing myself away in a fit of youthful impulsiveness. I went to Somerset House, and carefully examined a copy of the late Miss Petronia McFadden's last will and testament.

Nothing could have been more satisfactory ; a sum of between forty and fifty thousand pounds was Chlorine's unconditionally, a marriage with McFadden was merely recommended, and there was nothing whatever in the will to prevent her property from passing under the entire control of a future husband.

After this I could no longer restrain my ardour ; and so, one foggy afternoon about the middle of December, I found myself in a cab driving down the King's Road, Chelsea, on my way to the house in which I reckoned upon winning a comfortable independence.

We reached Parson's Green in time—a small, triangular plot, bor-

dered on two of its sides by humble cottages and beerhouses, and on the third by some ancient mansions, gloomy and neglected looking, but not without traces of their former consequence.

The cab stopped before the gloomiest of them all, a square, grim house, with dull small-paned windows, uncurtained and heavy-sashed, flanked by two narrow and slightly projecting wings, and built of dingy brick faced with yellow stone. Some old scrollwork railings, with a corroded frame in the middle, which had once held an oil lamp, separated it from the road; inside was a semicircular patch of rank grass, and a damp gravel sweep led from the heavy gate to a square portico, supported by two wasted black wooden pillars.

As I pulled the pear-shaped bell-handle, and heard the bell tinkling and jangling fretfully within, and when I glanced up at the dull house-front looming cheerless out of the fog-laden December twilight, my confidence failed me for the first time. I was almost inclined to give up the whole thing and run away; but before I had made up my mind a mouldy, melancholy butler came out and opened the gate, and my opportunity was gone for ever.

I remembered later that, as I walked up the gravel sweep, a wild and wailing scream pierced the heavy silence—it seemed half a lament, half a warning; but coming, as I believe it did, from one of the locomotives on the District Railway hard by, I attached no particular importance to it.

I followed the butler through a dank and chilly hall, where an antique lamp was glimmering inside its dusty stained-glass panes, up a broad carved staircase, and along tortuous panelled passages, until at last he ushered me into a long and rather low reception-room, scantily furnished with the tarnished mirrors and spindle-legged brocaded furniture of the last century.

A tall and meagre old man, with a long white beard and haggard, sunken black eyes, was sitting on one side of the high old-fashioned chimney-piece; opposite him was a limp little old lady, with a nervous, anxious expression, and dressed in trailing black robes relieved by a little yellow lace about the head and throat. I recognised at once that I was in the presence of Sir Paul Catafalque and his wife.

They both rose and advanced arm-in-arm to meet me, with a slow, stately solemnity. "You are very welcome!" they said, in a faint hollow voice. "We thank you for this proof of your chivalry and devotion. Such courage and self-sacrifice will have their reward!"

I did not quite understand how I could be considered to have given any proofs, as yet, of chivalry or devotion; but it was gratifying, of course, to find that they looked at matters in that light, and I begged them not to mention it.

And then, a slender figure, with a drooping head, a wan face, and large sad eyes, came softly down the dimly lighted room to me, and I met my destined bride for the first time.

I saw her eyes first anxiously raised to my face, and then resting upon it with a certain ineffable relief and satisfaction in them at the discovery that the accomplishment of Miss Petronia's wishes would not be personally distasteful.

I think that, upon the whole, I was myself slightly disappointed; her portrait had considerably flattered her; the real Chlorine was thinner and paler than I had imagined, while there was a settled, abstracted melancholy in her manner which seemed likely to render her society depressing.

I have always preferred a touch of archness and animation in womankind, and I should have greatly preferred to enter a more cheerful family; but, under all the circumstances, I felt scarcely in a position to be too particular.

For some days after my arrival I remained with the Catafalques as their honoured guest, every opportunity being afforded me for establishing nearer and dearer relations with the family.

But it was not a lively period; they went nowhere, no visitors ever called or dined, the days dragged slowly by in a dull and terrible monotony in that dim tomb of a house, which I found I was not expected to leave, except now and then when I contrived to steal out to smoke a pipe along the Putney road in the foggy evenings after dinner.

The diligence with which I had got up McFadden's antecedents enabled me to give perfectly satisfactory answers to most of the few questions that were put to me, and for the rest I drew on my imagination. But what puzzled me for some time was their general attitude to myself; there was something of tearful admiration in it, of gratitude, a touch of pity too as for some youthful martyr, blended with an anxious hope.

Now I was well aware that this was not the ordinary attitude of the parents of an heiress to an obscure and penniless suitor. I could only account for it at last by the supposition that there was some latent defect in Chlorine's temper or constitution which entitled the man who won her to commiseration; this explained, too, their evident anxiety to get rid of her. Anything of this kind would be a drawback of course, but forty or fifty thousand pounds would more than compensate for it—I could not expect *everything*.

I had more trouble in bringing Chlorine to confess that her heart was mine than I had counted upon at first, although my ultimate success was never for a moment doubtful. But she seemed to have an unaccountable shrinking from saying the word which bound us—a dread which she confessed was not for her own sake, but for mine. I thought such extreme self-depreciation very morbid, and devoted every energy to arguing her out of it.

And at last I succeeded; it evidently cost her a great effort. I believe she swooned immediately afterwards, but of this I cannot be cer-

tain, for I did not lose a moment in seeking Sir Paul and clenching the matter before Chlorine had time to repent.

His manner of receiving me certainly struck me as odd and scarcely encouraging. "We must hope for the best, my boy," he said with a rather dreary sigh. "I own I am too selfish to try to deter you from your high purpose. You would probably prefer as little delay as possible."

"I should," I replied promptly, pleased with his discernment.

"Then leave all preliminaries to me: you shall be informed when the day and time have been settled. It will be necessary, as you are aware, to have your signature to this document, but I feel it my duty to warn you solemnly that by signing it you make your decision irrevocable. There is yet time if your courage fails you."

After such an intimation as that, I need not say that I was in such a hurry to sign that I did not even trouble myself to make out the somewhat crabbed writing in which the terms of the agreement were set out. I presumed that since it was binding on me, the baronet would, as a man of honour, consider it equally conclusive on his side. Looking back on it all now, it seems simply extraordinary that I should have been so easily satisfied, have taken so little pains to find out exactly the position in which I was placing myself, but I fell an easy victim to a naturally confiding and unsuspecting disposition.

"Say nothing of this to Chlorine," said Sir Paul, as I gave him back the document, "until the final arrangements are made. She must not be needlessly distressed, poor child, before the time."

This seemed strange, too, but I promised to obey, supposing that he knew best.

And so for some days after that I made no mention to Chlorine of the approaching day which was to unite us: we were much together, and I learnt to feel a personal esteem for her which was quite independent of her main attractions. Her low spirits, however, seemed constitutional, and I anticipated a dull and drizzly honeymoon.

One afternoon the baronet took me aside mysteriously. "Prepare yourself, Augustus," he said: "it is all arranged. The event upon which our dearest hopes depend will take place to-morrow, in the Grey Chamber, and of course at midnight."

This I thought a curious time and place for the ceremony, but I knew his eccentric love of retirement, and supposed he had procured some very special form of licence.

"You do not know the place," he added: "come with me and I will show it you, from the outside at least."

So he led me up the broad staircase, and stopping before an immense door covered with black baize and studded with brass nails, which gave it a hideous resemblance to a coffin-lid, he pressed a spring and it fell slowly back, revealing a long dim gallery leading to a heavy oak door with cumbrous metal plates and fastenings.



“At twelve o'clock to-morrow night—Christmas Eve,” he said, under his voice, “you will present yourself at the Grey Chamber—it is there that you must go through it.”

I wondered why he should choose such a place for it, it would have been more cheerful in the drawing-room, but it was evidently a fancy of his, and I did not care to oppose it—I was too happy. I hastened to Chlorine, and, with her father's permission, told her that the crowning moment of both our lives was fixed.

It had the most astonishing effect upon her—she fainted away, just as she had done at the moment of giving her consent. I thought such conduct hypersensitive, and as soon as I had succeeded in bringing her round I remonstrated with her seriously. “It is highly creditable to your maidenly delicacy, my love,” I said, “but it is hardly complimentary to *me*!”

“Do not think I doubt you, Augustus,” she said, “but the ordeal is so terrible.”

“There are cases,” I said grimly, “in which it has not proved absolutely fatal; the victim occasionally survives the ceremony, I believe.”

“I will try to hope so,” she said earnestly. I thought her insane, which alarmed me for the validity of the marriage. “I am weak, I know,” she resumed; “but I shudder to think of you in that Grey Chamber, going through it all alone.”

My worst fears seemed confirmed: no wonder her parents were grateful to me for relieving them of such a responsibility. “May I ask where *you* intend to be at the time?” I inquired.

“You will not think us unfeeling, Augustus,” she said. “Papa thought that we should endeavour to forget our anxiety by seeking some distraction. So we are going to Madame Tussaud's directly after dinner.”

“If you forget your anxiety at Madame Tussaud's, while I am cooling my heels in the Grey Chamber,” I said, “I don't quite see how any clergyman will see his way to performing the ceremony—they won't marry us separately, you know.”

This time it was her turn to be astonished. “You are joking!” she cried: “you cannot really believe we are to be married in the Grey Chamber?”

“Then where are we to be married?” I asked, in utter bewilderment. “Hardly at Madame Tussaud's?”

She turned upon me with what seemed a sudden misgiving. “Augustus, tell me,” she said anxiously; “you have read your aunt's last message to you?”

Now, thanks to McFadden, this was my one weak point. I had *not* read it, and I felt myself upon delicate ground. It evidently related to business of importance which was to be transacted in this Grey Chamber, and, as the real McFadden clearly knew all about it, to confess ignorance would have been suicidal just then.

"Of course, darling, of course," I said hastily; "it was my silly joke—you are quite right, there is something I have to arrange in the Grey Chamber before I can call you mine. I did not think you knew. But, tell me, why does it make you so uneasy?" I added, thinking that it might be prudent to find out what particular formality was expected from me.

"I cannot help it," she sighed; "the test will be so searching; are you sure that you are prepared at all points? I overheard papa say that no precaution could be neglected. . . . If this should come between us after all!"

It was all clear now; the baronet was not so easy to satisfy in the choice of a son-in-law as I had imagined; he had no intention after all of accepting me without some inquiry into my previous habits and prospects. With characteristic eccentricity he was going to make the examination more impressive by holding it in this ridiculous midnight interview.

I thought I could easily contrive to satisfy the baronet, and said as much to Chlorine, with the idea of consoling her. "Why do you persist in treating me like a child, Augustus?" she said petulantly. "They have tried to hide all from me, but at least I know that in the Grey Chamber you will have to encounter one far more formidable, far harder to satisfy, than poor dear papa."

"I see you know all, dearest," I said; "I was wrong. I will not try to deceive you again. I *shall* have to encounter some one who is all you say he is, but don't be afraid, I shall come out of it with flying colours—you shall see!"

I said no more about it then; but I saw that matters were worse than I had thought. I should have to deal with some stranger, some exacting and suspicious friend or relation, perhaps; or, more probably, a keen family solicitor, who would put awkward questions, and even be capable of insisting on strict settlements.

Love, in my opinion, has nothing in common with Law. Law, with its offensively suspicious restraints, its indelicately premature provisions—I would have nothing to do with it. I would refuse to meet a family solicitor anywhere, and I resolved to tell Sir Paul so at the first convenient opportunity.

The opportunity came after dinner, when we had retired to the drawing-room. Lady Catafalque was dozing uneasily in an armchair behind a firescreen, and Chlorine, in the inner room, was playing funereal dirges in the darkness, pressing the notes of the old piano with a languid uncertain touch.

I drew a chair beside Sir Paul's, and began to broach the subject calmly and temperately. "I find," I said, "we have not quite understood one another about this affair in the Grey Chamber. When I agreed to make that appointment there, I thought—well, it doesn't matter what I thought—what I want to say now is, that, while I was

always ready to give you, as Chlorine's father, every information you could reasonably require, I feel a delicacy in discussing my private affairs with an entire stranger."

"I don't in the least understand you," he said. "What are you talking about?"

I began all over again. "In short," I concluded, "I don't recognise your solicitor's right to interfere in the matter, and I decline to meet him."

"Did I ever ask you to meet a solicitor anywhere?" he said sternly. "And do you mean to tell me now that you do not know what has to be done to-morrow in the Grey Chamber?"

I saw that I was wrong again; but, as I was so obviously supposed to be thoroughly acquainted with the real nature of this perplexing appointment, I dared not betray my ignorance. I stammered something to the effect that I was referring to something else, some other interview which I had fancied was intended from some words of Chlorine's.

"What Chlorine could have said to give you such an idea," said the baronet, "I have no notion—here she is, to answer for herself."

The faint mournful music had died away whilst we were speaking, and, looking up, I saw Chlorine, a pale slight form framed in the archway between the two rooms.

Before her father could question her about the solicitor, however, she spoke, as if forced to do so by some irresistible hysterical excitement.

"Papa," she said trembling; "dearest mamma. . . . Augustus . . . I can bear it no longer. All my life I have felt that we have lived this strange life under the shadow of some fearful Thing—a Thing which no home can possess and be a happy one. I never sought to know more than this—I dared not ask. . . . But now, when I know that Augustus, to whom I have given my first, my only love, must shortly face this ghastly presence, I cannot rest till I know exactly what the danger is that threatens him. You need not fear to tell me all, I can bear to know the worst."

Lady Catafalque awoke with a faint shriek, and began to wring her long mittened hands and moan feebly; Sir Paul seemed slightly discomposed and undecided. I began to feel exquisitely uncomfortable—Chlorine's words pointed to something infinitely more terrible than a mere solicitor.

"Poor girl!" said Sir Paul at last, "we concealed the whole truth for your good, but perhaps the time has come when the truest kindness will be to reveal all. . . . Augustus, break to her, as you best know how, the nature of the ordeal before you."

It was precisely what I would have given worlds to know myself, and I stared at his gloomy old face with what I felt were glassy and meaningless eyes. At last I managed to suggest that the story would come less harshly from a parent's lips.

"So be it," he said. "Chlorine, my darling, take a chair, and, yes, take a cup of tea before I begin." There was a little delay over this, the baronet being anxious that his daughter should be perfectly composed. No one thought about me, and I suffered tortures of suspense during the interval which I dared not betray.

At last Sir Paul was satisfied, and in a dull monotonous tone, and yet with a gloomy sort of pride and relish, too, at the exceptional nature of his affliction, he began his weird and almost incredible tale.

"For some centuries," he said, "our unhappy house has been afflicted with a Family Curse. One Humfrey de Catafalque, by his familiarity with the Black Art, as it was said, attracted to his service a kind of Familiar, a dread and supernatural Being. Living in bitter enmity with the whole of his relations, to whom he bore for some reason an undying grudge, he bequeathed this baleful Thing with refined malice to his descendants for ever, as an inalienable heirloom. It goes with the title. The head of the family for the time being is bound to assign it a secret apartment under his own roof, and as each member of our house succeeds to the ancestral rank and honours, he must seek an interview with the Curse (for by that name it has been called for generations). In that interview it is decided whether the spell is broken for ever, or whether the Curse is to continue its blighting influence, and hold him in miserable thralldom until he dies."

"Then are you one of its thralls, papa?" faltered Chlorine.

"I am," he said: "I failed to quell it, as every Catafalque, however brave and resolute, has failed yet. It checks all my accounts. I have to go and tremble before it annually, and even habit has not been able to rob that awful Presenee, with its cold withering eye, of all its terrors! I shall never get quite accustomed to it!"

Never in my wildest thoughts had I imagined anything one quarter so dreadful as this! I could not rest until I had satisfied myself that *I* was not affected by these alarming family disclosures.

"She's frightened," I said diplomatically, "she, ha, ha—she has got some idea *I* have to go through the same sort of thing, don't you see? Explain that to her. . . . *I'm* not a Catafalque, Chlorine, so it—it doesn't interfere with me, eh? does it, Sir Paul?"

"You mean well, Augustus," he said, "but we must deceive her no longer—she shall know the worst. Yes, my poor child," he went on, to Chlorine, whose eyes were wide with terror—like my own. "Unhappily, although our beloved Augustus is, as he says, not a Catafalque himself, it does concern him—he, too, must deliver himself up at the appointed hour, and brave the malevolence of the Curse of the Catafalques!"

I could not say a word—the horror of the idea was altogether too much for me—I fell back on my chair in a state of speechless collapse.

"Not only all new baronets," continued Sir Paul, "but every one who would seek an alliance with the females of our race must also undergo this test. Perhaps it is in some degree owing to this necessity that, ever

since Humfrey de Catafalque's diabolical bequest, every maiden of our house has died a spinster!" (Here Chlorine hid her face with a low wail.) "It is true that in 1770 one suitor was found bold enough to face the ordeal! He was conducted to the chamber where the curse was then lodged, and left there. Next day they found him outside the door—a gibbering maniac!"

I writhed on my chair. "Augustus!" cried Chlorine wildly, "promise you will never permit the Curse to turn you into a gibbering maniac! If I saw you gibber, I should die!"

I was very near gibbering then. I dared not trust myself to speak.

"Do not be afraid," said Sir Paul more cheerfully. "Augustus is happily in no danger. All is smooth for him!" (I began to brighten a little at this.) "His aunt Petronia had made a special study of these things, and had at last succeeded in discovering the master-word which alone can break the unhallowed spell. Her great interest in you, my child, and the reports she heard of her nephew's excellent character gave her the idea that he might be the instrument which would rid us of the ban for ever. Her belief was well founded. Augustus has nobly offered himself, and, with his aunt's instructions for his safeguard, failure is next to impossible."

Those instructions were somewhere at the bottom of the Melbourne docks! I could bear no more: "It's simply astonishing to me!" I said, "that you can calmly allow this hideous Curse, as you call it, to have things all its own way up to the present, in the nineteenth century, and not six miles from Charing Cross!"

"What can I do, Augustus?" he said helplessly.

"Do? Anything!" I retorted wildly (I hardly knew what I said). "Take it out for an airing (it must want an airing by this time): take it out—and lose it. Get both the archbishops to step in and lay it for you! Sell the house, and make the purchaser take it with the other fixtures, at a valuation. I wouldn't have such a thing in my house—it's not respectable! And I want you to understand one thing. My aunt never told me the whole truth. I knew there was some sort of a curse in the family—but I never dreamed it was as bad as *that*! I never intended to be shut up alone with it. And I shall not go near the Grey Chamber!"

"Not go near it!" they cried aghast.

"Not on any account!" I said, beginning to recover my firmness. "If the Curse has any business with me, let it come down and settle it here before you all, in a straightforward manner. I hate mysteries. On second thoughts," I added, fearing lest they might find means of acting on this suggestion, "I won't meet it anywhere."

"And why—why won't you meet it?" they asked breathlessly.

"Because," I explained desperately, "because I'm—I'm a Materialist" (I did not know I was anything of the sort, but I could not stay then to consider the point). "How can I have any dealings with a preposterous

supernatural something which reason forbids me to believe in? There's my difficulty—it would be inconsistent, and—and extremely painful to both sides."

"You forget," said Sir Paul, "that you are pledged—irrevocably pledged—you *must* meet it. And let me beg you, my dear boy, to be more careful what you say. The Curse knows all that passes beneath this roof. This shocking ribaldry may hereafter be terribly remembered against you!"

One short hour ago and I had counted Chlorine's fortune as virtually my own! Now I saw with feelings I cannot unveil in any magazine that the time had come to abandon all my pretensions. It was a terrible wrench—but I had no other course but to state what would effectually shatter my fondest hopes.

"I had no right to pledge myself," I said, with quivering lips, "under all the circumstances."

"What circumstances?" they all three demanded at once.

"Well, in the first place, I'm a base impostor—I am, indeed, I assure you," I said very earnestly: "I'm not Augustus McFadden at all; my real name is of no consequence, but it's not that. McFadden himself is, I regret to say, no more!"

Now, why I could not tell the plain truth here has always been a mystery to me. I suppose I had been lying so long that it was difficult to break myself of the habit at so short a notice, but I certainly did mix things up to a hopeless extent.

"Yes," I continued sorrowfully, "he is dead—he fell overboard during the voyage and a shark seized him almost immediately. It was my melancholy privilege to see him pass away. For one brief moment I saw him between the jaws of the creature, pale but composed (I refer to McFadden, you understand, not the shark); he just glanced up at me, and then, with a smile the sweetness of which I shall never forget (it was McFadden's smile, of course, not the shark's), he—he desired to be kindly remembered to you all (he was always courteous, poor fellow). Directly after that he was gradually withdrawn from my horror-stricken view."

In bringing the shark in at all I was acting contrary to my instructions, but I quite forgot them: all I could think of was how to escape making the acquaintance of the Curse of the Catafalques.

"Then, sir," said the baronet haughtily, "you have basely deceived us all!"

"That is what I was endeavouring to bring out," I replied. "You see it puts it quite out of my power to meet your family Curse; I do not feel myself entitled to intrude on it. So, if you will kindly let some one fetch a cab in a quarter of an hour——"

"Stop!" cried Chlorine. "Augustus (I will call you by that name still), you must not go like this! It was for love of me that you stooped to deceit, and—and—Mr. McFadden is dead. If he were alive, it might

be my duty to remain free for at least two years ; but he lies within the shark, and—and—you have taught me to love you. You must stay—stay and brave the Curse—and we may yet be happy !”

How I blamed my folly in not telling the truth at first ! “When—when—I said McFadden was dead,” I explained hoarsely, “I was not speaking quite correctly. It was another fellow the shark swallowed—in fact, it was another shark altogether. And McFadden is alive and well at Melbourne ; but, feeling slightly alarmed at the Curse, he asked me to call and make his excuses. I have now done so, and will trespass no further on your kindness. So if you will tell somebody to bring a cab——”

“Pardon me,” said the baronet, “we cannot part in this way. I always feared that your resolution would break down in some such way—it is only natural. Do you think we cannot see that these extraordinary stories are prompted by a sudden panic ? I quite understand it, Augustus. I cannot blame you for it ; but to listen to you would be culpable weakness on my part. It will pass away—you will forget your fears to-morrow. You *must* forget them ; for, remember, you have promised ! I dare not let you run the danger of exciting the Curse by a deliberate insult. For your own sake, I shall take care that your solemn bond is not forfeited.”

I read beneath his words the innate selfishness which prompted them—the old man did not entirely believe me, and he was determined that he would not lose the smallest chance of escaping from the thralldom of his race by my means.

I raved, I protested, I implored—but all in vain ; they would not believe a single word I said ; they positively refused to release me ; they insisted that, for my sake as well as their own, they were bound to insist upon my performing my engagement.

And, at last, Chlorine and her mother left the room with a little contempt in their pity for my unworthiness ; and after that, Sir Paul conducted me to my room, and left me, as he said, to return to my senses.

### III.

What a night I passed ! Tossing sleeplessly from side to side under the hearse-like canopy of my old-fashioned bedstead, I tortured my fevered brain with vain speculations as to the fate the morrow would bring me.

I was perfectly helpless—I saw no way out of it ; they would not believe me ; they were bent upon offering me up as a sacrifice to this private Moloch of theirs, the very vagueness of which made it doubly fearful. If I had only some idea what it was like to look at, I might not feel quite so afraid of it ; the impalpable awfulness of the thing was what I found so terrible—the very thought of it made me fling myself about in an ecstasy of horror.

But by degrees I grew calmer and able to consider my position with something like composure, until, by daybreak, I had come to a final resolution.

As I was evidently bound to meet my fate, the wisest course was to do so with a good grace; then, if by some fortunate chance I came well out of it, my future was insured. Whereas, if I went on repudiating myself to the very last, I might in time arouse suspicions which the most successful encounter with the Curse would not dispel.

And then, after all, the affair might have been much exaggerated. By keeping my head, and exercising all my powers of cool impudence, I might surely manage to hoodwink this formidable relic of mediæval superstition, which must have fallen rather behind the age by this time.

It might even turn out to be (though I confess I was not very sanguine as to this) as big a humbug as I was myself, and the interview resolve itself into a sort of augurs' meeting.

At all events, I resolved to see this mysterious business out, and trust to my customary good fortune to bring me safely through. I came down to breakfast something like my usual self, and I managed to reassure the family, in contradicting by word and deed my weakness of the night before.

From a mistaken consideration for me, they left me to myself for the whole of the day; and, although I was as determined as ever to make a bold fight for the fortune that I saw in danger of eluding me, I moped about that gloom-laden house with a depression that deepened every hour.

We dined almost in solemn silence; Sir Paul made no remark, except as he saw my hand approaching a decanter, when he would observe that I had need of a clear head and strong nerves that night, and warn me to beware of the brown sherry.

Chlorine and her mother stole apprehensive glances at me from time to time, and sighed heavily between the courses, their eyes brimming with unshed tears. It was not a lively meal.

It came to an end at last; the ladies rose, and Sir Paul and I sat brooding silently over the dessert. I think both of us felt a delicacy in beginning a conversation.

But before I could venture upon a safe remark, Lady Catafalque and Chlorine returned—dressed, to my unspeakable horror, in readiness to go out. Worse still, Sir Paul apparently intended to join them.

"It is now time to say farewell," he said, in his hollow voice. "You will need a season of self-preparation; you have more than three hours yet. At midnight you will go to the Grey Chamber. You will find the Curse prepared for you."

"You are not all going!" I cried. I had never expected this. They were not a gay family to sit with; but even their company was better than my own.



"We must," they said: "it is one of the traditions connected with the Curse. No human being but one must be in the house during the night appointed for the interview. The servants have already left it, and we ourselves are about to pass the night at a private hotel, after a brief visit to Madame Tussaud's, to allay, if possible, our terrible anxiety."

I believe at this I positively howled with terror—all the old fears came back with a sudden rush. "Don't leave me all alone with it!" I cried. "I shall go mad if you do!"

Sir Paul turned on his heel with a gesture of contempt, and his wife followed. Chlorine remained behind for one instant. I had never thought her so pretty before, as she looked at me with a yearning pity in her pale face.

"Augustus," she said, "show me I was not mistaken in you. I would spare you this if I could; but you know I cannot. Be brave, now, or you will lose me for ever!"

I felt a stronger determination to win her then than I had ever done before—her gentle appeal seemed to make a man of me once more; and, as I kissed the slender hand she held out to me, I vowed sincerely enough to prove myself worthy of her.

Almost immediately after that the heavy front door slammed behind them, the rusty old gate screeched like a banshee as it swung back with a hollow clang. I heard the carriage wheels grinding the slush, and knew that I was alone—shut up on Christmas Eve in that sombre house, with the Curse of the Catafalques for my only companion!

Somehow the generous ardour with which Chlorine had inspired me did not last very long. Before the clock struck nine I found myself shivering, and I drew up a clumsy old leathern armchair close to the fire, piled on the logs, and tried to overcome a horrible sensation of internal vacancy and look my situation fairly in the face.

However repugnant it might seem to one's ordinary common-sense ideas, there was no possible doubt that there was something of a supernatural order shut up in that great chamber, and also that, if I meant to win Chlorine, I should have to go up and have some kind of an interview with it.

If I could only have had some distinct idea of what this would be! What description of being should I find this Curse? Would it be aggressively ugly—like the bogie of my childish days? Or should I see an awful unsubstantial shape, draped in clinging black, with nothing visible but a pair of hollow burning eyes and one long, pale, bony hand? Really I could not decide which would be the more trying.

All the frightful stories I had ever read came crowding into my unwilling mind. One in particular of a Marshal Somebody, who, after much industry, succeeded in invoking an evil spirit, which came bouncing into the room, shaped like a gigantic ball with (I think) a hideous face

in the middle of it, and the horrified marshal could not get rid of it until after hours of hard praying and persistent exorcism.

Only suppose the Curse should be something like that!

Then there was another appalling tale I had read in some magazine—a tale of a secret chamber, too, and almost a parallel case to my own, where the heir of a great house had to go in and meet a mysterious aged person with strange eyes and an evil smile, who wanted to shake hands with him. I determined that I would steadfastly refrain from shaking hands with the Curse of the Catafalques.

If I had only had McFadden's aunt's instructions I should have felt safer; but I had no hint even for my conduct, and besides I was an impostor, about to confront a power which knew nearly everything! For a moment the desperate thought occurred to me of confessing all, and sobbing out my deceit upon its bosom. But suppose it had no such thing as a bosom, what then?

By this time I had worked up my nerves to such a pitch of terror that it was absolutely necessary to brace them. I did brace them. I emptied all three of the decanters, but Sir Paul's cellar being none of the best, the only result was that I began to feel exceedingly unwell without gaining any perceptible moral courage.

I dared not smoke, though tobacco might soothe me. The Curse, being old-fashioned, might object to it, and I was anxious to do nothing to prejudice it against me.

So I simply sat there and shook. Every now and then I heard steps on the glistening path outside; sometimes a rapid tread of some happy person no doubt on his way to scenes of Christmas revelry, and little dreaming of the miserable wretch he passed; sometimes the slow, elephantine tramp of the Fulham policeman on his beat.

What if I called him in and gave the Curse into custody—say for putting me in bodily fear, or for being found on the premises under suspicious circumstances?

There was a boldness in thus cutting the knot which rather fascinated me; but most probably, I thought, the stolid officer would decline to interfere on some pretext, and, even if he did, Sir Paul would be deeply annoyed to hear of his Family Curse spending its Christmas in the cell of a police station. He would certainly consider it a piece of unpardonable bad taste on my part.

So one hour passed. A few minutes after ten I heard footsteps again and voices in low consultation, as of a band of men outside the railings. Could there be any indication without of the horrors those walls contained?

But the gaunt house front kept its secret. They were merely the waits.

They struck up the old carol, "God rest you, merry gentleman, let nothing you dismay!" which, of course, was very appropriate, and followed it up with that most doleful of airs, "The Mistletoe Bough," which

they gave with some wheeziness but intense feeling. At first I had a vague comfort in listening. I felt that I was not quite alone, and I even had a faint hope that the Curse might hear and be softened by the strains. Such things have been known to happen at this season of the year. But they did play so infernally that I was soon convinced that such music could only have an irritating effect, and I rushed to the window and beckoned to them to go away.

I had better have left it alone, for they took it as an encouragement, and played on yet more villainously, while one of the band remained at the gate for quite a quarter of an hour, ringing incessantly, in the vain expectation of some gratuity.

This must have stirred the Curse up quite enough; but after they had gone there came a man with a barrel-organ, and his barrel-organ had been out in the weather for so long that it had become altogether demoralised, or, as it were, deranged. When he turned the handle it brayed out confused portions of its entire repertory all at once with a maddening effect. Even its owner seemed aware that there was something wrong, for he stopped occasionally, probably struck aghast at the din, but apparently he still hoped that by perseverance he would bring the instrument round, and Parson's Green being a quiet place for the experiment he remained there for some time, every fresh discord lessening my chances of success.

He went too at last, though not before he must have rendered the Curse absolutely rabid; and then, as the hour-hand stole on towards eleven, my excited fancy began to catch strange sounds echoing about the old house—sharp reports from the furniture, sighing moans in the windy passages, doors shutting, and, worse still, stealthy padding footsteps above and outside in the ghostly hall.

I sat there in a cold perspiration until I could really bear it no longer.

My nerves wanted more bracing than ever. I got out the spirit case, and after I had consumed several consecutive tumblers of brandy and water my fears began at last to melt rapidly away.

What a ridiculous bugbear I was making of the Thing after all! How did I know that I should not find this dreaded Curse as pleasant and gentlemanly a demon—or familiar, or whatever it was—as a man could wish to meet?

I would go up at once and wish it a merry Christmas. That would put it in a good temper. On the other hand, it might look as if I was afraid of it. Afraid! ha, ha! Why, for two straws I would go up and pull its nose for it, if it had a nose? At all events, I would go up to the door of the Grey Chamber, and defy it boldly—perhaps not exactly defy it, but just go as far as the corridor to get used to the neighbourhood.

I made my way with this object, rather unsteadily, up the dim and misty staircase, and opened the coffin-lid door which led to the corridor, down which I looked apprehensively.

The strange metal fittings on the massive door of the Grey Chamber seemed to be all flashing and sparkling with a mysterious pale light, like electricity, or perhaps phosphorus, and from under the door came a sullen red glow, while I heard within sounds like the roar of a mighty wind, above which rose at intervals peals of fiendish mirth, accompanied by a hideous dull clanking.

Evidently the Curse was getting up the steam to receive me.

I did not stay there long. It might dart out suddenly and catch me eavesdropping—a bad beginning of our acquaintance. I got back to the dining-room somehow, and found the fire out, and the time, which was just visible by the fast dimming lamp, a quarter to twelve.

Only fifteen more short minutes and, unless I gave up Chlorine and her money for ever, I must go up and knock at that awful door, and enter the presence of the frightful mystic Thing that was roaring and laughing and clanking inside.

I sat staring stupidly at the funereal black face of the clock, watching the long gold hand steal relentlessly on. In six minutes I should be beginning my desperate duel with one of the powers of darkness! It gave me a sick qualm as I thought of it, and still the time wore on.

I had but two precious minutes left, when the lamp gave a faint gurgling sob, like a death-rattle, and went out, leaving me in the dark alone.

If I lingered, the Curse might come down and fetch me, and the horror of this made me resolve to go up at once; punctuality might propitiate it.

I groped my way to the door, reached the hall, and stood there, swaying for a moment under the old stained-glass lantern. Then I began to be aware of the terrible fact that I was not in a condition to transact any business successfully—much less to go through an encounter with the Curse of the Catafalques! I had disregarded Sir Paul's well-meant warning at dinner—I was not my own master—I was lost!

I was endeavouring to get upstairs when the clock in the room below tolled twelve, and from without the faint peal and chime from distant steeples proclaimed that it was Christmas morning—my hour had come!

I made one more desperate effort to go up, and then—then, upon my word, I don't know how it was, but I happened to see my hat on the hat-rack below, and I did what I venture to think most men in my position would have done too.

I renounced my ingeniously elaborate scheme for ever; I rushed to the door (which was fortunately unbolted and unlocked), and the next moment I was making for the King's Road with an unsteady run, as if the Curse itself were at my heels.

There is little more to say; for weeks I lay in hiding, trembling every hour lest the outraged Curse should hunt me down at last; my belongings were all at Parson's Green, and for obvious reasons I dared not

write or call for them, nor indeed have I seen any of the Catafalques since my ignominious flight.

I had been trapped and cruelly deceived—my hopes of an ample and assured income with a wife I could honestly love are fled for ever—but, although I regret this bitterly and sincerely, I am now resigned, for the price of success was too tremendous.

Perhaps there may be one or two who read this whose curiosity has been excited in the course of my strange and unhappy story, and who may feel a slight disappointment at not learning after all what the Curse's personal appearance is, and how it comports itself in its ghastly Grey Chamber. For myself, I have long ceased to feel any curiosity on the subject, but I can only suggest that full information as to these points would be easily obtained if any unmarried male person of unexceptionable recommendations were to call at Parson's Green and ask Sir Paul's permission to pay his addresses to his daughter.

I shall be very happy to allow my name to be used as a reference.

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