

THE OLD DOCTOR'S STORY

By Richard Stow



ANYTHING in those magazines, Dick?"

"Oh, stupid ghost stories mostly, uncle! What I can't understand is this silly recrudescence of superstition. Twentieth century indeed! It ought to be the eighteenth, with all this hysterical stuff floating about. It seems to have got on the public's nerves—all this psychic research twaddle!"

Old Uncle Jim at first smiled at my vigorous language, as he proceeded carefully to uncork a bottle. This important operation being successfully achieved, however, he replied somewhat gravely:

"I don't know, my boy. Perhaps we may be sometimes a little too confident in our negations, even the youngest of us, eh, Dick? You know the story?" he added, with a kindly laugh.

"But, surely, uncle, you don't mean to say that you believe in such stuff?" I cried, in astonishment.

At my rude speech, though I did not so intend it, the white-haired old doctor looked at me keenly and very earnestly, almost sternly, before resuming his habitually kind expression.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Sir!" I stammered, somewhat confused. "I had, of course, no idea you really believed in anything of the kind."

"No more did I at your age, my boy; nor at double your age."

The old man seemed to be hesitating, and for a moment a far-off look came into his eyes. Then turning to me he continued very seriously:—

"My dear Dick, you know that you are on the threshold of a life of great responsibility and difficulty. A doctor's

is the grandest of all professions. A man is not simply a body-healer only, my boy. He has often to play the part of physician of the soul as well."

I said nothing, and my old uncle resumed his seat.

"That sounds somewhat 'sermony,' eh?—and I'm no good at that sort of thing, Dick. But perhaps you would like to hear what broke the back of my own scepticism or . . . certainty—whichever you please? I was as sure as you are—once, my boy.

"It's a strange, sad story; I sometimes, even now, cannot believe it. But my certainty of disbelief—that is . . . well—permanently crippled, if you will have it so."

The old doctor bowed courteously in my direction. He was no longer my aged relative and kind friend only; it was the bow of intellect to intellect.

Uncle Jim was really my great uncle; he was eighty-two. Though we had only seen each other occasionally on his rare visits to town, we had taken a great fancy to one another. As I found out afterwards, it was he really who had been paying for me at Bart's when my poor father died and left my mother hard put to it to make both ends meet.

I had just passed my "Final" with what for me were "flying colours," and old uncle Thompson had insisted that I should run down to his place for a rest, with the additional inducement of the loan of a friend's small yacht, for I am awfully keen on sailing.

I promptly accepted his kind invitation, and lost no time in taking myself and my baggage, a pile of magazines, and the "Flying Cornishman" down to Penzance, where Dr. James Thompson, long since retired from practice, was

living out his peaceful old age to a finish.

It was our second evening together in his comfortable study. We had been smoking and talking about the enormous progress of the last fifty years, the countless triumphs in every branch of science, the subtle methods of exact research.

When I come to think of it, however, I fancy that I had been responsible for most of the talk, and the doctor for most of the smoking; I had been telling him, I remember, some of the latest discoveries in chemistry, and had got rather keen on the subject.

He had just left the room for a few minutes to unearth a bottle of some very special old Scotch whiskey, and on his return found me lazily turning over the pages of one of the picture magazines I had brought down the day before.

I, of course, expressed myself most eager to hear his story; the old man's courteous bow had mollified me in a way, but I could not help feeling deeply chagrined that one for whom I had such respect and affection should prove to be so unsound in his science.

"Try some of this first, Dick, anyhow," said he kindly, evidently feeling I was upset. "I'm sorry Banks decanted that new stuff. I knew I had some more of the old left, the same you liked so much last night."

I helped myself mechanically, and Uncle Jim followed my example. We sat in silence for some minutes, Uncle Jim pulling hard at his pipe, and I puffing a cigarette and waiting for him to begin.

The old man, however, said nothing, but rising from his chair, crossed the room to his big writing desk near the window. Unlocking one of the top drawers, he began slowly to turn over a number of neatly arranged papers.

I smoked on in silence. There was no sound save the ticking of the old grandfather's clock in the corner, and the soft rustling of the papers as my uncle turned them over.

The rustling ceased, and the old gentleman came back slowly towards his chair, holding some closely written

sheets of blue foolscap which he was scanning so intently that he seemed almost to have forgotten my presence.

At last he sat down, and with evident effort, as though it gave him pain or opened up some old wound, began his strange story. I noticed afterwards that the old man left his pipe unlit and his whiskey untasted. It was very evident that he was living over again in imagination the past which had made so deep an impression upon him.

"Yes, Dick, it was a tragedy, if ever there was one! I am no story-teller, my boy, and I fear I can never make you realise what I felt, even as I know I can never realise what must have been felt by her.

"It was in '68—thirty-five years ago. They were stopping at Newlyn for the winter. That was long before there was any artists' colony there.

"You remember the low white house on the hill, as you go to Paul—the one with the high escallonia hedge you admired this afternoon? Well, that's where it happened. It was an old farm house then; but they've converted it into a set of studios.

"The first time I saw them they came here; or, rather, she had brought him to consult me.

"In spite of her apparently calm exterior, I could feel how terribly anxious she was about him, and how determined she was that everything possible should be done to fight the thing.

"De Brys himself—though he actually said nothing—from the first gave me the impression of not believing in any possible cure that science could devise. He seemed all along quite resigned to getting steadily worse, but had apparently no anxiety for himself. All his anxiety was for his wife—for the deep distress she was manifestly suffering on his account.

"He was willing to do anything I suggested—to take anything, give everything a trial. But then, as ever afterwards, he gave me the impression of doing this solely to pacify his wife, and not because he had the slightest belief in the efficacy of my drugs and prescriptions.

"When he first described his symptoms I had a vague unsatisfactory impression which I could not quite define, but which, in spite of his apparent frankness, led me to suspect he might speak more freely to me alone. Perhaps he did not want his wife to know all, I thought.

"Catarrh of the stomach, loss of appetite, weakness, fits of giddiness,—quite enough to begin on anyhow. Complete nervous breakdown; and yet he did not give me the impression of being nervous about himself in any way.

"I made out a prescription and promised to call next day so as to go more fully into the case.

"This was the beginning of my intimacy with two of the nicest people I had ever known. They were both remarkably well read and well travelled, he especially. But what struck me most was the perfect nature of their union; they were absolutely devoted to each other in every way.

"He was about forty, but his grey hair and feeble health gave him the appearance almost of an old man. She was ten years his junior, a woman nobly planned, in the perfection of her womanhood. They had only been married a twelve-month, I learned.

"When I say that they seemed absolutely devoted to each other, I fear I am giving you a poor idea of the impression they made upon me as an ideally united couple. I was so touched by it that I swore to myself I would cheat death of his victim by every means that science could devise or skill could invent.

"As I grew more intimate with them—for do what I would De Brys grew gradually worse—I learned to admire their characters more and more. The fine qualities which the strain of the battle against disease brought into play—the quiet bravery of the man, fearless of death, contemptuous even of it,—yet most sorely handicapped by love of his adored wife, and most of all by the torture that she suffered because of him—the brave quiet of the woman who strove in every way to hide from her husband her own cruel distress.

De Brys was now subject to fainting fits; he was evidently getting weaker

and weaker, in spite of everything I tried.

"I could make no impression on the disease; could not put my finger on the spot, try how I might. Indeed I could find no sufficient cause of any kind for his strange malady.

"De Brys had been a powerful man, so he told me, and indeed he must have been to have gone through some of the adventures he referred to on rare occasions when speaking of his travels. Moreover, Mrs. De Brys assured me that he was quite strong and vigorous before they were married. But even that gave no clue, for De Brys, in answer to a direct question from me, assured me that the tie between them was purely spiritual.

"He was now very emaciated, and his delicately-chiselled features, always clean shaven, made him look more like a woman than a man.

"The strain was also beginning to leave indelible marks on Mrs. De Brys' unusual beauty; her magnificent hair was here and there turned in iron-grey patches. I was almost as anxious about her as I was about him, and so I was glad to hear that her sister was on her way from India to help her with the nursing; for do what I would I could not persuade her to have a trained nurse down from town.

"She was still, in spite of the strain, an admirable specimen of womanhood, a veritable Juno, though indeed when with her I felt rather in the presence of a Madonna than of an Olympian goddess.

"We had now been fighting the battle shoulder to shoulder eight long months, and gradually we had grown very intimate, and had talked over and discussed many things together.

"It was an unaccustomed pleasure to me freely to discuss the problems of life with two such well read and thoughtful people, for in Penzance in those days one had to keep one's mouth shut if bread and butter were to be earned.

"Yet, somehow, in spite of their apparently genuine open-mindedness, I always felt there was a point where this might break down if I were to press my arguments home too remorselessly. However, from the very first I made it

quite clear that, as far as I was concerned, I believed in nothing but what I could see and handle.

"The weaker De Brys got, the more I was determined to pull him together again, for his wife's sake if not for his own. Ida De Brys was never tired of thanking me for my care of her husband. I, of course, told her it was nothing but my plain duty, and that my greatest thanks would be to find out the real cause of the trouble in the interests of science.

"It was the end of August, the 30th I think. In the afternoon a farm boy rode up with a hastily-scribbled note from Mrs. De Brys—'Come at once to Charles. Paralysis I fear.'

"I jumped into the dog-cart, and found De Brys in a queer state. He had been unconscious, and for some time after I came was speechless and unable to move. But I gradually pulled him together. We got him to bed, and he soon fell into a deep and natural sleep.

"Next morning I was delighted to find him much better. His wife said that he had taken nourishment and stimulants most readily when he woke, and had slept all night and made a good breakfast, an unheard-of thing. He was still sleeping when I saw him. Nothing could be better; he had evidently turned the corner at last.

"I drove home feeling pleased with myself. But what had done the trick? All the way I puzzled over the various things I had tried lately on my patient—which of them or what combination of them had touched the spot?

"On reaching home, however, my thoughts were quickly turned elsewhere, for I found a telegram waiting for me telling me to come at once; my sister, your Grandmother Mary, was dying.

"I left by the night train for town. It is true I was disappointed to be called away from my most puzzling case just at the moment of its greatest interest; but Mary was my first care, and I really felt less anxious about De Brys than I had done for months.

"Your grandmother passed away before I got to town, and I stayed on in Russell Square for the funeral. But I was not to follow her to her last resting-

place, for on Wednesday—two days after I left home—I got a wire from Tom Pentreath—he was looking after my work while I was away—'De Brys—suicide—you wanted at once—inquest.'

"I left by the express early next morning and found matters far worse even than I had expected.

"De Brys had not committed suicide as I supposed from the telegram. There was no doubt about it. *Ida de Brys had shot her husband and then blown out her own brains.*

"The most puzzling thing about the whole mysterious occurrence was, that the bodies were both found in Mrs. De Brys' room. Their rooms opened into one another.

"The farm people were startled by the shots at about ten in the evening. Old Bob Keirgwin, the farmer, found a ghastly sight. He, of course, sent straight off for Tom; Tom said it made even him feel quite sick.

"De Brys lay huddled up on the hearth rug with nothing on but his night shirt. He was shot in three places, thigh, heart and head.

"Mrs. De Brys had fallen across the bed, on the other side from the fireplace. She was fully clothed except that instead of a dress she had on a soft Oriental wrapper of silk. She had fallen on her face, and the mantle of her glorious hair hid the horrid sight. One hand was pressed to her eyes while the other tightly clutched the revolver.

"It was all too ghastly for words. Tom Pentreath told me the details as we drove together from the station. It was just a horrible night-mare. I could not at first believe it.

"That these two people of all the world should come to this, murder and suicide!

"The only possible explanation was that long-suffering nature had at length given way. De Brys had developed some sudden fit of homicidal mania and had attacked his wife—they sometimes do turn first on those they love best—and she had done it in self-defence. And I proceeded to expound this theory to Pentreath.

"'That won't do,' said Tom. 'De

Brys had absolutely nothing in his hand. There was not the slightest sign of a struggle. She couldn't have been afraid of him unarmed. She was so much stronger physically—and she had the pistol.'

"'Perhaps she took the pistol from him,' said I, as the thought suddenly flashed into my brain.

"'It won't do, Jim, I tell you,' retorted Pentreath, obstinately—'there was no struggle at all; he was potted like a rabbit.'

"'Well then, she must have broken down,' I said—'all the worry and strain and all that.'

"'Looks like it more,' said Tom, thoughtfully; and yet . . . why was he in her room? When I heard of course I rode off as soon as I could saddle a horse, but I could find nothing that would give the slightest clue. Perhaps he'd taken too much whiskey.'

"'Whiskey!' I said. 'Bosh, my dear fellow, you don't know the people. De Brys could hardly be induced to touch a drop of it even to help a faint.'

"'Well, at any rate, there was an empty bottle by his bed side, and the medicine glass smelt of it.'

"'O that's easily enough explained. I gave her a powder to give him in water with half a spoonful of whiskey in it, if he felt queer again.'

"'A fainting man does not leave his bed and go into another room for choice, Jim. It won't do.'

"'Won't do!' I retorted desperately. 'Even if you are right and he had taken too much stimulant, that's no reason . . .'

"'No, it isn't old man! But shoot him she evidently did, there's no getting away from that.'

"We drove on together in silence. I felt absolutely crushed by the terrible calamity that had overtaken my two friends. For now they were no more I realised how deep was my interest in them, how much I should miss . . . how great a regret it was that I should see Ida De Brys no more.

"I was only then fully conscious for the first time that I loved . . . I was almost frightened at my own feelings, I loved her, yet I had no jealousy of her

husband. I'd have cured him for her so willingly. I felt the best influence in my life had gone for ever from it.

"And yet—she had killed the man I was absolutely sure she loved more deeply than her own life!

"It was too horrible for words! Some sudden folly—some monstrous accident of nature, that made one doubt one's own sanity!

"Fools that men were to believe in a Providence, when all was but the rattling of dice by the hand of chance!

"When we got home Pentreath came in to give me a few notes of cases he had seen for me, and on leaving said, 'I have opened all the letters except this.'

"He held out an ordinary looking envelope with my address, and 'to await arrival' written in the corner.

"I snatched it from him so excitedly that he started back in surprise.

"'Why it's from her!' I cried, bursting the envelope open with unsteady fingers.

"'Hadn't the ghost of an idea,' muttered Tom. 'Never saw her handwriting before. It came on Tuesday morning.'

"But I hardly heard what he said. My whole attention was centred on the following brief sentences scribbled on a half-sheet of paper. I see them now before me.

"'Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your goodness to us. My sister, Mrs. Weight, is coming home by the *Cochin*. She is due at Marseilles on the 14th. She was coming to stay with us you know. Be good to her too, my dearest, kindest Doctor.

"'IDA DE BRYs.'

"I sank heavily into a chair with my hand pressed to my eyes.

"'When did you say this came, Tom?'

"'The day before yesterday. I found it here in the morning.'

"'Good God, man! This is still more horrible! Why!—it was all premeditated! Yet she speaks of my goodness to 'us'—to them—as though . . .'

"Horrible, horrible! Do we kill for love? Did they agree to kill each other? Had he not the nerve to do it himself?—asked her to put him out of his misery?"

"But then he was better when I left him! And anyway he used to smile so at death!"

"Perhaps he was a hypocrite after all?—it was all the pretence of a proud man?"

"These, and many other thoughts flashed through my brain, Dick. I felt utterly prostrate, not only with the shock of the thing, but with the utter hopelessness of solving the mystery."

"I would have gladly given all I possessed to have found a reason in all this madness."

"What good anyhow was all this terrible experience to them dead, or to me living? Who was benefited by it all? We were all the sport of malignant fate. The mills of matter finally ground us all impartially and remorselessly to powder!"

"I felt for the moment very much inclined to follow the De Brys's example and cheat the blind process of things. Perhaps they were right. The world-process was a failure, and the only choice a thinking being had was to bring it to an end as speedily as possible, as far as he himself was concerned at least!"

"I need not trouble you, Dick, with the details of the inquest. If I who had known them so intimately was utterly at a loss, it was not to be expected that twelve simple, not to say stupid, Newlyn fisher folk would get to the bottom of it."

"They listened to the witnesses and to my bald recital of the history of the case and the bare medical facts, and on the direction of the Coroner brought in a verdict of murder and suicide whilst of unsound mind."

"It was all over long before my letter to Mrs. Weight, containing a brief statement of the sad tragedy, reached her on her landing at Marseilles."

"She wired that she was coming on straight here. I met her at the station, and Tom and his wife put her up."

"Ida De Brys' sister was a woman of distinguished appearance, and of most

charming courtesy. She was, however, very silent and reserved. Her grief was, so to speak, 'dry-eyed,' and I doubted whether she fully realised the ghastly tragedy of the thing. I now know that I did her a grave injustice in this, and that the control she exercised over herself was little short of heroic."

"It appeared that on his marriage De Brys had willed everything to his wife, and in the event of the death of both of them to her sister. Mrs. Weight had accordingly to remain till this document could be forwarded from Bombay."

"She thus stayed about two months with the Pentreaths, and we had some long talks together on the subject. She, however, seemed unable to throw any light on the mysterious tragedy that had befallen her relatives; yet somehow or other while she was here I seemed to feel less intensely puzzled."

"When all the necessary legal formalities were complete, Mrs. Weight said goodbye, and left for India."

"She would have pressed a large cheque upon my acceptance, but this I steadily refused. I told her that I was only too happy to have served my friends while they lived; now they were dead, the only possible solace to my grief, the only possible reward for my care of them, would be to know why I had failed—why they had failed."

"Tears were in her eyes as she said goodbye, and we parted mournfully enough. This was the last I ever saw of her."

"I settled down to my practice in a mechanical fashion, but my inside nerve, I found, was almost gone."

"I was always asking myself the question: *Cui bono*, when . . . ? And then all the swirl of the mysterious event would begin over and over again in my brain."

"I was, so to say, fascinated with the tragic end that had overtaken my unfortunate patients. I kept brooding over it, till at last my whole world-problem seemed to centre round it."

"It got on my nerves. I began to develop an unhealthy sympathy with Ida De Brys—imagining all sorts of excuses. Somehow or other I felt she was

to be greatly pitied. What she had done she had done for the best, because . . . But it was always just at that 'because' where the whole thing began to run into itself again, and I could find no outlet.

"Some two months had thus passed since Mrs. Weight had left us. I was feeling thoroughly demoralized and shattered. Tom Pentreath strenuously urged a complete rest and change of air; he would look after the work.

"I was at last persuaded to run up to town for a fortnight, which I intended to spend in a round of theatres and any other amusement I could find to take me out of myself, and keep my thoughts from grinding away in the same old grooves.

"I had not, however, been in town forty-eight hours when I received, among some other letters forwarded by Tom, a long blue envelope, registered and marked 'private' in one corner. It contained *this*, from Mrs. Weight, from Lahore.

"You'd better read it yourself, Dick. I've now told you my part of the story, though poorly, I fear, for my memory is dim, and I am no teller of tales."

. . .

The old doctor sighed, and held out the faded blue pages to me. I took them in silence and began to read.

"Lahore, Jan. 3, 1869.

"Dear Doctor Thompson,—I have hesitated for some days, but have at last made up my mind that the best way in which I can repay your great kindness to my dear ones and to myself is to tell you the truth as I know it.

"I therefore send you herewith a copy of Ida's letter which I received on my return from the hands of a common friend.

"I fear I cannot put you in possession of all the facts even now, as you will see for yourself, but I hope my information may enable you in some small measure to realise the ghastly horror of the fate which drove my unhappy sister to do this thing.

"Ida shall speak for herself, but you must first be told of whom she speaks.

"Charles had a younger brother,

Ralph. But no one would have taken them for brothers; Ralph was not only dark, he was darker than most natives, quite swarthy; whereas, as you know, Charles was a very fair man.

"I can tell you very little in detail about this man, for Charles was always most reticent; but Ida and I gleaned enough of the bare facts to know that Ralph from his childhood—they were both born out here, though brought up at home—had hated his brother with a fierce and bitter hatred that nothing could appease. Charles had behaved in a most exemplary manner. Again and again had he paid his brother's debts; again and again had he stood between him and disgrace—even worse. Charles had once been very wealthy; his father was a merchant and extensive planter out here, and at his death left all his money to his elder son, for he had years before ceased to have anything to do with Ralph.

"Charles must have behaved to Ralph more than nobly, and have forgiven until seventy times seven and beyond, for, not even when what I am going to tell you had occurred, did Ida or I ever hear him say an unkind thing of this incarnate fiend—his brother!

"Though I had known Charles intimately for several years—for we were both deeply interested in certain common studies and endeavours—I had never seen his brother, never heard of him even; nor had Charles seen Ida, till we all four met at Simla about two years ago.

"Ida had just come out to spend the winter with me, and Charles had accepted my invitation to stop with us a few days on his way north.

"Ralph—I learned afterwards—had followed his brother begging, praying and threatening for a large sum of money. I could never learn the precise details, but it was a case of forgery, and his villainous native accomplices had turned on Ralph and were blackmailing him.

"Of course, I knew nothing of all this at the time, and when he came to see Charles I naturally insisted that he should have his things sent up from the hotel to us.

"He must have been a consummate actor, for I had not the faintest suspicion of any breach between them for weeks; and Charles said nothing.

"Oh, had I only known then! From that moment the battle of good and evil for possession of Ida began. We stayed at Simla for four months; and they stayed on too—took a bungalow near ours.

"I cannot tell you the details of the struggle; it was long and infinitely subtle to watch, as I gradually learned for myself by observation and feeling—even though I really did not know. How much more subtle, then, must it have been in the grim full conscious reality between the men themselves!

"With Charles, the infinite subtlety of the struggle of the inner life—the struggle between what he believed to be his duty of sacrifice of all things dear to him for the highest of all aims, and his overpowering and undying love for what was best in womanhood for him; with Ralph, the infinitely subtle use of the most brilliant deception to make what was most foul appear most fair.

"Charles had as yet spoken no word of love to Ida. But I knew; I could read it in their eyes when I spoke to each of the other. I knew these two were made for one another.

"One day I rallied him on his timidity. For long he looked earnestly at me; so that gradually I began to follow his thoughts. 'Do you not know why I hesitate, my sister?' was all he said.

"Then in a flash I understood; I did not see, but I felt that he was at some great crisis of fate where sacrifice—and sacrifice almost unendurable—was demanded of him.

"One day, shortly after this, on returning from a ride, I found Ida in her room in terrible distress—exhausted, hysterical. She had quite lost control of herself. She clung to me like a frightened child, as I knelt beside her, and between her sobs told me the cause of her distress.

"Ralph De Brys had been about an hour ago. He had proposed to her, at first with the humblest manner and most

delicately worded professions of his undying attachment.

"She, however, gently repulsed him, and told him it could not be. He then pressed her most earnestly to take time and not then definitely to refuse him.

"He pleaded so eloquently, so persuadingly and adroitly, that he drew from her a hesitating and scarcely audible admission that she loved Charles.

"This sweet confession forced from her trembling lips suddenly transformed him from a pleading lover into a tense dark statue of hate, cold with suppressed fury.

"He stood silent for half a minute, a naked will of evil. Then remorselessly and weirdly he calmly cursed his brother. Ida sank on to the sofa, half stupefied with horror.

"Then turning to her, the rage of baffled passion in his eyes, he swore he would possess her even against her will, and that soon.

"Her senses seemed to be leaving her. She felt as though she was being driven out of her body by one overmastering feeling of loathing and personal horror.

"In utter despair, not knowing what she did, she heard herself, as though far off, shriek out 'Charles! Charles!!' and fainted. When she recovered consciousness Ralph was gone.

"Ida spent a sleepless night, unable to shake off the fear that clutched at her heart.

"Early next morning Charles called and insisted on seeing her. I dressed my darling hastily, brought her to the drawing room and left her in his arms.

"Ralph had disappeared, leaving no trace behind, and I have only just learned from the friend who gave me Ida's letter that he died at Calcutta in the native quarter some four months ago. He had always been a hard drinker and practically drank himself to death.

"Charles and Ida were married, and from that moment Charles began gradually to fall into weak health. They spent a year travelling about on the Continent and in England, before they

went to Penzance on a Cornish tour. Charles was tired of travelling, and liked the place so much that he proposed they should winter at Newlyn.

"I myself had long known that Charles was fighting heroically an inner battle against strong forces of evil; that he had unreservedly volunteered his life and earthly happiness in a great spiritual struggle. But in a long private conversation we had together the day he took Ida to his arms, he sternly forbade me to breathe a word of this to my sister. These things were not yet for her to know consciously, he said.

"It was then that I first realized that the bringing into physical consciousness of his love for Ida—a love that had its roots in the depths of his being, would perhaps add severely to the strain, and bring into play many new forces.

'My confidence in Charles, however, was unlimited, and I had then no fear of the outcome.

"It was only as I gleaned from Ida's letters that things were going from bad to worse, and how, finally, he was subject to those mysterious fainting fits, and was now the wreck of his former vigorous self, that I determined to lay aside work that I knew to be most urgent, for a duty which had become imperative, and so I took my passage on the *Cochin* from Bombay to come to them.

"The rest you know, my dear Doctor, all but my darling's last words to me. She wanted you to know, but feared to tell herself, and thought I should not dare. But I dare tell, and Ida shall not lose if daring can aid.

"And now, dear Dr. Thompson, good-bye and God bless you for all your kindness to my loved ones. It is no good writing to me at Lahore, for I shall leave no address behind me. It is better thus; indeed I am going beyond the reach of the post for many a long day, I hope.

"Yours most gratefully,

"MURIEL E. WEIGHT."

When I came to the end of this strange letter, I sat up in my chair feeling somewhat dazed. I looked across at old Uncle Jim, but he was lying back

in his great arm chair with his eyes closed and to all appearance asleep.

So lighting a fresh cigarette, and sinking back again, I turned to the remaining sheets of blue paper—the copy of Ida De Brys' letter to her sister.

"Newlyn, Sept. 1, 1868.

"My own dearest Muriel,—It is too much! I can bear no more!! I shall go mad!!!

"Oh, why did I meet my darling this time again, if it was to end thus? I feel that I have been the drag upon him, when all I longed for was to help.

"But, oh, God, are such things possible! Is there no mercy? Must there be literally no hope but in the Formless and Eternal?

"Is love, love most pure and holy, impotent against this devil?

"I now know, Muriel dearest, how Charles has been done to death. They used his love for me against him—his love for me, his fear for me, that I should be harmed because I loved him.

"The utter fiendishness of their cunning is indescribable, and yet they simply intensify already existing forces!

"It was Ralph—that monster Ralph—that they have been using all the time—his blind hate for Charles, his foul passion for me—they have used it as a two-edged sword with which to smite down my true knight, my darling husband.

"Yes, Sissy, they've killed him, the fiends! Charles is dead. But—too horrible, too awful to think of—his body is alive. And worse, a thousand times more ghastly than this, that foul beast is in it!

"Oh, Muriel, Muriel, what am I to do?

"It was after the last fainting fit—a very long one—two days ago; it was different from the others. I feared it was a paralytic stroke, but he rallied marvellously, and Dr. Thompson was quite jubilant that he'd turned the corner—that the crisis of his mysterious illness was over.

"At first I had no suspicion—it was the drinking that alarmed me. O God! that awful moment! I had raised him,

my own weak, gentle darling as I thought, my arm round his dear shoulders, to give him a powder Dr. Thompson had just sent up, mixed in a spoonful of whiskey and water.

"Suddenly he angrily dashed the glass from my hand, and shouted out—'Damn you, woman! give me the . . . bottle!'

"In a flash I understood. I saw Ralph looking through my darling's eyes; I felt him; I knew he was there.

"I saw his anger change to a look—Muriel, I cannot write it; you will know. But whiskey was his first craving.

"Catching sight of the bottle on the table by the bedside, he savagely pulled out the cork, with his teeth, holding the bottle in his shaking hands, and then drank and drank, till the bottle fell from his grasp and I caught it.

"He fell back and gradually sank into a state of coma. That was yesterday at about eleven in the morning—centuries ago!

"Oh, I have not told you that Dr. Thomson was suddenly called away yesterday to town to see a dying relative. I am utterly alone, and dare not speak. I dare not tell anyone. Who would believe me? I dare not tell even the Doctor if he were here.

"I have let no one into the room, saying that Mr. De Brys is sleeping very soundly. I have all my meals in my room, next to his.

"I thought, of course, at first that this horror would be a passing thing, some special weakness of my darling's, that he had only momentarily been overcome and taken possession of.

"But, oh, Sissy, even so it was horrible! Whenever I went to the bed to look at him, strive as I would to conquer it, in spite of my heart's yearning to breaking for my love, I was driven back by a feeling of utter loathing for the body of my husband that had now been defiled!

"He slept all day and woke, about nine. As he stirred, I rose from the chair—my heart thumping till I thought it would burst—and so we eyed each other. But no—it was not that—for he would not look at me straight.

"He spoke just like Charles—yet not like him—gently, but giving me the

strange inner feeling of someone playing a cunning part.

"He said he was feeling better and would like something to eat.

"He said many things like Charles—but there was no feeling of Charles about him.

"I moved about as in a dream—fascinated by some terrible nightmare—in horrible doubt. Perhaps it was I who was run down too much—light-headed? I was feeling most awfully shattered, broken to pieces; yet I dared not sleep.

"He ate heartily; Charles had never eaten like this!

"I could not sleep—I dare not. I spent the night in torment, clinging desperately to the forlorn hope that the obsession was gradually fading off, and that when he woke Charles would be there—my love be in my arms again.

"But it never could be quite the same again, I felt. Something had come between us—there could no longer be the same absolute sanctity—our union had been profaned!

"When he woke this morning, Charles seemed nearer, and the other farther away, and I was beginning to regain some confidence.

"He had his breakfast and was almost my darling again.

"But gradually, from speaking like Charles, so gently and lovingly, he became more and more strange. From loving, his words became . . . oh, loathsome, loathsome!

"And then he swore, and raved, and cursed, and taunted and threatened. When he was strong—oh, my God!"

"He sprang out of bed, and I rushed into my own room and locked the door.

"I heard him fall; then a movement as though he were crawling on his hands and knees for some time; then the creaking of the bed; and then—silence!

"I dared not open the door; but I stooped down and looked through the keyhole.

"He had found the rest of the whiskey, which I had foolishly left on the mantle-piece, crawled back to bed, and was draining it to the dregs.

"As before, he fell back in a sort of coma,

"Then it was for the first time that the way out flashed into my head.

"Yes, Muriel, I have now made up my mind.

"Here all is hopeless, helpless. There is no way out down here. I can tell no one, consult no one. No one can help me.

"I might go and leave Charles' body to this fiend to brutalize it, and Charles' money to him to squander on vice—to him, his brother's murderer, and worse.

"I might meet you at Marseilles, and we could go straight back to India together.

"But I will not do this, Muriel—I will not play the coward. I have some right to do as well as to suffer. A wife's place is by her husband's side—a wife's duty is to defend her husband if she can—protect his body from pollution!

"I now feel strong, my mind is clear. I have no longer any real fear inside.

"You and others who know more about these things, may perhaps disapprove. But I can only go on my own knowledge, my own feeling of right.

"I feel I am really harming no one, and that in this way I may perhaps be able to help Charles.

"When I am out of this body I may be able to act with my eyes open. Here I am not only blind, but bound hand and foot.

"We mortals, Muriel, have only the choice between two evils—I choose the lesser, as I see it.

"If one may shoot a tiger, surely one may shoot a fiend! And would not Charles freely give me everything he possesses? Will he not then give me his now useless and polluted body?

"But, God help me! I can't do it now!

"I know where Charles keeps it; it's in his dressing case next door.

"But I can't, no, I can't, Muriel, do this in cold blood!

"It must be only when I am forced to do it—in self-defence.

"But I know I shall be compelled; it is only a question now of a few hours at most. When he wakes

scarcely knowing what I write, or whether you will be able to read it.

"You will know long before you ever get this—know of yourself why—but you must not know physically.

"You will then be able to say truthfully that you had heard nothing from me to explain what I shall do.

"They'll all say I am mad.

"Let them! I don't care—except for dear, kind Doctor Thompson.

"If only you dare tell him. But then, that is impossible—for you won't know physically; you won't know I have written even; and you won't be quite sure you know rightly inside until you see N ——— when you get back, for I am sending this to him to await your return.

"Oh, darling Muriel, if only you were here to help me! But, no, if you were here, you would only think it your duty to stop me or get me away.

"The choice is mine, not yours, nor any one's else. I will not be a coward, for that is what it would be for me.

"I now ask only for justice, for there is no mercy.

"Goodbye, goodbye.

"Your heart broken and most wretched

"IDA."

As I read this awful letter, the fascination of the poor lady's terror, her too terrible hallucination, almost entirely overpowered me.

It was all I could do to keep a sure grip on all the facts of life which proved the purely hallucinatory nature of the beliefs of this otherwise gifted and high-minded trio.

I sprang up in need of strong physical action to shake off the terrible feeling of depression that Ida De Bry's letter had made upon me.

As I did so, the old doctor opened his eyes, and looked at me questioningly. He held out his hand for the faded blue sheets.

"Well?" he queried, gently.

"It is too horrible to be true!" I cried, with decision.

And now, twelve months afterwards, I am as absolutely convinced as I was

"I am writing this to you, dearest,

then that this is the only sane view of the matter.

Uncle Jim said nothing, but turned slowly, and, putting the blue sheets into their envelope, locked them up once more in his desk. He never mentioned the subject to me again.

A month ago my dear old uncle went to his long rest, leaving me everything.

On looking over his papers I immediately recognized the blue envelope when I came across it, but was surprised to find a piece of white note paper pinned

to it, with the following words in the old doctor's straggling writing :—

“ Dick, I should like you to publish this. It is a human document, if ever there was one. Fact is fact, hallucination is hallucination. We grow wise by experience alone. Only change their names; you'd better change all of them.”

This I have done and publish the story, not only because it is my duty to respect his wishes, but because I so thoroughly agree that fact is fact and hallucination hallucination; in this case it was hallucination for it was really too horrible to be true.

