

"I always knew there was something uncanny about the poor child," whispered Urban to his wife.

"Alas! she was born," said Muriel, low, "at the sad time when my mind was nigh distraught by that fearful inquest, and I lay in fever and delirium. She has never been as other children. I often marvel at her strange words. But she is clever, bright, happy, good, and beyond her years in sense. There can be no fear that her head is really affected. I have never had cause to dread such a terrible lot for her."

"Please God!" murmured the father. "Surely Providence would never add so great a curse to that which has already fallen on us."

"Do not say a curse!" whispered his wife. "Who knows but her peculiar condition may prove a blessing?"

"It is all very odd," cried Edna, suddenly, as she stood at the table. "I *should* so like to see this Judgment Hall."

"That, in all probability, you will never do," replied Urban.

"But why, papa, why?" said the child, eagerly, as she came to her parents. "Does it not belong to the Ashfords? And are we not Ashfords all?"

"Can I tell her?" questioned Urban Ashford of his wife. After a moment's consideration Muriel nodded her head.

"Come here, Edna, and sit on my knee," said her father. "I have a tale to tell. You are a great girl now, as you say, and can understand most things. Perhaps the time is come when you ought to know that which I am about to say to you. Listen, my darling. Once on a time—"

"That is the way all the pretty fairy tales begin," cried the child, eagerly, as she nestled to her father on his knee. "Is this a fairy tale?"

"Would that it were," pursued Urban, with a sigh. "No; it is a true story, dear. There lived a Sir Randolph Ashford. He had a younger brother whose name was Emeric, and an orphan cousin, who was looked on as a sort of dependent of his family, and who was called Urban—"

"Urban?" said Edna, looking up. "Why, that is you, papa."

"Sir Randolph Ashford was, for a time, childless; and had he no son his brother Emeric would have succeeded, on his death, to the title and estates, or, failing Emeric, his cousin Urban. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes, papa. I understand perfectly."

"Well," pursued the father, "one day the sounds of a quarrel were heard in the woods of Ashford Hall. A gamekeeper came up and found Emeric Ashford lying senseless—dead! His skull was fractured! A bloody stake was found by his side; it had evidently been lately cut from a tree. Can you bear to hear this wretched story, my child?"

"Why not, papa?" said the child, dreamily. "Somehow I feel as if I had heard all this before; though I don't know who told me." The father and mother looked again at each other. "Go on, papa; please go on!"

"As a wretched fatality would have it, Urban Ashford, who had likewise heard the sounds of quarrel, also came up. He was horrified at the sight of his murdered cousin, as he lay before him. The corpse was conveyed to the hall. What is called a 'coroner's inquest' was held. It was a sort of trial; for suspicion fell on Urban Ashford. He alone would have profited by Emeric's death—he alone would have any cause for wishing to rid the world of him."

"But you were innocent, father—you were innocent, I know," said Edna, in violent excitement.

"Urban was innocent, my child. God knows his innocence!" and the man paused in strong emotion. "The only shadow of a proof against him lay in the fact that he had in his possession a clasp-knife—just such a knife as the stake with which the deed was done might have been cut by. The coroner's jury returned a verdict which went to say that Emeric Ashford had been 'murdered by some person or persons unknown.' The real murderer was never discovered. The foulest suspicions rested on poor Urban's guiltless head. Whatever the verdict of the jury, the verdict of the world for him was 'guilty.' He retired into seclusion, with such small fortune as was his, to bring with him his dear wife and his darling little child, who was born just at this fatal time."

"And they loved him. *They*," said Edna, twining her arms about her father's neck and kissing him, "although the wicked, cruel world might hate him."

"They did," said the father, returning her caress; "they were his only solace."

"And that was all?" asked his child.

"Not quite," said Urban. "A son was afterwards born to Sir Randolph Ashford. Had Urban committed so fearful a crime he would have sinned in vain. Lady Ashford, the mother, died. But the boy lived and thrived; and Urban thanked God that it should be so. But now—"

"What, papa?"

"That boy is dead."

"And this causes you sorrow?"

"More than you can think, Edna," said Urban Ashford, in a despairing tone. "Between Urban and his cousin Randolph stands now no relative. The malice of the world will assail him more cruelly than ever. It will again accuse him."

"No, no, it cannot," cried the child, springing up. "Accuse my own papa—my good, dear papa! it cannot—it shall not!"

"What can *you* do, my poor little girl. You cannot brave the malice of the world."

"I can—I will!" exclaimed Edna, with an inspired look. "I can hear voices—soft, pleasant voices—whispering in my ear that it will be so. They sound louder and louder, nearer and nearer."

"What does she mean?" cried Muriel Ashford. "I hear sounds, too; but they are as those of a horse's hoofs."

In truth, the noise of a galloping horse might be distinctly heard. It stopped before the house door. Urban and his wife looked at one another inquiringly.