

Presently a female servant entered with a sealed packet.

"What does this mean?" cried Urban, as he looked at the superscription, pale as death. It was addressed to "Sir Urban Ashford." He tore open the envelope and read hastily. The letter, from old Herbert, the steward, informed a new master that Sir Randolph was no more. For a very long time past he had been in deplorable health, and had seemed to have led a painful existence. The death of his boy had appeared to have broken his heart, and he had died suddenly. His cousin Urban, his only remaining relative, was now the baronet, and the heir to Ashford Hall and all the proud demesnes. His attendance was respectfully requested at Sir Randolph's funeral, etc.

"Never, never will I claim the wretched inheritance," cried Urban, as he flung down the letter in great excitement, and began pacing the room. "No, no! I cannot face the world!"

"The world will receive you now with open arms," urged his wife, timidly. "Urban, dear, you are too sensitive."

"I cannot, I say—I will not!" and he hid his face in his hands.

"Papa," said little Edna, solemnly, gently separating her father's hands and looking in his face. "What are you afraid of? You have never stained proud Ashford's name. No doom of shame can fall on you—you need not fear her Judgment Hall."

"You are right, my child," said Sir Urban Ashford, looking up and kissing Edna. "Why should I be afraid? My conscience is clear. My soul is free from sin. I will go!"

II.

So Sir Urban Ashford took possession of Ashford Hall, the proud residence of his ancestors. His wife proved correct in her judgment of what is called "society." Urban Ashford was now the baronet, and the possessor of wide domains. He was no longer the poor outcast, whose name could be attacked, and whose honor impugned, without cavil, by malice and scandal. The "world" seemed disposed to obliterate the past from its memory. The younger generation of neighbors especially—however the elder one might still shake its head—visited Sir Urban and Lady Ashford, and held out the hand of seemingly unaffected cordiality to them.

A cloud, nevertheless, still hung over Urban Ashford's brow. He felt that, however the world to all appearance might be inclined to forget, the old stigma on his name was not yet removed; and the old calumny, which accused him of the murder of his cousin Emeric, might at any time be revived by enmity and malice. His wife and child were a perpetual solace to his gloomy mind, it was true; but even they could not fully chase away that cloud; and Muriel Ashford often sighed when the dark spirit fell on her beloved husband.

Edna alone was the ray of sunshine in the house. Her strange romantic nature revelled in all the picturesque accessories of the Hall. Her chief delight lay in

the collection of portraits of all the ancestors in the long line of Ashfords which hung on the walls of the vast gallery that, on the first floor, traversed the entire length of Ashford Hall from end to end. Edna knew all the names of the ancestors by heart, from Sir Eustace, who lived in the long gone-by days of the Second Henry, to the powdered and patched Sir Ronald and his pretty wife, with the sweet languishing eyes, known in family traditions as "the fair and accomplished Lady Arethusa." And, with a little wand in her hand, she would often go alone from picture to picture, pointing out each ancestor or ancestress to an imaginary crowd of visitors, and relating every legend or anecdote attached to each. At other times she would talk to the portraits as familiar friends with pretty, childlike, affectionate prattle, passing from one to the other with profound courtesies to each. Sometimes she would pause and listen, as if the figure before whom she stood had spoken to her, and then give a quaint answer to the imaginary address, laughing at one time, at another shaking her finger archly as if in reproof, but always with the air of being on the most friendly and confidential terms with all the Ashfords of the past.

One object seemed to have inspired little Edna with feelings rather of solemn awe than pleasure. This was a huge organ, which occupied a large space at one end of the gallery. Brought up, as Edna had been, in seclusion, she had no acquaintance with any musical exercises; yet she longed to touch that organ. It was closed, however, and probably had been disused for a century or more. Baffled as she was in her examination of the instrument, Edna looked on it as an object of mystery and, at the same time, of veneration.

Christmastide was approaching; and, at his wife's urgent exhortation, Urban Ashford had resolved, at last, to invite a party of so-called friends to a great supper which was to be given on Christmas Eve—that anniversary having always been considered, by family tradition, as a festival to be specially observed. With few exceptions the invitations had been cordially accepted; and Muriel Ashford smiled, with legitimate pride, in her husband's face, as each acquiescing answer arrived, in her joy at seeing how sound had been her judgment and advice. The "banquet," as Lady Ashford laughingly called the supper, was to be set out for the family and guests on the large round table in the great hall. It was a wide oak-panelled room, gloomy and mysterious in its aspect, with heavy old-fashioned sconces on the walls—scarcely a room, it might be thought, fitted for a festive entertainment. But it had always been considered by Ashford tradition as the fitting place for all family meetings; and in Edna's mind it was stamped as the awe-inspiring Judgment Hall, where the solemn tribunal sat, when Ashford pronounced its "doom of shame" on the unworthy scion of the race who had "stained proud Ashford's name."

And now Christmas Eve was there! Sir Urban and Lady Ashford were ready to receive their guests in the spacious and picturesque, though old-fashioned, drawing room on the first floor, when Edna bounded excitedly