

# THE THREAD OF LIFE

OR,  
SUNSHINE AND SHADE.

## CHAPTER XIII.—(CONTINUED.)

"Why, what does this mean, Miss Meysey—that is to say, Winifred?" He corrected himself hurriedly. "Elsie isn't gone? She's here this morning as usual, surely?"

As he said it he almost hoped it might be true. He could hardly believe the horrible reality. His face was pale enough in all conscience now—a little too pale, perhaps, for the letter alone to justify. Winifred, eyeing him close, saw at a glance that he was deeply moved.

"She's gone," she said, not too tenderly either. "She went away last night, taking her things with her—at least some of them.—Do you know where she's gone, Mr. Massinger? Has she written to you, as she promised?"

"Not Mr. Massinger," Hugh corrected gravely, with a livid white face yet affecting jauntness. "It was agreed yesterday it should be 'Hugh' in future.—No; I don't at all know where she is, Winifred; I wish I did." He said it seriously. "She hasn't written a single line to me."

Hugh's answer had the very ring of truth in it—for indeed it was true; and Winifred, watching him with a woman's closeness, felt certain in her own mind that in this at least he was not deceiving her. But he certainly grew unnecessarily pale. Cousinly affection would hardly account for so much disturbance of the vaso-motor system. She questioned him closely as to all that had passed or might have passed between them these weeks or earlier. Did he know anything of Elsie's movements or feelings? Hugh, holding the letter firmly in one hand, and playing with the key of that incriminating cupboard, in his waistcoat pocket, loosely with the other, passed with credit his examination. He had never, he said, with gay flippancy almost, been really intimate with Elsie, talked confidences with Elsie, or received any from Elsie in return. She did not know of his engagement to Winifred. Yet he feared, whatever her course might be, some man or other must be its leading motive. Perhaps—but this with the utmost hesitation—Warren Relf and she might have struck up a love affair.

He felt, of course, it was a serious ordeal. Apart from the profounder background of possible consequences—the obvious charge of having got rid of Elsie—two other unpleasant notions stared him full in the face. The first was, that the Meyseys might suspect him of having driven Elsie to run away by his proposal to Winifred. But supposing even they never thought of that—which was highly unlikely, considering the close sequence of the two events and the evident drift of Winifred's questions—there still remained the second unpleasantness—that his cousin, through whom he had been introduced to the family, should have disappeared under such mysterious circumstances. Was it likely they would wish their daughter to marry a man among whose relations such odd and unaccountable things were likely to happen?

For, strangely enough, Hugh still wished to marry Winifred. Though he loathed her in his heart just then for not being Elsie, and even, by some illogical twist of thought, for having been the unconscious cause of Elsie's misfortunes; though he would have died himself far rather than lived without Elsie; yet, if he lived, he wished for all that to marry Winifred. For one thing, it was the programme; and because it was the programme, he wanted, with his strict business habits, to carry it out to the bitter end. For another thing, his future all depended upon it; and though he didn't care a straw at present for his future, he went on acting, by the pure force of habit in a prudent man, as deliberately and cautiously as if he had still the same stake in existence as ever. He wasn't going to chuck up everything all at once, just because life was now an utter blank to him. He would go on as usual in the regular groove, and pretend to the world he was still every bit as interested and engaged in life as formerly.

So he brazened things out with the Meyseys somehow, and to his immense astonishment, he soon discovered they were ready dupes, in no way set against him by this untoward accident. On the contrary, instead of finding, as he had expected, that they considered this delinquency on the part of his cousin told against himself as a remote partner to her original sin, by right of heredity, he found the Squire and Mrs. Meysey nervously anxious for their part least he, her nearest male relative, should suspect them of having inefficiently guarded his cousin's youth, inexperience, and innocence. They were all apology, where he had looked for coldness; they were all on the defensive, where he had expected to see them vigorously carrying the war into Africa. One thing, above all others, he noted with profound satisfaction—nobody seemed to doubt for one second the genuineness and authenticity of the forged letter. Whatever else they doubted, the letter was safe. They all took it fully for granted that Elsie had gone, of her own free will, gone to the four winds, with no trace left of her; and that Hugh, in the perfect innocence of his heart, knew no more than they themselves about it.

Nothing else, of course, was talked of at Whitstrand that living day; and before night, the gossips and quidnuncs of the village inn and the servants' hall had a complete theory of their own to account for the episode. Their theory was simple, romantic, and improbable. It had the dearly-loved spice of mystery about it. The coast-guard had noticed that a ship, name unknown, with a red light at the masthead and a green on the port bow, had put in hastily about nine o'clock the night before, near the big poplar. The Whitstrand cronies had magnified this fact before night-fall, through various additions of more or less fanciful observers or non-observers—for fiction, too, counts for something—into a consistent story of a most orthodox elopement. Miss Elsie had let herself down by a twisted sheet out of her own window, to escape observation—some said a rope, but the majority voted for the twisted sheet, as more strictly in accordance with established precedent—she had slipped away to the big tree, where a gentleman's yacht, from parts unknown, had put in cautiously before a terrible gale, by previous arrangement, and had carried her over through a roaring sea across to the opposite of Flanders. Detail after detail grew and before long there were some

who even admitted to having actually seen a foreign-looking gentleman in a dark cloak—the cloak is a valuable romantic property upon such occasions—catch a white-robed lady in his stout arms as she leaped a wild leap into an open boat from the spray-covered platform of the guarded poplar roots. Hugh smiled a grim and hideous smile of polite incredulity as he listened to these final imaginative embellishments of the popular fancy; but he accepted in outline the romantic tale as the best possible version of Elsie's disappearance for public acceptance. It kept the police at least from poking their noses too deep into this family affair, and it freed him from any possible tinge of blame in the eyes of the Meyseys. Nobody can be found fault with for somebody else's elopement. Two points at least seemed fairly certain to the Whitstrand intelligentsia: first, that Miss Elsie had run away of her own accord in the absence of the family; and second, that she neither went by road nor rail, so that only the sea or river appeared to be left by way of a possible explanation.

The Meyseys, of course, were less credulous as to detail; but even the Meyseys suspected nothing serious in the matter. That Elsie had gone was all they knew; why she went was a profound mystery to them.

## CHAPTER XIV.—LIVE OR DIE?

And all this time, what had become of Elsie and the men in the *Mud Turtle*?

Hugh Massinger, for his part, took it for granted, from the moment he came to himself again on the bank of the salt marshes, that Elsie's body was lying unseen full five fathoms beneath the German Ocean, and that no tangible evidence of his crime and his deceit would ever be forthcoming to prove the naked truth in all his native ugliness against him. From time to time to be sure, one disquieting thought for a moment occurred to his uneasy mind: a black current might perhaps cast up the corpse upon the long dike where he had himself been stranded, or the breakers on the bar might fling it ashore upon the great sands that stretched for miles on either side of the river-mouth at Whitstrand. But to these terrible imaginings of the night-watches, the more judicial functions of his waking brain refused their assent on closer consideration. He himself had floated through that seething turmoil simply because he knew how to float. A woman, caught wildly by the careering current in its headlong course, would naturally give a few mad struggles for life, gasping and gulping and flinging up her hands, as those untaught to swim invariably do; but when once the stream had carried her under, she would never rise again from so profound and measureless a depth of water. He did not in any way doubt that the body had been swept away seaward with irresistible might by the first force of the outward flow, and that it now lay huddled at the bottom of the German Ocean in some deep pool, whence dredge or diver could never by human means recover it.

How differently would he have thought and acted all along had he only known that Warren Relf and his companion on the *Mud Turtle*, had found Elsie's body floating on the surface, a limp burden, not half an hour after its first immersion.

That damning fact rendered all his bold precautions and daring plans for the future worse than useless. As things really stood, he was plotting and scheming for his own condemnation. Through the mere accident that Elsie's body had been recovered, he was heaping up suspicious circumstantial evidence against himself by the forged letter, by the night escapade, by the wild design of entering Elsie's bedroom at the Hall, by the mad idea of concealing at his own lodgings her purloined clothes and jewelry and belongings. If ever an inquiry should come to be raised into the way that Elsie met her death, the very cunning with which Hugh had fabricated a false scent would recoil in the end most sternly against himself. The spoor that he scattered would come home to track him. Could any one believe that an innocent man would so carefully surround himself with an enveloping atmosphere of suspicious circumstances out of pure wantonness?

And yet, technically speaking, Hugh was in reality quite innocent. Murderer ashefelt himself, he had done no murder. Morally guilty though he might be of the causes which led to Elsie's death, there was nothing of legal or formal crime to object against him in any court of so-called justice. Every man has a right to marry whom he will; and if a young woman with whom he has cautiously and scrupulously avoided contracting any definite engagement, chooses to consider herself aggrieved by his conduct, and to go incontinently, whether by accident or design, and drown herself in chagrin and despair and misery, why, that is clearly no fault of his, however much she may regard herself as injured by him. The law has nothing to do with sentiment. Judges quote no precedent from Shelley or Tennyson. If Hugh had told the whole truth, he would at least have been free from legal blame. By his extraordinary precautions against possible doubts, he had only succeeded in making himself seem guilty in the eyes even of the unromantic lawyers.

When Warren Relf drew Elsie Challenger, a huddled mass, on board the *Mud Turtle*, the surf was rolling so high on the bar, that with one accord he and Potts decided together it would be impossible for them, against such a sea, to run up the tidal mouth to Whitstrand. Their piteous little dot of a craft could never face it. Wind had veered to the south-east. The only way possible now was to head her round again, and make before the shifting breeze for Lowestoft, the nearest northward harbour of refuge.

It was an awful moment. The sea roared onward through the black night; the cross-drift whirled and wreathed and eddied; the blinding foam lashed itself in volleys through the dusk and gloom against their quivering broadside. And those two men, nothing daunted, drove the *Mud Turtle* once more across the flank of the wind, and fronted her bows in a direct line for the port of Lowestoft, in spite of wind and sea and tempest.

But how were they to manage meanwhile, in that tossing cockleshell of a boat, about the lady they had so dearly rescued? That Elsie was drowned, Warren Relf didn't for

moment doubt; still, in every case of apparent drowning, it is a duty to make sure life is really extinct before one gives up all hope; and that duty was a difficult one indeed to perform on board a tiny yawl, pitching and rolling before a violent gale, and manned against the manifold dangers of the sea by exactly two amateur sailors. But there was no help for it. The ship must drift with one mariner only. Potts did his best for the moment to navigate the dancing little yawl a'fore, now that they let her scud before the full force of the favouring wind under little canvas; while Warren Relf, staggering and steadying himself in the cabin below, rolled the body round in rugs and blankets, and tried his utmost to pour a few drops of brandy down the pale lips of the beautiful girl who lay listless and apparently lifeless before him.

It was to him indeed a terrible task; for from the first moment when the painter set eyes on Elsie Challenger, he had felt some nameless charm about her face and manner, some tender cadence in her musical voice, that affected him as no other face and no other voice had ever affected him or could ever affect him. He was not exactly in love with Elsie—love with him was a plant of slower growth—but he was fascinated, impressed, interested, charmed by her. And to sit there alone in that tossing cabin, with Elsie cold and stiff on the berth before him, was to him more utterly painful and unmanly than he could ever have imagined a week or two earlier.

He did not doubt one instant the true story of the case. He felt instinctively in his heart that Hugh Massinger had shown her his inmost nature, and that this was the final and horrible result of Hugh's airy, easy protestations.

As he sat there, watching by the light of the one oil lamp, and rubbing her hands and arms gently with his rough hard palms, he saw a sudden tumultuous movement of Elsie's bosom, a sort of gasp that convulsed her lungs—a deep inspiration, with a gurgling noise; and then, like a flash, it was borne in upon him suddenly that all was not over—that Elsie might yet be saved—that she was still living.

It was a terrible hour, a terrible position. If only they had had one more hand on board, one more person to help him with the task of recovering her! But how could he ever hope to revive that fainting girl, alone and unaided, while the ship drifted on, single-handed, tossing and plunging before that stiffening breeze? He almost despaired of being able to affect anything. Yet life is life, and he would nerve himself up for it. He would try his best, and thank Heaven this boisterous wind that roared through the rigging would carry them quick and safe to Lowestoft.

His mother and sister were still there. If once he could get Miss Challenger safe to land, they might even now hope to recover her. Where there's life, there's hope. But what hope in the dimly lighted cabin of a toy yawl, just fit for two hardy weather-beaten men to rough it hardly in, and pitching with wild plunges before as fierce a gale as ever ploughed the yeasty surface of the German Ocean.

He rushed to the companion-ladder as well as he was able, steadying himself on his sea-legs by the rail as he went, and shouted aloud in breathless excitement: "Potts, she's alive! she's not drowned! Can you manage the ship anyhow still, while I try my best to bring her round again?"

Potts answered back with a cheery, "All right. There's nothing much to do but to let her run. She's out of our hands, for good or evil. The admiral of the fleet could do no more for her. If we're swamped, we're swamped; and if we're not, we're running clear for Lowestoft harbour. Give her sea-room enough, and she'll go anywhere. The storm don't live that'll founder the *Mud Turtle*. I'll land you or drown you, but anyhow I'll manage her."

With that manful assurance satisfying his soul, Warren Relf turned back, his heart on fire, to the narrow cabin and flung himself once more on his knees before Elsie.

A more terrible night was seldom remembered by the oldest sailors on the North Sea. Smacks were wrecked and colliers foundered, and a British gunboat, manned by the usual complement of scientific officers, dashed herself full tilt in mad fury against the very base of a first-class light-house; but the taut little *Mud Turtle* true to her reputation as the staunchest craft that sailed the British channels, rode it bravely out, and battled her way triumphantly, about one in the morning, through the big waves that rolled up the mouth of Lowestoft harbour. Potts had navigated her single-handed amid storm and breakers, and Warren Relf, in the cabin below, had almost succeeded in making Elsie Challenger open her eyes again.

But as soon as the excitement of that wild race for life was fairly over, and the *Mud Turtle* lay in calm water once more, with perfect safety, the embarrassing nature of the situation, from the conventional point of view, burst suddenly for the first time upon Warren Relf's astonished vision; and he began to reflect that for two young men to arrive in port about the small-hours of the morning, with a young lady very imperfectly known to either of them, lying in a dead faint on their cabin bunk, was, to say the least of it, a fact often open to social and even to judicial misconstruction. It's all very well to say offhand, you picked the lady up in the German Ocean; but Society is apt to move the previous question, how did she get there? Still something must be done with the unconvicted passenger. There was nothing for it, Warren Relf felt, even at that late season of the night, but to carry the half-inanimate patient up to his mother's lodgings, and to send for a doctor to bring her round at the earliest possible opportunity.

When Elsie was aware of herself once more, it was broad daylight; and she lay on a bed in a strange room, dimly conscious that two women whom she did not know were bending tenderly and lovingly over her. The elder, seen through a haze of half-closed eyelashes, was a sweet old lady with snow white hair, and a gentle motherly expression in her soft grey eyes: one of the few women who know how to age gracefully.

Whose fair old faces grow more fair  
As Point and Flanders yellow.

The younger was a girl about Elsie's own time of life, who looked as sisterly as the other looked motherly; a pleasant-faced girl, not exactly pretty, but with a clear brown skin, a cheek like the sunny side of peaches, and a smile that showed a faultless row of teeth within, besides lighting up and irradiating the whole countenance with a charm-

ing sense of kindness and girlish innocence. In a single word it was a winning face Elsie lay with her eyes half open, looking up at the face through her crossed eyelashes, for many minutes, not realising in any way her present position, but conscious only, in a dimly pleased and dreamy fashion, that the face seemed to soothe and comfort and console her.

Soothe and comfort and console her for what? She hardly knew. Some deep seated pain in her inner nature—some hurt she had had in her tenderest feelings—a horrible aching blank and void.—She remembered now that something unspeakable and incredible had happened.—The sun had grown suddenly dark in heaven.—She had been sitting by the waterside with dear Hugh.

As she thought of the name, that idolised name, a smile played for a moment faintly round the corners of her mouth; and the older lady, still seen half unconsciously through the chink in the eyelids, whispered in an audible tone to the younger and nearer one: "She's coming round, Elsie. She's waking now. I hope, poor dear, she won't be dreadfully frightened, when she sees only two strangers by the bed beside her."

"Frightened at you, mother," the other voice answered, soft and low, as in a pleasant dream. "Why, nobody on earth could ever be anything but delighted to wake up anywhere and find you, with your dear sweet old face, sitting by their bedside."

Elsie, still peering with half her pupils only through the closed lids, smiled to herself once more at the gentle murmur of those pleasant voices, both of them tender and womanly and musical and went on to herself placidly with her own imaginings.

Sitting by the waterside with her dear Hugh—dear Hugh—that price of men. How handsome he was; and how clever, and how generous! And Hugh had begun to tell her something. Eh! but something! What was it? What was it? She couldn't remember; she only knew it was something terrible, something disastrous, something unutterable, something killing. And then she rushed away from him, mad with terror, towards the big tree, and—

It was an awful, heart-broken, heart-rending cry. Coming to herself suddenly, as the whole truth flashed like lightning once more across her bewildered brain, the poor girl flung up her arms, raised herself wildly erect in the bed, and stared around her with a horrid vacant, maddened look, as if all her life were cut at once from under her. Both of the strangers recognized instinctively what that look meant. It was the look and the cry of a crushed life. If ever they had harboured a single thought of blame against that poor wounded, bleeding, torn heart for what seemed like a hasty attempt at self-murder, it was dissipated in a moment by that terrible voice—the voice of a good, distracted, irresponsible creature, from whom all consciousness or thought of right and wrong, of life and death, of sense and movement, of motive and consequence, has been stunned at one blow by some deadly act of undeserved cruelty and unexpected wickedness.

The tears ran unchecked in silent sympathy down the women's flushed cheeks.

Mrs. Relf leant over and caught her in her arms. "My poor child," she whispered laying Elsie's head with motherly tenderness on her own soft shoulder, and soothing the girl's pallid white face with her gentle old hand, "cry, cry, cry if you can! Don't hold back your tears; let them run, darling. It'll do you good.—Cry, cry, my child—we're all friends here. Don't be afraid of us."

Elsie never knew, in the agony of the moment, where she was or how she came there; but nestling her head on Mrs. Relf's shoulder, and in of the sympathy that gentle soul extended her so easily, she gave vent to her pent-up passion, and let her bosom sob itself out in great bursts and throbs of choking grief; while the two women, who had never till that very morning seen her fair face, cried and sobbed silently in mute concert by her side for many, many minutes together.

"Have you no mother, dear?" Mrs. Relf whispered through her tears at last; and Elsie, finding her voice with difficulty, murmured back in a choked and blinded tone; "I never knew my mother."

"Then Elsie and I will be mother and sister to you," the beautiful old lady answered with a soft caress. "You mustn't talk any more now. The doctor would be very, very angry with me for letting you talk and cry even this little bit. But crying's good for one when one's heart's sore. I know, my child, yours is sore now. When you're a great deal better, you'll tell us all about it.—Elsie, some more beef-tea and brandy.—We've been feeding you with it all night, dear, with a wet feather.—You can drink a little, I hope, now. You must take a good drink and lie back quietly."

Elsie smiled a faint sad smile. The world was all lost and gone for her now; but still she liked the dear souls' sweet, quiet sympathy. As Elsie glided across the room noiselessly to fetch the cup, and brought it over and held it to her lips and made her drink, Elsie's eyes followed every motion gratefully.

"Who are you?" she cried, clutching her new friend's plump, soft hand eagerly.

"Tell me where I am. Who brought me here? How did I get here?"

"I'm Edie Relf," the girl answered in the same low, silvery voice as before, stooping down and kissing her. "You know my brother, Warren Relf, the artist whom you met at Whitstrand. You've had an accident—you fell into the water—from the shore at Whitstrand. And Warren, who was cruising about in his yawl, picked you up and brought you ashore here. You're at Lowestoft now. Mamma and I are here in lodgings. Nobody at Whitstrand knows anything about it yet, we believe.—But darling," and she held poor Elsie's hand tight at this, and whispered very low and close in her ear, "we think we guess all the rest too.—Don't be afraid of us. You may tell it all to us by-and-by, when you're quite strong enough. Mother and I will do all we can to make you better. We know we can never make you forget it."

Elsie's head sank back on the pillow. It was all terrible—terrible—terrible. But one thought possessed her whole nature now. Hugh must think she was really drowned; that would grieve Hugh—dear affectionate Hugh.—He might be cruel enough to cast her off as he had done—though she couldn't believe it—it must surely be hideous, a hideous dream, from which sooner or later she would be certain to have a happy awaken-

ing—but at any rate it must have driven him wild with grief and remorse and horror to think he had killed her—to think she was lost to him.—Oughtn't she to telegraph at once to Hugh—to dear, dear Hugh—and tell him at least she was saved, she was still living.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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