

THE THREAD OF LIFE,

OR,
SUNSHINE AND SHADE.

CHAPTER XV.—THE PLAN EXTENDS ITSELF.

For three or four days, Elsie lay at the Relfs' lodgings at Lowestoft, seriously ill, but slowly improving; and all the time, Mrs. Relf and Edie watched over her tenderly with unceasing solicitude, as though she had been their own daughter and sister. Elsie's heart was torn every moment by a devouring desire to know what Hugh had done, what Hugh was doing, what they had said and thought about her at Whitstrand. She never said so directly to the Relfs, of course; she couldn't bring herself yet to speak of it to anybody; but Edie perceived it intuitively from her silence and her words; and after a time, she mentioned the matter in sisterly confidence to her brother Warren. They had both looked in the local papers for some account—if accident it were—and saw, to their surprise, that no note was taken anywhere of Elsie's sudden disappearance. This was curious, not to say ominous; for in most English country villages a young lady cannot vanish into space on a summer evening, especially flinging herself bodily into the sea—as Warren Relf did not doubt for a second Elsie had done in the momentary desperation of a terrible awakening—without exciting some sort of local curiosity as to where she has gone or what has become of the body. We cannot emulate the calm social atmosphere of the Bagdad of the Califs where a mysterious disappearance on an enchanted carpet aroused but the faintest and most languid passing interest in the breasts of the bystanders. With us the enchanted carpet explanation has fallen out of date, and mysterious disappearances, however remarkable, form a subject rather of prosaic and prying inquiry on the part of those commonplaces and unromantic myrmidons, the county constabulary. This strange absence of all allusion in the Whitstrand news to what must needs have formed a nine days' wonder in the quiet little village, quickened all Warren Relf's profoundest suspicions as to Hugh's procedure. At Whitstrand, all they could possibly know was that Miss Challoner was missing—perhaps even that Miss Challoner had drowned herself. Why should it all be so unaccountably buried, so strangely hushed up in the local newspapers? Why should no report be divulged anywhere? Why should nobody even hint in the *Lowestoft Times* or the *Ipswich Chronicle* that a young lady of considerable personal attractions, was unaccountably missing from a family of a well-known Suffolk landowner?

Already on the very day after his return to Lowestoft, Warren Relf had hastily telegraphed to Hugh Massinger at Whitstrand that he was detained in the Broads, and would be unable to carry out his long-standing engagement to take him round in the *Mud-Turtle* to London. But as time went on, and no news came from Massinger, Warren Relf's suspicions deepened daily. It was clear that Elsie, too, was lingering in her convalescence from suspense and uncertainty. She couldn't make up her mind to write either to Hugh or Winifred, and she couldn't bear the long state of doubt which silence entailed upon her. So at last, to set to rest their joint fears, and to make sure what was really being said and done and thought at Whitstrand, Warren Relf determined to run over quietly for an afternoon's inquiry, and to hear with his own ears how people were talking about the topic of the hour in the little village.

He never got there, however. At Almundham Station, to his great surprise, he ran suddenly against Mr. Wyville Meysiey. The Squire recognised him at a glance as the young man who had taken them in his yawl freely at once about all that had since happened in the family. But Relf was even more astonished when he found that the subject which lay uppermost in Mr. Meysiey's mind just then was not Elsie Challoner's mysterious disappearance at all, but his daughter Winifred's recent engagement to Hugh Massinger. The painter was still some years too young to have mastered the profound anthropological truth that even with the best of us, man is always a self-centred being.

"Well, yes," the Squire said, after a few commonplace conversations had been interchanged between them. "You haven't heard, then, from your friend Massinger lately, haven't you? I'm surprised at that. He had something out of the common to communicate. I should have thought he'd have been anxious to let you know at once that he and my girl Winifred had hit things off amicably together.—O, yes, it's announced, definitely announced: Society is aware of it. Mrs. Meysiey made it known to the county, so to speak, at Sir Theodore Sheepshanks on Wednesday evening. Your friend Massinger is not perhaps quite the precise man we might have selected ourselves for Winifred, if we'd taken the choice into our own hands: but what I say is, let the young people settle these things themselves—let the young people settle them between them. It's they who've got to live with one another, after all, not we; and they're a great deal more interested in it at bottom, when one comes to think of it, than the whole of the rest of us put together."

"And Miss Challoner?" Warren asked, as soon as he could edge in a word conveniently, after the Squire had dealt from many points of view—all equally prosy—with Hugh Massinger's position, character, and prospects—"is she still with you? I'm greatly interested in her. She made an immense impression on me that day in the sandhills."

The Squire's face fell somewhat. "Miss Challoner?" he echoed. "Ah, yes: our governess. Well, to tell you the truth—if you ask me point-blank—Miss Challoner's gone off a little suddenly.—We've been disappointed in that girl, if you will have it. We don't want it talked over in the neighbourhood more than we can help, on Hugh Massinger's account, more than anything else, because, after all, she was a sort of cousin of his—a sort of cousin, though a very remote one; as we learn now, an extremely remote one. We've asked the servants to hush it all up as much as they can, to prevent gossip; for my daughter's sake we'd like to avoid gossip; but I don't mind telling you, in strict confidence, as you're a friend of Massinger's, that Miss Challoner left us, we all think, in a most ungrateful manner. It fell upon us like a thunderbolt

from a clear sky. She left a letter for Winifred, saying she was leaving for parts unknown, without grounds stated. She slipped away, like a thief in the night, as the proverb says, taking just a small handbag with her, one dark evening; and the only other communication we've since received is a telegram from London—sent to Miss Challoner's address in London, in the most mysterious, romantic school-girlish style, to forward her luggage and belongings to an address given.

"A telegram from London?" Warren Relf cried in blank surprise. "Do you think Miss Challoner's in London, then? That's very remarkable.—A telegram to Massinger! asking you to send her luggage on to London!—You're quite sure it came from London, are you?"

"Quite sure!—Why, I've got it in my pocket this very moment, my dear sir," the Squire replied somewhat testily. "When an elder man says 'My dear sir' to a very much younger one, you may take it for granted he always means to mark his strong disapprobation of the particular turn the talk has taken." "Here it is—look!" To Hugh Massinger, *Fisherman's Rest*, Whitstrand, Suffolk.—Ask Winifred to send the rest of my luggage and property to 27 Holmby Place, Duke Street, St. James's, London. Explains by post hereafter.—ELISIE CHALLONER.—And here's the letter she wrote to Winifred: a very disappointing, disheartening letter. I'd like you to read it, as you seem interested in the girl. It's an immense mistake ever to be interested in anybody anywhere! A very bad lot, after all, I'm afraid; though she's clever of course, undeniably clever.—We had her with the best credentials, too, from Gorton. We're only too thankful now to think she should have associated for so very short a time with my daughter Winifred."

Warren Relf took the letter and telegram from the Squire's hand in speechless astonishment. This was evidently a plot—a dark and extraordinary plot of Massinger's. Just if first he could hardly unravel its curious intricacies. He knew the address in Holmby Place well; it was where the club porter of the Cheyne Row lived. But he read the letter with utter bewilderment. Then the whole truth dawned piecemeal upon his astonished mind as he read it over and over slowly. It was all a lie—a hideous, hateful lie. Hugh Massinger had forged the letter to Winifred to cover the truth, and, incredible as it seemed to a straight-forward, honest nature like Warren Relf's, he had managed to get the telegram sent from London by some other person, in Elsie's name, and to have Elsie's belongings forwarded direct to the club porter's, as if at her own request, by Miss Meysiey. Warren Relf stood aghast with horror at this unexpected revelation of Massinger's utter baseness and extraordinary cunning. He had suspected the man of heartlessness and levity; he had never suspected him of anything like so profound a capacity for serious crime—for forgery and theft and concealment of evidence.

His fingers trembled as he held and examined the two documents. At all hazards, he must show them to Miss Challoner. It was right she should herself know for exactly what manner of man she had thrown herself away. He hesitated a moment, then he said boldly: "These papers are very important to me, as casting light on the whole matter. I'm an acquaintance of Massinger's, and I'm deeply interested in the young lady. It's highly desirable she should be traced and looked after. I have some reason to suspect where she is at present. I want to ask a favour of you now. Will you lend me these documents, for three days only, and will you kindly mention to nobody at present the fact of your having seen me or spoken to me here this morning?" To gain time at least was always something.

The Squire was somewhat taken aback at first by this unexpected request; but Warren Relf looked so honest and true as he asked it, that, after a few words of hesitation and explanation, the Squire, convinced of his friendly intentions, acceded to both his propositions at once. It flashed across his mind as a possible solution that the painter had been pestering Elsie with too pressing attentions, and that Elsie, with hysterical girlish haste, had run away from him to escape them—or perhaps only to make him follow her. Anyhow, there would be no great harm in his tracking her down. "If the girl's in trouble, and you think you can help her," he said coolly and naturally, "I don't mind giving you what assistance I can in this matter. You can have the papers. Send them back next week or the week after. I'm going to Scotland for a fortnight's shooting now—at Farquharson's of Invertnant—and I shan't be back till the 10th or 11th. But I'm glad somebody has some idea where the girl is. As it seems to be confidential, I'll ask no questions at present about her; but I do hope she hasn't got into any serious mischief."

"She has got into no mischief at all of any sort," Warren Relf answered slowly and seriously. "You are evidently labouring under a complete misapprehension, Mr. Meysiey, as to her reasons for leaving you. I have no doubts that misapprehension will be cleared up in time. Miss Challoner's motives, I can assure you, were perfectly right and proper; only the action of another person has led you to mistake her conduct in the matter."

This was mysterious, and the Squire hated mystery; but after all, it favoured his theory—and besides, the matter was to him a relatively unimportant one. It didn't concern his own private interest. He merely suspected Warren Relf of having got himself mixed up in some foolish love-affair with Elsie Challoner, his daughter's governess, and he vaguely conceived that one or other of them had taken a very remarkable and romantic way of wriggling out of it. Moreover, at that precise moment his train came in; and since time and train wait for no man, the Squire, with a hasty farewell to the young painter, installed himself forthwith on the comfortable cushions of a first-class carriage, and steamed unconcernedly out of Almundham Station.

It was useless for Warren Relf now to go on to Whitstrand. To show himself there would be merely to display his hand openly before Hugh Massinger. The caprice of circumstances had settled everything for him exactly as he would have wished it. It was lucky indeed that the Squire would be away for a whole fortnight; his absence

would give them time to concert a connected plan of action, and to devise means for protecting Elsie. For to Warren Relf that was now the one great problem in the case—how to hush the whole matter up, without exposing Elsie's wounded heart to daws and jays—without minding her the matter of unnecessary suspicion, or the subject of common gossip and censorious chatter. At all costs, it must never be said that Miss Challoner had tried to drown herself in spite and jealousy at Whitstrand poplar, because Hugh Massinger had ventured to propose to Winifred Meysiey.

That was how the daws and jays would put it, after their odious kind, over five o'clock tea, in their demure drawing-rooms. What Elsie herself would say to it, or think of doing in these difficult circumstances, Warren Relf did not in the least know. As yet, he was only imperfectly informed as to the real state of the case in all its minor details. But he knew this much—that he must screen Elsie at all hazards from the slanderous tongues of five o'clock tea-tables, and that the story must be kept as quiet as possible, safeguarded by himself, his mother, and his sister.

So he took the next train back to Lowestoft, to consult at leisure on these new proofs of Hugh Massinger's guilt with his domestic counsellors.

CHAPTER XVI.—FROM INFORMATION RECEIVED.

At Whitstrand itself, that same afternoon, Hugh Massinger sat in his own little parlor at the village inn, fervid and eager, as he had always been since that terrible night when "Elsie was drowned," as he firmly believed without doubt or question; and in the bar across the passage, a couple of new-comers, rough waterside characters, were talking loudly in the seafaring tongue about some matter of their own over a pint of beer and a pipe of tobacco. Hugh tried in vain for many minutes to interest himself in the concluding verses of his *Death of Alaric*—anything for an escape from this gnawing remorse—but his Hippocrene was dry; he could find no rhymes and grind out at last for his own unproductiveness, he leant back in his chair with profound annoyance and listened listlessly to the strange disjointed echoes of gossip that came to him in fragments through the half-open door from the adjoining taproom. To his immense surprise, the talk was not now of topsails or of spinnakers; conversation seemed to have taken a literary turn; he caught more than once through a haze of words the unexpected name of Charles Dickens.

The oddity of its occurrence in such company made him prick up his ears. He strained his hearing to catch the context.

"Yes," the voice drawled out in a low London accent, tinged with the peculiar Wapping dialect; "I think that there book, *Our Mutual Friend*, I read 'e calls it. A pal o' mine, 'e said to me right out at the time, 'Bill,' says 'e 'that there Dickens 'ave took a leaf out o' your book,' says 'e; 'e've been a-takin' of your off: 'e've showed you up in print, 'e 'ave, under the halias of *Rogue Rider*'ood,' says 'e; 'an' you'd oughter read it, if it was for nothin' on earth but for the sake o' the likeness."—"Is that so?" says I, never thinkin' 'e meant it, as the sayin' is. "It is," says 'e; 'an' you've got to look into it."—Well I got a 'old o' the book, an' I read it right through on 'is recommendation: leastways, my missus she read it out loud to me; she've 'ad a eddication, my missus 'av: an' it's a pack o' rot, that's wot I calls it. There ain't no kind o' sense in it, to my thinkin'."

"The cap don't fit you, then, says you," the other voice retorted with a gurgle of tobacco. "'E ain't drawn you so as a man could recognise you." "Recognize me! Well, recognisins' ain't in it, d'y'e see. Wot 'e say is just a lot o' rubbish. This 'ere *Rogue Rider*'ood, accordin' to the story, 'e'd used to row about Lime-ouse Reach, a searchin' for bodies."—"A searchin' for bodies!" the second man repeated with an incredulous whiff. "'W, wot the dooce did 'e want to go an' do that for?"

"Well, that's just where it is, don't you see? 'E done it for a livelihood. A livelihood, says I, weny my missus reads that part out to me; wot livelihood could a beggar make out o' bodies? says I. 'Tain't as though a body was worth anything now-a-days, viewed as a body, says I, argumentative-like. A man as knowed anything about the riverside wouldn't never 'a gone writtin' such rubbish as that, an' in a printed book, too, as 'ad ought to be wrote careful an' accurate. It's my opinion, says I, as this 'ere Dickens is an over-rated man. A body now-a-days, wether it's a drowned body or a nat'ral body, ain't worth nothing not the clothes it stands up in, viewed as a body. Times was weny a body was always acsahally a body, an' wot savin' for itself, afore the 'Natomy Act.' But wot's it worth now? 'W, 'arf a crown for landin' it, paid by the parish, if it's landed in Essex, or five bob if you tow it over Surrey side o' the river. Not but wot I grant you there's bodies an' bodies. If a nob drowns himself, w'y, then, o' course there's sometimes as much as fifty pounds, or might be a 'undred, set upon the body. 'Is friends is glad to get the corpse back, an' ave it buried reg'lar in the family churchyard. A reward's offered free enough for a nob, I don't deny it. But 'ow many nobbs goes an' drowns themselves in a season, d' you suppose; an' 'oo as knowed anything about the river would go a lookin' for nobbs in Lime-ouse Reach or 'way down Bermondsey way?"

"Stands to reason they wouldn't, Bill," the other voice answered with a quiet chuckle. "'O' course it stands to reason," Bill replied with an emphatic expletive. "Wen a nob drowns himself, 'e don't go an' throw himself off London Bridge; no, nor off Blackfriars neither, you warrant you. 'E don't go an' put himself out aforehand for nothin' like that takin' a 'bus into the City, as you may say, out o' pure foolhiness. 'E just claps 'is 'at on 'is 'ead an' strolls down to Westminster Bridge, as it may be 'ere, or to Charin' Cross or Waterloo—a lot o' 'em goes over Waterloo, perlice or no perlice; an' 'e jumps in close an' 'andy by 'is own door, in the manner o' speakin', an' is done with it immediately.—But wot's the use o' lookin' for 'im after that, below bridge, away down at Lime-ouse? Anybody as knows the river knows well as a body startin' from Waterloo, or may be from Westminster, don't go down to Lime-ouse, ebb or flow, nor nothin' like it. It gets into the whirlpool of Saunders' Wharf, an' 'atches the back-current, an' turns round an' round till it's throwed up by the tide, as you may say, upward, on the

mud at Millbank, or by Lambeth Stangate. So there ain't no livel'ood to be made any 'ow by pickin' up bodies down about Lime-ouse; an' it's always been my opinion ever since then that that there Dickens is a very much overrated person."

"There ain't no doubt about it," the other answered. "'If 'e said that, there can't be no doubt at all about it."

To Hugh Massinger, sitting apart in his own room, these strange scraps of an alien conversation had just then a ghastly and horrible fascination. These men were accustomed, then, to drowned corpses! They were connoisseurs in drowning. They knew the ways of bodies like regular experts. He listened, spellbound, to catch their next sentences. There was a short pause, during which—as he judged by the way they breathed—each took a long pull at the pewter mug, and then the last speaker began again. "You'd oughter know," he murmured musingly, "for I s'pose there ain't any man on the river anywheres as 'ad to do with as many bodies as you 'ave."

"That's so!" the first person assented emphatically. "Thirty year I've served the Trinity 'ouse, rain or shine, an' you don't provision light-ships that long without learnin' a thing or two on the way about bodies. The current carries 'em all one way round. A body as starts on its journey at Westminster, as it may be 'ere, goes ashore at Millbank. A body as begins at London Bridge, comes out, as reg'lar as clockwork, on the furrer end o' the Isle o' Dogs.—It's just the same along this 'ere east coast 'ere. I picked up that gal I've come about to-day on the north side o' the Orfordness Light, by the back o' the Trinity groyne or thereabouts. A body as comes up on the north side of Orfordness 'as always drifted down from the nor'-west'ard. So it stands to reason this 'ere gal I've got lying up there must 'a come with the ebb from Walberswick or Aldeburgh, or maybe Whitstrand: there ain't no other way out of it any 'ow. Well, they told me at Walberswick there was a young lady a-missin' over 'ere at Whitstrand—a young lady from the 'All—a lady o' property seemin'—and as there might be money on it, or again there mightn't w'y I come up 'ere o' course to make all proper inquiries."

Hugh Massinger's heart gave a terrible bound. O heavens! that things should have come to this pass! That wretch had found Elsie's body!

In what a tangled mass of impossibilities had he entangled himself for ever by that one false step of the forged letter. This wretch had found Elsie's body—the body that he loved with all his soul—and he could neither claim it himself nor look upon it, bury it nor show the faintest interest in it, without involving his case still further in endless complications, and rousing suspicions of fatal import against his own character.

He waited breathless for the next sentence. The second speaker went on once more. "And it don't fit?" he suggested, inquiringly.

"No; it don't fit, drat it," the man called Bill answered in an impatient tone. "She ain't drowned at all, the young lady as is missin' at the 'All. They've 'ad letters an' telegrams from 'er, dated later nor the day I found 'er. I've 'anded over the body to the county perlice; it's in the mortuary at the Low Light; an' I shan't 'ave no more nor arf a crown from the parish after all for all my trouble. Suffolk and Essex is half-a-crown counties; Surrey's more liberal; it goes to five bob on 'em. W'y, I'm more'n eight shillin's out o' pocket by that there gal already, wot with loss of time an' travelin' expenses an' that. Next time I catches a body unbeknown knockin' about promiscuous on a lee-shore, with the tide runnin', an' the breakers poundin' it on its face on the shingle, they may whistle for it themselves, that's wot they may do; I ain't a livel'ood to trouble my 'ead about it. Make a livel'ood out of it, indeed! W'y, it's all rubbish, that's wot it is. It's my opinion that that there Dickens was a very much overrated person."

Hugh Massinger rose slowly, like one stunned, walked across the room, as in a dream, to the door, closed it noiselessly, for he could contain himself no longer, and then, burying his face silently in his arms, cried to himself a long and bitter cry, the tears following one another hot and fast down his burning cheeks, while his throat was choked by a rising ball that seemed to check his breath and impede the utterance of his stifled sobs. Elsie was dead, dead for him as if he had actually seen her drowned body cast up, unknown, as the man so hideously and graphically described it in his callous brutality, upon the long spit of the Orfordness lighthouse. He didn't for one moment doubt that it was she indeed whom the fellow had found and placed in the mortuary. His own lie reacted fatally against himself. He had put others on a false track, and now the false track misled his own spirit. From that day forth, Elsie was indeed dead, dead, dead for him. Alive in reality, and for all else save him, she was dead for him as though he had seen her buried. And yet, most terrible irony of all, he must still pretend before all the world strenuously and ceaselessly to believe her living. He must never in a single forgetful moment display his grief and remorse for the past; his sorrow for the loss of the one woman he had really loved—and basely betrayed; his profound affection for her now she was gone and lost to him for ever. He dare not even enquire—for the present at least—where she would be laid, or what would be done with her poor dishonored and neglected corpse. It must be buried, unheeded, in a pauper's nameless grave, by creatures as base and cruel as the one who had discovered it tossing on the shore, and regarded it only as a lucky find to make half-a-crown out of. Hugh's inmost soul revolted at the thought. And yet—And yet, even so, he was not man enough to go boldly down to Orfordness and claim and rescue that sacred corpse, as he truly and firmly believed it to be, of Elsie Challoner's. He meant still in his craven soul to stand well with the world, and to crown his perfidy by marrying Winifred.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

A Rich Jockey.

Wood, the crack English jockey, testified under oath the other day that his income was from \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year. His regular fees for riding bring him in \$9,500 a year, and his retainers and refreshers, his presents from gentlemen who win, and his bets swell the total to the figure above given. He owns two stables, five hotels and inns, and a lot of cottages; he has \$20,000 interest in a co-operation business, and he has also \$60,000 invested in funds.

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The Mistakes of Moses

and Ingeroll, are common topics of conversation, but the mistakes we wish to comment on here, is the great one so many people labor under that consumption (which is really only Sorofula of the Lungs) is an incurable disease, and that there is no hope for one suffering from it. This terrible malady, that yearly fills so many graves, can be surely cured, if not too long neglected. Be wise in time, if you are afflicted with it, and arrest the undermining influence that is sapping your life blood, and hurrying you to an untimely grave, by using Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery, a remedy that never fails in its life-giving mission, if taken in time. All druggists.

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