CHAPTER III.

GIVEN UP FOR DEAD.

Misfortune brings
Sorrow enough; 'tis envy to ourselves
To augment it by perdition.

Habington.

With the object of filling up an awkward gap that would otherwise occur at this point, and that the successive chapters may have the interest and continuity of a regular narrative, a brief account is here given of the events which occurred immediately after Mr. Fleming’s escape from the asylum, and up to the time when he was first heard from.

Late in the autumn of the year 1888 a message was sent to the family of Mr. E. B. Fleming announcing the fact that he had made his escape in some mysterious manner from the asylum, and that no trace of him could be found. A vigorous search was at once instituted, and inquiries made in every direction, but all to no purpose. The asylum authorities could not learn, and do not know to this day, in what manner he made his escape, or in what direction he went. He had vanished as utterly as though the earth had opened and swallowed him, leaving no sign or clew behind him. He was therefore given up for dead, as it was known that he had been very despondent.
and had made attempts upon his own life. Accordingly, the only solution of the profound mystery attending his escape and disappearance was the supposition that he had drowned himself, and he was thenceforward mourned as one dead.

This side of the story got abroad, and all who had known him in former years came to believe that his life had drawn to its close in the dark depths of some unknown lagoon. Men whispered among themselves of the blighted life and melancholy ending of one whom they had known as the incarnation of energy and thrift; and this sad story was given wide circulation.

Meanwhile time passed on, and his family had long since given up all hope of ever finding the slightest clew as to the exact manner of his death. But one day some years after a letter came from an old family servant from whom nothing had been heard in many years—a faithful negro named Dick, who, after having married a termagant of a mulatto, had left the service of the family and degenerated into a ragged loafer about town. The letter was post-marked at San Antonio, Texas, and, as near as it could be made out, for every word was spelled in a manner wholly original with the writer, and quite unheard-of before, while the penmanship might have passed for a rude map of the holy land, went on to state after a long preamble that the writer had just returned from Mexico; that during his absence he had seen one of Mrs. Fleming's particular friends, who had inquired about the family; but that the writer could give him
no information as to whether they were dead or alive, not having heard from them in many years. Whereupon, the black letter-writer, after offering a rambling apology for writing to his "ole mistress" at all, prayed that she would, if living, give him such information as she thought would satisfy the friendly curiosity of an old acquaintance. After this, commending her to the mercy of God in very bad English, and assuring her, in worse English, that he was now religious, as she ought to be, the letter closed.

Having no suspicion whatever as to the identity of this friend, an immediate answer was nevertheless returned to the garrulous old negro, containing the information asked for. Sometime after this elapsed before anything more was heard from him; but, after a long delay, a shorter letter came from the same place, acknowledging the receipt of the letter from his "ole mistress." He apologized for his unaccountable procrastination, and thanked her for her condescension in noticing his unsolicited communication at all. He stated that her "friend" was satisfied and pleased with the intelligence he had been, through her courtesy, enabled to convey to him. Alluding in mysterious term to some "dear one," whom he did not even remotely name, nor mention what relationship existed between her or him and the "friend," and also of the strange fate which permitted some persons to rise as from the dead, but neglecting to state just how this applied to Mr. Fleming's family, he brought his second letter to a close.

From this time on letters came now and then from
various persons who had known the family in former years, and it was astonishing to see how great a variety of trades, men and things were represented in the person of these many letter-writers. There were letters from old negro servants, from farm hands, from brick-masons, from lawyers, from merchants, from real estate dealers, from tobacconists, and so on through half the gamut of avocations, trades and professions. Many indeed came from men whom the family had never so much as heard of, and almost always asking for "information" of every conceivable kind, or for copies of the local newspapers. But however the different constituents of this epistolary avalanche differed from each other in the main, they had one point in common, and all, without exception contained vague allusions to a "friend" of the family. The reader need hardly be told how tantalizing all this finally became. However, the constant and almost periodical recurrence of these indefinite hints soon awakened a suspicion in the minds of the family that possibly, by some strange chance, this "friend" so often alluded to, might have seen Mr. Fleming himself since his disappearance from the asylum. The last of these strange communications came from a real estate dealer in the city of San Diego, California, and he was at once appealed to to give the family any information that might be of interest to them. The request was purposely put in these vague terms in order to allow the gentleman as much latitude as possible. This gentleman's name was Mr. James N. Cook, and the appeal was not made to him
in vain. His generous nature was touched, and he responded at once, confessing that not only had the "friend" so frequently mentioned actually seen Mr. Fleming, but that the "friend" was none other than Mr. Fleming himself.

He then went on to say that the latter was at that time residing in San Diego, and had lived in California for something near two years; that he had fully recovered his health and spirits, and was as sound mentally as he had ever been. The rejoicing occasioned by this intelligence had hardly subsided when the family received a letter from Mr. Fleming himself, and an immediate correspondence ensued. A few months later he returned to his home, but little the worse for his strange and romantic experiences.