CHAPTER VIII.

I AM TOLD OF MY OWN DEATH.

True religion
Is always mild, propitious and humble;
Plays not the tyrant, plants no faith in blood
Nor bears destruction on her chariot wheels.

—Miller.

Wooten Wells, though widely known as a valetudinarian resort, could hardly be called a town. There was one small store devoted to general merchandise, and a few private residences scattered about. The principal hostelries were the Jackson House and the Roan Hotel. Messrs. Roan and Jackson were equal partners, and each was manager of the house which bore his name. Thus, although Mr. Jackson was manager of the Jackson House, he was but part proprietor, the other half being owned by Mr. Roan, and vice versa.

These two men, thus associated in the management of the principal industry of the place, were in their mental make-up as wide apart as the poles. Indeed, I doubt whether, in the course of a number of years spent in the study of human character, I have ever seen two natures which seemed to have so little in common. But their different traits will be more fully revealed as our narrative advances.
After breakfast on the morning of my arrival, I sought out Mr. Jackson, who was a kind-hearted gentleman, and told him that I had come to his town for the benefit of my health, which had long been in a critical condition—indeed, that an eminent physician had given me up to die and—I asked him to give me such employment about his place as I could do to pay for my board and lodging. In reply, he spoke in the kind manner that was natural to him, and told me that I might remain, as he thought suitable employment for me would not be hard to find; that he would give the matter a night's reflection and let me know his decision on the morrow. With this promise the interview ended.

On the night of my arrival I had slept on the ground floor in a small apartment near the office, and somewhere about sunrise had been awakened by the sound of voices. On account of the intervening wall I could hear, but not see, the voices of several gentlemen in conversation in the office, and in the tones of one of them I recognized the voice of an old gentleman whom I had known for many years in my old home. His name was Payne, but he was more familiarly known as Judge Payne from having served as judge of Hopkins County. I knew that he was familiar with my history, and would recognize me at sight. This was a contingency which I had not calculated upon, and which I now determined to avoid. The reader will easily guess that my desire to hear late news from my family, and from my old home, was very strong, and I wondered if there were
any means by which I could learn such intelligence from Judge Payne without betraying myself. At least I determined to do so, if it were possible, by any strategem which I could devise. On leaving Mr. Jackson that morning I hurried into the office, and, to make assurance doubly sure, examined the registrar. After some trouble I found the name, "Judge Payne, Sulphur Springs, Texas." By a few cautious inquiries I learned that the Judge had been stopping at Wooten Wells for a week or more, and that he would probably return home on the next day. I therefore made two resolves; namely, that I must be careful to avoid a meeting with him on that day; and, second, that I must question him, if I did so at all, without delay. The first was comparatively an easy matter; the second difficult if not impossible. Chance, however, favored me, and threw the desired opportunity in my way.

After supper that evening several gentlemen collected, in true lawyer fashion, around the heater in the office, and engaged in conversation. Among the party was Judge Payne. The small apartment was but dimly and partially lighted by an oil lamp which depended from the ceiling. The Judge sat with his back to a door which was thrown open. Now, back of this door when it was thus wide open was a small recess in the wall where faces were washed and heads combed. There were mirrors, wash-basins, brushes and such paraphernalia; and anyone engaged in brushing his hair or washing his face was entirely concealed, or nearly so, by the door when it swung
back. I was in this alcove performing my ablutions when the group of gentlemen mentioned entered the room and took seats about the heater. As soon as I perceived that Judge Payne was among them, I inwardly rejoiced, for I saw that chance had given me the opportunity so greatly desired. And I resolved to make the best of it. The conversation had lulled (this may seem to be an extraordinary circumstance, as these gentlemen were all lawyers; yet we repeat, that the conversation had lulled) and at this moment one of the gentlemen asked:

“What is the character, Judge—the main natural features, I might say,—of the country in your county?”

I mentally thanked the gentleman for this question, as it opened an easy way for me to ask several inquiries that were trembling upon my tongue. The Judge, pleased at so good an opportunity to pay a glowing tribute to his native county, answered at some length. When he had finished, I spoke, rubbing my hands noisily in the water:

“Are you acquainted, Judge, may I ask, with many people in the county seat of Hopkins County?”

“Oh, yes!” he replied, supposing me to be merely a curious stranger, “I know a great many people there.”

“Some years ago,” said I, “I went through that section of country, and stopped there for quite a while. I got acquainted with a number of persons. There was one in particular whom I have never heard from since that I should like to inquire about, but I
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cannot think of his name. He lived in a large white house on a hill north of the town, and did business, I think, on the public square. I cannot recall his name, but it seems to me it begins with an 'F.'"

"Oh yes," said the obliging Judge, "perhaps you are thinking of Fleming—E. B. Fleming?"

"Yes," said I, agitating the water with both hands, "that is the name. Do you happen to know where he is at present?"

"Yes," he rejoined; "Fleming is dead, poor fellow. He became broken up in business, lost his property, and, went insane. He was taken to an asylum, and stayed there a number of years—I don't remember how many."

"But I believe you said he was dead?"

"Yes, I was going to add that he finally made his escape from the asylum, wandered away, and was drowned. A sad affair. Fleming was a good citizen, and an enterprising man. He met with a terrible fate."

Then there was silence for some moments, and I continued my questioning of the innocent old Judge. I asked him a great many questions, and received answers which, if set down here, would probably only weary the reader. The information so greatly desired was learned from him so far as he could give it to me. Finally, however, either wondering at the great length of time I required to perform my ablutions, or else having some desire to see the man who had shown such unusual curiosity about a strange town, the Judge moved his chair slightly beyond the
door, and turned and looked at me. But I saw the movement in time, and hastily buried my face in the large towel, and was so long about drying it that he turned again to the crowd in front of him. Fearing that I had aroused his suspicions, or awakened his curiosity, which amounted to the same thing, I immediately escaped through the door and left the house. On the following day he returned to his home in Sulphur Springs, and that was the last time I ever saw him. The questions that I had asked him had not, as I had feared, aroused his suspicions. Open as the day himself, he was the last man to harbor suspicions towards, or be distrustful of, anyone. A few months after his return home, the last messenger came for him, and he died in the full belief that I had passed on ahead of him.

I remained at Wooten Wells for several months, and only left it for reasons which shall be made known. The work assigned me by my kind friend Mr. Jackson, was in his flower-yard and subsequently in his garden. The employment was light and easily done, and had the emoluments been great enough I should have had a sinecure. Indeed, the labor was beneficial rather than otherwise, and did me a great deal of good in thus supplying light employment for both body and mind. Roan came over to the Jackson House pretty often, and his presence was never desired by anyone. Short, stubby, and selfish, as well as domineering, he was liked by very few.

He came to me one day and contumeliously ordered me to take my meals thereafter at the servant's table.
Now, the servants were principally negroes, and a command to sit at the servant’s table was equivalent to being ordered to dine with negroes.

“What do you mean, sir?” I demanded, in a rage.

“I mean, sir, he yelled, his squat figure puffing and swelling like Aesop’s frog, and his round bulging eyes glaring prodigiously from his fat red face, “I mean, sir, for you to take your proper place. We don’t feed servants like gentlemen, I’d have you know! And furthermore, sir, I’d have you know that you are talking to me!” and he swelled and puffed and fumed and got redder and rounder an more frog-like every moment.

“Well sir,” I returned, “your commands are wasted upon me. I shall continue as I have begun, all the brutes in Wooten Wells to the contrary notwithstanding.” And with that I turned about and left him, staring after me in wonder, wrath, and astonishment, and working himself up into a mighty rage.

I paid no further attention to him; but some days after I was doing some light work in the garden when Roan came up; and, affecting to be oblivious of my presence, began examining some work done by a negro. Several rows of English peas in one corner were the objects of his attention. He stood looking upon them as if he expected the whole row to fall down in mute homage before him. The negro had thrust some sticks down into the ground beside each vine for them to grow upon, and Roan was not pleased with the work. Indeed, after staring at them for a time, he became enraged, and seizing a hoe
began to cut them down, sticks and all, root and branch, cursing volubly with each stroke of the hoe.

I stood and watched him in silence for several minutes. Obviously, the man who could thus destroy property, either his own or some one else's, in a fit of capricious rage, needed restraining. I asked him what he was doing. As he made no reply—

"Roan," said I, disgusted at his mighty rage over so small a matter, "you are a fool."

At this he paused, his round red face, streaming with perspiration, and heated by the vigor of his efforts, growing suddenly rounder redder and hotter, and glaring at me, he yelled:

"Do you know whom you are talking to?"

"Well sir," I rejoined, "I think I do. I am talking to a capricious fool."

"What!" he fumed, violently, "you—you—y-y-ou—can leave! You can get out from here, and stay out, sir!"

"Certainly I can," I retorted. "And I can say to you that you are the worst brute in this country. You great puffed, moon-faced, unappreciative, domineering, coarse imbecile!"

He raged dreadfully at this, and from his antics, his prodigious puffing, and his squat figure heaving and swelling, I thought he would burst. One would have thought, not unnaturally, from such conduct as this that the man had gone stark mad. He did not, however, make any attack upon me. I determined to fire one more shot at him; for (let me confess) I was considerably enraged, and too angry to be considerate or to choose my words.
"I have been wanting to leave here for some time," I said to him, when he had calmed down sufficiently for my words to be heard, "because I have not been in the habit of associating with brutes. I have seen villains and scoundrels before, but you are the greatest of all that I have yet seen." After waiting a moment for his reply, which was not forthcoming, I turned and left him.

It was then morning, and I determined to leave Wooten Wells that afternoon. A small town known by the name of Bremond was only three miles away; and as there was no railroad connection between the two places, I resolved to make the journey on foot. My friend Jackson was sorry that any "misunderstanding" as he termed it, had occurred, and sorry that Roan and myself had disagreed. His deprecation of the affair, however sincere, did not mend matters; and had I been given the alternative of leaving immediately, or apologizing to Roan, I should unhesitatingly have chosen the former. I did not in the least regret what I had said to him, and did not care whether he relished it or not. In truth, I do not think it would have been safe for him to have approached me for any purpose, friendly or otherwise.

Accordingly, I set out about the middle of the afternoon on my journey to Bremond. I walked along leisurely in the mild spring air, and reflected upon the incidents of my stay at Wooten Wells. I had not, fortunately for myself, fallen a victim to any of the advertising "doctors" who abounded there, although others had; and if I had received no benefit,
I at least had not been harmed. There were at that time—and may be yet—a swarm of advertising "doctors" and other quacks and social cormorants, who haunted the hotels, and fastened their talons upon every "patient" who came in their way, and lucky was he who escaped them.

I had not walked more than half of the league which lay between the two villages, when I perceived a gentleman approaching me in a one-horse vehicle. In a short time we met, and I saw before me a man in the meridian of life, with a countenance striking and remarkable for its expression of open and friendly benevolence. I thereupon stopped him and we entered into conversation. He had not spoken half a dozen words before I saw that he was a minister, and his appearance certainly comported in every visible respect with his calling.

"I should say, friend," said he, "that you are a stranger in these parts."

"I am, sir," returned I. And I proceeded to give him an account of my stay at Wooten Wells, and such other facts as I thought proper to tell him.

"And how am I to call your name?" he asked, looking at me out of the corners of his eyes.

"Nall," I answered, "R. M. Nall."

"And mine," said he, "is J. H. Rowland. I am the pastor of the Baptist church at Bremond. And you are looking for some place to stop—some place where you can get light employment and board?"

I answered in the affirmative. He bent his head, as if in meditation, for some moments, fingerling his
beard abstractedly, and tapping his toe against the wheel of his vehicle.

“Well, Mr. Nall,” said he at length, raising his head to look at me with a very meditative expression of countenance, “we (meaning himself) are not very rich, and our house, which is our own, is not very commodious, but our hearts are willing; and if you think you can put up with our poor accomodations, you may remain with us for a time. May be as we grow better acquainted we can hit upon some arrangement that will please all around. My wife is at home, with her children. We have two grown daughters and some smaller boys and girls. Do you think this would suit you?”

I told him gratefully and even eagerly that it would. His manner was markedly kind and friendly, and very winning. He then gave me minute directions as to route, how to find his house, etc., and what to do when I got there. He then reached me his hand, shook mine warmly and, drove on, but called back after he had gone a short distance to say that he himself would return later on that afternoon. I could not forbear congratulating myself upon this meeting and its results, and walked on in a better frame of mind.

In the course of half an hour I reached the home of the kind-hearted minister. It was a large white frame dwelling, situated in the outskirts of the village. I knocked at the door, and had no sooner made known the object of my visit than I was invited to enter and the family treated me with great friendliness and
cordiality. The ladies were modest, pure-minded and innocent, and knew little of the great world beyond them. I endeavored to entertain them with accounts of my experiences in the various States of the Union that I had visited, until parson Rowland returned, some hours later that afternoon.

I remained with this family for some weeks. Each afternoon I went to the village postoffice for the minister's mail. The office was situated considerably more than a mile from the Rev. Rowland's, and for some reason was located on an obscure side street, or road, which was always silent and deserted. One afternoon some weeks after my arrival, having as usual gone to the postoffice, which the postmaster kept in the extreme back end of a building near two hundred feet in length, and secured the mail, I observed, on emerging from the building, a one-armed man standing on the sidewalk. At that moment a carriage, containing a man and a woman, drove up to the pavement and came to a halt. As they approached I happened to glance at the one-armed man —whom we will call Smith—and I saw that he was gazing at the couple with an expression not good to see. The moment the vehicle came to a stop, the gentleman started to spring out upon the pavement; but ere he could do so the one-armed man came silently but swiftly forward and confronted him. The gentleman in the carriage turned pale and sank back into his seat. The lady beside him, who, as I afterwards learned, was his wife, was small and determined-looking, and she did not grow pale as Smith
stood before them with clenched hand and flushed face. No, obviously, if appearances went for anything, she was a brave and daring little woman, and possessed of that dauntless courage which ladies ordinarily do not possess. The sequel will show that her appearance did not belie her character.

No one was in sight. No object, great or small, moved upon the street, and we four were alone. I waited in the doorway to learn the issue of the scene.

"Worth," began one-armed Mr. Smith, in tones husky and tremulous with rage, "you are an infernal villain! I have long wanted an opportunity to tell you so."

Worth* was a large man, with an excellent physique, and in full possession of all means of offense or defense with which nature had endowed him. He was large enough and strong enough, had he been brave enough, to have easily conquered his smaller adversary in single combat, even had the latter gentleman possessed two arms instead of one. But the stout, strong-limbed man, with a capacity for great and sustained physical exertion, only cowered before his physically insignificant opponent, turned pale and red by turns, and finally stammered out that he "did not want any trouble."

"Trouble," said his enemy, in angry scorn; "no you dirty villain; but you are quite ready to make it with your base lying tongue—ready to blacken the characters of helpless women, and to forever blight

* These name are pseudonyms. The true names are not given for obvious reasons.
the lives and prospects of innocent girls. You detestable heartless villain!"

Worth trembled, but made no reply. Smith gazed upon him for some moments in silence, and was evidently struggling with himself for his features worked convulsively, and he clenched and unclenched his hand in a manner too suggestive to be mistaken. Then, as if other thoughts had suddenly swept over him, the expression of his countenance changed in an instant from hesitating anger to furious and un­governable rage, and he edged closer to the trembling coward in the vehicle and struck him several stinging blows. The big rascal only threw up his hands and crouched lower in his seat. As is usual in such cases, the more Smith gave way to his anger, the more furious he became; and so, from striking a few blows he began to shower them down upon Worth's head like rain. The latter took them in silence for a while, or only uttered low, terrified moans, but as they grew in force he began to whine and cry to Smith to "Quit—quit, I say! Quit now! Oh, you quit!" with much more to the same purpose.

Even then no one came in sight; and the only one who might have heard Worth's groans—the post­master—was shut up in his office near two hundred feet away.

My attention up to this point had been bestowed entirely upon the two men, but now I glanced at Mrs. Worth. The expression upon her face struck me at once, and though she was silent and motion­less, the dilated eyes, glittering and sparkling like
living coals, the swelling nostrils, the cheek now ghastly white and now suffused with red; the compressed lip and tightly-clenched hands;—all these bespoke the volcano within. She, it was obvious, possessed the physical courage so markedly absent in her unworthy consort.

While these thoughts were running through my mind, she rose in her seat and sprang with the fury and silent swiftness of a tigress upon their one-armed foe. Her frame was slight and delicate, but, surprised by the energy and celerity of her onset, Smith staggered back a few steps, and she slipped to the ground. The next moment one of her slim hands was buried in the long beard of her adversary, and the other busy upon his face. In an instant of time several streams of blood were trickling down his cheeks. He endeavored to push her backward, or to disengage himself, but she clung to him with a tenacity that baffled all his efforts. Yet she had not uttered a word, or screamed or made the least outcry as women commonly do at such moments.

I saw that Smith, unable to release himself, and equally unable to strike a woman, even in his rage, was becoming desperate, and must soon lose his self-control. In the latter case I shuddered to think what might follow. He struggled almost frantically to release himself. But she had his beard in a tight grip, and he was comparatively helpless. His face was badly scratched and disfigured, and blood was running freely from each wound made by the infuriated woman.
At length he commanded her, in a hoarse and strident voice that might have warned her, to release him, but she clung to him all the tighter. He then repeated the command in a voice that made the trembling occupant of the vehicle start. This, like the first, was disregarded, and the frantic man demanded, for the third time, "Madam, turn me loose!"

He then waited a moment to ascertain whether she would obey, and as she gave no sign of doing so, he raised his foot—his only means of defense under the circumstances—and bestowed a powerful kick upon the enraged woman. The blow was so furious that she released her hold upon him and, staggered and fell. In a moment, however, she was upon her feet again, and endeavored to attack him. He kicked her a second time, and she fell in a heap in the center of the road, almost insensible. The maddened man rushed at her again, when, having recovered from the astonishment that had held me spell-bound and motionless, I hurried forward and grasped him by the arm.

"For God's sake, man," I cried, as I seized him with all my strength, "forbear! Would you strike a woman? You have killed her now!"

He turned pale at this and said:

"You are right, my friend, whoever you are. I think I must have been gone here," and he touched his head with a significant gesture.

The woman opened her eyes and rose unsteadily to her feet. Whispering to Smith that he had better go, which he instantly did, without stopping to thank
me, and soon disappearing down the street, without pausing or stopping to look behind, I assisted the lady to return to her carriage. She was somewhat stunned from the force of the blows that had struck her to the ground, and apathetic from the reaction of feeling, but otherwise uninjured. As soon as she had resumed her seat, the carriage was driven rapidly away.