

THE EXECUTOR

CHAPTER I.

“THE woman was certainly mad,” said John Brown.

It was the most extraordinary of speeches, considering the circumstances and place in which it was spoken. A parlour of very grim and homely aspect, furnished with dark mahogany and black haircloth, the blinds of the two windows solemnly drawn down, the shutters of one half-closed; two traditional decanters of wine standing reflected in the shining uncovered table; half-a-dozen people all in mourning, in various attitudes of surprise, disappointment, and displeasure; and close by one of the windows Mr Brown, the attorney, holding up to the light that extraordinary scrap of paper, which had fallen upon them all like a thunderbolt. Only half an hour ago he had attended her funeral with decorum and perfect indifference, as was natural, and had come into this parlour without the slightest idea of encountering anything which could disturb him. Fate, however, had been lying in wait for the unsuspecting man at the moment he feared it least. He had not been employed to draw out this extraordinary document, nor had he known anything about it. It was a thunderbolt enclosed in a simple envelope, very securely sealed up, and delivered to him with great solemnity by the next of kin, which carried him off his balance like a charge of artillery, and made everybody aghast around him. The sentiment and exclamation were alike natural; but the woman was not mad.

By the side of the table, very pale and profoundly discomposed, sat the next of kin; a woman, of appearance not unaccordant with that of the house, over fifty? dark-complexioned and full of

wrinkles, with a certain cloud of habitual shabbiness, not to be cast aside, impairing the perfection of her new mourning. Her *new* mourning, poor soul! got on the strength of that letter containing the will, which had been placed in her safe keeping. She was evidently doing everything she could to command herself, and conceal her agitation. But it was not a very easy matter. Cherished visions of years, and hopes that this morning had seemed on the point of settling into reality, were breaking up before her, each with its poignant circumstances of mortification and bitterness and dread disappointment. She looked at everybody in the room with a kind of agonised appeal—could it really be true, might not her ears have deceived her?—and strained her troubled gaze upon that paper, not without an instinctive thought that it was wrongly read, or misunderstood, or that some mysterious change had taken place on it in the transfer from her possession to that of Mr Brown. His amazement and dismay did not convince the poor dismayed woman. She stretched out her hand eagerly to get the paper to read it for herself. He might have changed it in reading it; he might have missed something, or added something, that altered the meaning. Anything might have happened, rather than the reality that her confidence had been deceived and her hopes were gone.

“Did you know of this, Mrs Christian?” said the rector, who stood at the other end of the room with his hat in his hand.

Did she know! She could have gnashed her teeth at the foolish question, in her excitement and exasperation. She made a hysterical motion with her head to answer. Her daughter, who had come to the back of her chair, and who knew the rector must not be offended, supplied the words that failed to her mother—“No; we thought we were to have it,” said the poor girl, innocently. There was a little movement of sympathy and compassion among the

other persons present. But mingled with this came a sound of a different description; a cough, not an expression of physical weakness, but of moral sentiment; an irritating, critical, inarticulate remark upon that melancholy avowal. It came from the only other woman present, the servant of the house. When the disappointed relation heard it, she flushed into sudden rage, and made an immediate identification of her enemy. It was not dignified, but it was very natural. Perhaps, under the circumstances, it was the only relief which her feelings could have had

“But I know whose doing it was!” said poor Mrs Christian, trembling all over, her pale face reddening with passion. There was a little movement at the door as the servant-woman stepped farther into the room to take her part in the scene which interested her keenly. She was a tall woman, thin and dry, and about the same age as her accuser. There was even a certain degree of likeness between them. As Nancy’s tall person and white apron became clearly visible from among the little group of gentlemen, Mrs Christian rose, inspired with all the heat and passion of her disappointment, to face her foe.

“Did *you* know of this?” said the excellent rector, with his concerned malaprop face. Nancy did not look at him. The three women stood regarding each other across the table; the others were only spectators—they were the persons concerned. The girl who had already spoken, and who was a little fair creature, as different from the belligerents as possible, stood holding her mother’s hand tightly. She had her eyes on them both, with an extraordinary air of control and unconscious authority. They were both full of rage and excitement, the climax of a long smouldering quarrel; but the blue eyes that watched, kept them silent against their will. The crisis lasted only for a moment. Poor Mrs Christian, yielding to the

impulse of the small fingers that closed so tightly on her hand, fell back on her chair, and attempted to recover her shattered dignity. Nancy withdrew to the door; and Mr Brown repeated the exclamation in which his dismay and trouble had at first expressed itself, "Certainly the woman must have been mad!"

"Will you have the goodness to let me see it?" said Mrs Christian, with a gasp. It is impossible to say what ideas of tearing it up, or throwing it into the smouldering fire, might have mingled with her desire; but, in the first place, she was eager to see if she could not make something different out of that paper than those astounding words she had heard read. Mr Brown was an honest man, but he was an attorney; and Mrs Christian was an honest woman, but she was next of kin. If she had known what was in that cruel paper, she might not, perhaps, have preserved it so carefully. She read it over, trembling, and not understanding the very words she muttered under her breath. Bessie read it also, over her shoulder. While they were so occupied, Mr Brown relieved his perplexed mind with a vehemence not much less tragical than that of the disappointed heir.

"I have known many absurd things in the way of wills," said Mr Brown, "but this is the crown of all. Who on earth ever heard of Phœbe Thomson? Who's Phœbe Thomson? Her daughter? Why, she never had any daughter in the memory of man. I should say it is somewhere like thirty years since she settled down in Carlingford—with no child, nor appearance of ever having had one—an old witch with three cats, and a heart like the nether millstone. Respect? don't speak to me! why should I respect her? Here she's gone, after living a life which nobody was the better for; certainly *I* was none the better for it; why, she did not even employ me to make this precious will; and saddled me—me, of all men in

the world—with a burden I wouldn't undertake for my own brother. I'll have nothing to do with it. Do you suppose I'm going to give up my own business, and all my comfort, to seek Phœbe Thomson? The idea's ridiculous! the woman was mad!"

"Hush! for we're in the house of our departed friend, and have just laid her down," said the inappropriate rector, "in the sure and certain hope——"

Mr Brown made, and checked himself in making, an extraordinary grimace. "Do you suppose I'm bound to go hunting Phœbe Thomson till that day comes?" said the attorney. "Better to be a ghost at once, when one could have surer information. I'm very sorry, Mrs Christian; I have no hand in it, I assure you. Who do you imagine this Phœbe Thomson is?"

"Sir," said Mrs Christian, "I decline to give you any information. If my son was here, instead of being in India, as everybody knows, I might have some one to act for me. But you may be certain I shall take advice upon it. You will hear from my solicitor, Mr Brown; I decline to give you any information on the subject."

Mr Brown stared broadly at the speaker; his face reddened. He watched her get up and make her way out of the room with a perplexed look, half angry, half compassionate. She went out with a little of the passionate and resentful air which deprives such disappointments of the sympathy they deserve—wrathful, vindictive, consoling herself with dreams that it was all a plot, and she could still have her rights; but a sad figure, notwithstanding her flutter of bitter rage—a sad figure to those who knew what home she was going to, and how she had lived. Her very dress, so much

better than it usually was, enhanced the melancholy aspect of the poor woman's withdrawal. Her daughter followed her closely, ashamed, and not venturing to lift her eyes. They were a pathetic couple to that little group that knew all about them. Nancy threw the room-door open for them, with a revengeful satisfaction. One of the funeral attendants who still lingered outside opened the outer one. They went out of the subdued light, into the day, their hearts tingling with a hundred wounds. At least the mother's heart was pierced, and palpitating in every nerve. There was an instinctive silence while they went out, and after they were gone. Even Mr Brown's "humph!" was a very subdued protest against the injustice which Mrs Christian had done him. Everybody stood respectful of the real calamity.

"And so, there they are just where they were!" cried the young surgeon, who was one of the party; "and pretty sweet Bessie must still carry her father on her shoulders, and drag her mother by her side wherever she goes; it's very hard—one can't help thinking it's a very hard burden for a girl of her years."

"But it is a burden of which she might be relieved," said Mr Brown, with a smile.

The young man coloured high and drew back a little. "Few men have courage enough to take up such loads of their own will," he said, with a little heat—"I have burdens of my own."

A few words may imply a great deal in a little company, where all the interlocutors know all about each other. This, though it was simple enough, disturbed the composure of the young doctor. A minute after he muttered something about his further presence

being unnecessary, and hastened away. There were now only left the rector, the churchwarden, and Mr Brown.

“Of course you will accept her trust, Mr Brown,” said the rector.

The attorney made a great many grimaces, but said nothing. The whole matter was too startling and sudden to have left him time to think what he was to do.

“Anyhow the poor Christians are left in the lurch,” said the churchwarden; “for, I suppose, Brown, if you don’t undertake it, it’ll go into Chancery. Oh! I don’t pretend to know; but it’s natural to suppose, of course, that it would go into Chancery, and stand empty with all the windows broken for twenty years. But couldn’t they make you undertake it whether you pleased or no? I am only saying what occurs to me; of course, I’m not a lawyer—I can’t know.”

“Well, never mind,” said Mr Brown; “I cannot undertake to say just at this identical moment what I shall do. I don’t like the atmosphere of this place, and there’s nothing more to be done just now that I know of. We had better go.”

“But the house—and Nancy—some conclusion must be come to directly. What will you do about them?” said the rector.

“To be sure! I don’t doubt there’s plate and jewellery and such things about—they ought to be sealed and secured, and that sort of thing,” said the still more energetic lay functionary. “For anything we know, she might have money in old stockings all about the house. I shouldn’t be surprised at anything, after what we’ve heard to-day. Twenty thousand pounds! and a daughter! If any one had

told me that old Mrs Thomson had either the one or the other yesterday at this time, I should have said they were crazy. Certainly, Brown, the cupboards and desks and so forth should be examined and sealed up. It is your duty to Phœbe Thomson. You must do your duty to Phœbe Thomson, or she'll get damages of you. I suppose so—you ought to know."

"Confound Phœbe Thomson!" said the attorney, with great unction; "but notwithstanding, come along, let us get out of this. As for her jewellery and her old stockings, they must take their chance. I can't stand it any longer—pah! there's no air to breathe. How did the old witch ever manage to live to eighty here?"

"You must not call her by such improper epithets. I have no doubt she was a good woman," said the rector; "and recollect, really, you owe a little respect to a person who was only buried to-day."

"If she were to be buried to-morrow," cried the irreverent attorney, making his way first out of the narrow doorway, "I know one man who would have nothing to do with the obsequies. Why, look here! what right had that old humbug to saddle me with her duties, after neglecting them all her life; and, with that bribe implied, to lure me to undertake the job, too. Ah, the old wretch! don't let us speak of her. As for respect, I don't owe her a particle—that is a consolation. I knew something of the kind of creature she was before to-day."

So saying, John Brown thrust his hands into his pockets, shrugged up his shoulders, and went off at a startling pace up the quiet street. It was a very quiet street in the outskirts of a very quiet little town. The back of the house which they had just left was on a

line with the road—a blank wall, broken only by one long staircase-window. The front was to the garden, entering by a little side-gate, through which the indignant executor had just hurried, crunching the gravel under his rapid steps. A line of such houses, doleful and monotonous, with all the living part of them concealed in their gardens, formed one side of the street along which he passed so rapidly. The other side consisted of humbler habitations, meekly contented to look at their neighbours' back-windows. When John Brown had shot far ahead of his late companions, who followed together, greatly interested in this new subject of talk, his rapid course was interrupted for a moment. Bessie Christian came running across the street from one of the little houses. She had no bonnet on, and her black dress made her blonde complexion and light hair look clearer and fairer than ever; and when the lawyer drew up all at once to hear what she had to say, partly from compassion, partly from curiosity, it did not fail to strike him how like a child she was, approaching him thus simply with her message. "Oh, Mr Brown," cried Bessie, out of breath, "I want to speak to you. If you will ask Nancy, I am sure she can give you whatever information is to be had about—about aunt's friends. She has been with aunt all her life. I thought I would tell you in case you might think, after what mamma said——"

"I did not think anything about it," said Mr Brown.

"That we knew something, and would not tell you; but we don't know anything," said Bessie. "I never heard of Phœbe Thomson before."

Mr Brown shrugged up his shoulders higher than ever, and thrust his hands deeper into his pockets. "Thank you," he said, a little ungraciously. "I should have spoken to Nancy, of course, in

any case; but I'm sure its very kind of you to take the trouble—good-by.”

Bessie went back blushing and disconcerted; and the rector and the churchwarden, coming gradually up on the other side of the road, seeing her eager approach and downcast withdrawal, naturally wondered to each other what she could want with Brown, and exchanged condolences on the fact that Brown's manners were wonderfully bearish—really too bad. Brown, in the mean time, without thinking anything about his manners, hurried along to his office. He was extremely impatient of the whole concern; it vexed him unconsciously to see Bessie Christian; it even occurred to him that the sight of her and of her mother about would make his unwelcome office all the more galling to him. In addition to all the annoyance and trouble, here would be a constant suggestion that he had wronged these people. He rushed into his private sanctuary the most uncomfortable man in Carlingford. An honest, selfish, inoffensive citizen, injuring no one, if perhaps he did not help so many as he might have done—what grievous fault had he committed to bring upon him such a misfortune as this?

The will which had caused so much conversation was to this purport. It bequeathed all the property of which Mrs Thomson of Grove Street died possessed, to John Brown, attorney in Carlingford, in trust for Phœbe Thomson, the only child of the testatrix, who had not seen or heard of her for thirty years; and in case of all lawful means to find the said Phœbe Thomson proving unsuccessful, at the end of three years the property in question was bequeathed to John Brown, his heirs and administrators, absolutely and in full possession. No wonder it raised a ferment in the uncommunicative bosom of the Carlingford attorney, and kept the town in talk for more than nine days. Mrs Thomson had died

possessed of twenty thousand pounds: such an event had not happened at Carlingford in the memory of man.

CHAPTER II.

The divers emotions excited by very unexpected occurrence may be better evidenced by the manner in which the evening of that day was spent in various houses in Carlingford than by any other means.

First, in the little house of the Christians. It was a cottage on the other side of Grove Street—a homely little box of two stories, with a morsel of garden in front, and some vegetables behind. There, on that spring afternoon, matters did not look cheerful. The little sitting-room was deserted—the fire had died out—the hearth was unswept—the room in a litter. Bessie’s pupils had not come to-day. They had got holiday three days ago, in happy anticipation of being dismissed for ever; and only their young teacher’s prudential remonstrances had prevented poor Mrs Christian from making a little speech to them, and telling them all that henceforward Miss Christian would have other occupations, but would always be fond of them, and glad to see her little friends in their new house. To make that speech would have delighted Mrs Christian’s heart. She had managed, however, to convey the meaning of it by many a fatal hint and allusion. In this work of self-destruction the poor woman had been only too successful; for already the mothers of the little girls had begun to inquire into the terms and capabilities of other teachers, and the foundations of Bessie’s little empire were shaken and tottering, though fortunately they did not know of it to-day. Everything was very cold, dismal, and deserted in that little parlour. Faint sounds overhead were the only sounds audible in the house; sometimes a foot moving over the creaky boards: now and then a groan. Upstairs there were two

rooms; one a close, curtained, fire-lighted, stifling, invalid's room. There was Bessie sitting listlessly by a table, upon which were the familiar tea-things, which conveyed no comfort to-night; and there was her paralytic father sitting helpless, sometimes shaking his head, sometimes grumbling out faint half-articulate words, sighs, and exclamations. "Dear, dear! ah! well! that's what it has come to!" said the sick man, hushed by long habit into a sort of spectatorship, and feeling even so great a disappointment rather by way of sympathy than personal emotion. Bessie sat listless by, feeling a vague exasperation at this languid running accompaniment to her thoughts. The future had been blotted out suddenly, and at a blow, from Bessie's eyes. She could see nothing before her—nothing but this dark, monotonous, aching present moment, pervaded by the dropping sounds of that faint, half-articulate voice. Other scene was not to dawn upon her youth. It was hard for poor Bessie. She sat silent in the stifling room, with the bed and its hangings between her and the window, and the fire scorching her cheek. She could neither cry, nor scold, nor blame anybody. None of the resources of despair were possible to her. She knew it would have to go on again all the same, and that now things never would be any better. She could not run away from the prospect before her. It was not so much the continuance of poverty, of labour, of all the dreadful pinches of thrift; it was the end of possibility—the knowledge that now there was no longer anything to expect.

On the other side of the passage Bessie's own sleeping-room was inhabited by a restless fever of disappointment and despair and hope. There was Mrs Christian lying on her daughter's bed. The poor woman was half-crazed with the whirl of passion in her brain. That intolerable sense of having been duped and deceived, of

actually having a hand in the overthrow of all her own hopes, aggravated her natural disappointment into frenzy. When she recollected her state of exultation that morning, her confident intentions—when they were to remove, what changes were to be in their manner of life, even what house they were to occupy—it is not wonderful if the veins swelled in her poor head, and all her pulses throbbed with the misery of the contrast. But with all this there mingled a vindictive personal feeling still more exciting. Nancy, whom she knew more of than any one else did—her close, secret, unwavering enemy; and even the innocent lawyer, whom, in her present condition of mind, she could not believe not to have known of this dreadful cheat practised upon her, or not to care for that prize which, now that it was lost, seemed to her worth everything that was precious in life. The poor creature lay goading herself into madness with thoughts of how she would be revenged upon these enemies; how she would watch, and track out, and reveal their hidden plots against her; how she would triumph over and crush them. All these half-frenzied cogitations were secretly pervaded—a still more maddening exasperation—by a consciousness of her own impotence. The evening came creeping in, growing dark around her—silence fell over the little house, where nobody moved or spoke, and where all the world, the heavens, and the earth, seemed changed since this morning; but the wonder was how that silence could contain her—all palpitating with pangs and plans, a bleeding, infuriated, wounded creature show no sign of the frenzy it covered. She had lain down to rest, as the saying is. How many women are there who go thus to a voluntary crucifixion and torture by lying down to rest! Mrs Christian lay with her dry eyes blazing through the darkness, no more able to sleep than she was to do all that her burning fancy described to her. She was a hot-blooded Celtic woman, of that

primitive island which has preserved her name. If she could have sought sympathy, here was nobody to bestow it. Not the heart which that poor ghost of manhood in the next room had lost out of his chilled bewildered bosom; not Bessie's steadfast, unexcited spirit. The poor soul saved herself from going wild by thinking of her boy; holding out her passionate arms to him thousands of miles away; setting him forth as the deliverer, with all the absolute folly of love and passion. He would come home and have justice done to his mother. Never fancy was more madly unreasonable; but it saved her from some of the effects of the agitation in her heart.

On the other side of the road, at the same hour, Nancy prepared her tea in the house of which she was temporary mistress. There could not be any doubt, to look at her now, that this tall, dry, withered figure, and face full of characteristic wrinkles, was like Mrs Christian. The resemblance had been noticed by many. And as old Mrs Thomson had not hesitated to avow that her faithful servant was connected with her by some distant bond of relationship, it was not difficult to imagine that these two were really related, though both denied it strenuously. Nancy had a friend with her to tea. They were in the cheerful kitchen, which had a window to the garden, and a window in the side wall of the house, by which a glimpse of the street might be obtained through the garden gate. The firelight shone pleasantly through the cheerful apartment. All the peculiar ornaments of a kitchen—the covers, the crockery, the polished sparkles of shining pewter and brass—adorned the walls. Through it all went Nancy in her new black dress and ample snowy-white apron. She carried her head high, and moved with a certain rhythmical elation. It is surely an unphilosophical conclusion that there is no real enjoyment in wickedness. Nancy had no uneasiness in her triumph. The more

she realised what her victory must have cost her opponent, the more entire grew her satisfaction. Remorse might have mixed with her exultation had she had any pity in her, but she had not; and, in consequence, it was with unalloyed pleasure that she contemplated the overthrow of her adversary. Perhaps the very satisfaction of a good man in a good action is inferior to the absolute satisfaction with which, by times, a bad man is permitted to contemplate the issue of his wickedness. Nancy marched about her kitchen, preparing her tea with an enjoyment which possibly would not have attended a benevolent exercise of her powers. Possibly she could almost have painted to herself, line by line, the dark tableau of that twilight room where Mrs Christian lay, driving herself crazy with wild thoughts. She did the gloom of the picture full justice. If she had peeped into the window and seen it with her own eyes, she would have enjoyed the sight.

“I’ll make Mr Brown keep me in the house,” said Nancy, sitting down at a table piled with good things, and which looked an embodiment of kitchen luxury and comfort, “and get me a girl. It was what missis always meant to do. I’ll show it to him out of the will that I was left in trust to be made comfortable. And in course of nature her things all comes to me. It’s a deal easier to deal with a single gentleman than if there was a lady poking her nose about into everything. Thank my stars, upstarts such like as them Christians shall never lord it over me; and now I have more of my own way, I’ll be glad to see you of an evening whenever you can be comfortable. Bring a bit of work, and we’ll have a quiet chat. I consider myself settled for life.”

The young surgeon’s house was at the other end of the town; it was close to a region of half-built streets—for Carlingford was a prosperous town—where successive colonies were settling, where

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