

A Suicide.

BY MABEL E. WOTTON.

ILLUSTRATED BY THE MISSES HAMMOND.

IF you don't get away at once, *at once*, mind you, the consequences will be of the gravest. To winter in England in your present condition would be deliberate suicide."

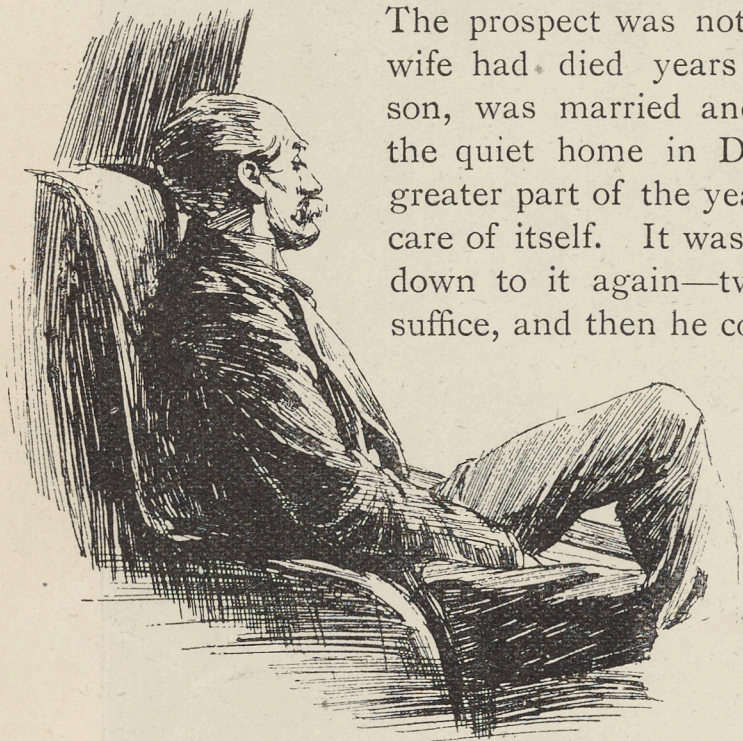
This was the verdict with which Major Dallas had been confronted that morning, and this it was which he was now pondering as he sat at the club window in St. James's Street, meditating the few arrangements it would be necessary to make before starting for Egypt in, say, a couple of days' time.

The prospect was not a disagreeable one. His wife had died years before; his only child, a son, was married and settled in London; and the quiet home in Dorset, where he spent the greater part of the year, could be trusted to take care of itself. It was not worth while running down to it again—two or three letters would suffice, and then he could pick up whatever was

absolutely necessary in town, say good-bye to Ralph, and be off. There was no possible escape from the unconciliatory opinion as regards his health, for the doctor was a personal friend of his own, and had impressed upon him at some length both the present precarious

condition of his lungs, and that it would be "deliberate suicide"—the phrase kept recurring to his patient's mind—if he stayed in England. And to Dallas, being a man of simple, old-fashioned creeds and God-fearing habits, this settled the matter.

He was just beginning a note to his lawyer when the desultory talk of a little knot of men near him, to which he had been listening perforce, though without heeding it, suddenly arrested his attention.



"HE SAT AT THE CLUB WINDOW."

"There goes Ray," said a voice, apparently in reference to a man who was then passing. "I bet you anything you like he is going to call on Mrs. Ralph Dallas. He is head over ears in love with her, you know."

"You should join the staff of *The Repeater*," returned one of the two friends he addressed. "They have a partiality for stale news there."



"TOOK UP ONE FROM HIS SON."

The first speaker flushed hotly. He was little more than a lad, and a possible scandal being a newer thing to him than to his companions, he felt nettled at the way his remarks had been received.

"I believe she'll bolt with him sooner or later, from what I am told," he said sagely, and would have waxed eloquent upon the subject had the others not agreed carelessly, and then sauntered off, none of the three bestowing a secondary glance on the elderly man at the writing table. Dallas was very seldom at his club, and but few of the members knew him by sight.

His hand trembled a little as he laid down his pen, and, sorting the letters in his pocket-book, took up one from his son. Ray? Ray? Surely Ralph had mentioned that name in his last letter. Yes, here it was.

"*This secretary business keeps me pretty close at work, and the little Thursday dinners you ask about have almost fallen through. However, I want to arrange one when you are in town, if I can possibly spare an evening, to make you acquainted with a Mr. Julius Ray, of whom we see a good deal. He is a brilliant talker, and I think would interest you.*"

Dallas was not an emotional man. The hand with which he refolded the letter was quite steady again, and he did not shift his attitude as he sat thinking over what he had heard. He had thought the young people so happy; what was this horrible thing these men had openly discussed? To be sure he had never quite understood Ralph's choice, nor cared much for his young wife, Elizabeth. She was a pale-faced girl,

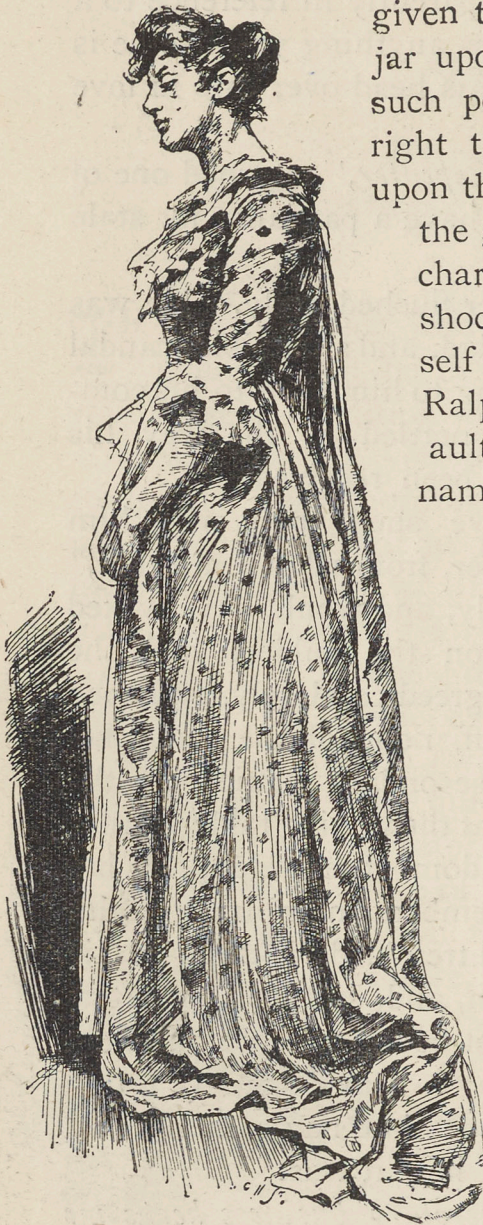
given to dressing in neutral tints, and was apt to jar upon the Major, who was ultra-fastidious on such points, by her excessive anxiety to do the right thing socially, and to mould her opinions upon those of the Countess of Townley, who was the great lady of her little world. But it was characteristic of him that when once the first shock of the thing was over, he insisted to himself that if this were true it was thanks to Ralph's self-absorption. It could not be the ault of a young girl, and one, too, who bore the name of his dead wife. Very slowly he tore up the half-written letter, and, without farther thought of the doctor's warning, went out into the misty streets, and so on to his son's home. At all events, he decided, he would not leave England for a week or two; he would see how matters went.

Matters went in such a fashion that when, Christmas being now within appreciable distance, Julius Ray and his friend's wife met by appointment one morning at a Bond Street gallery, they greeted each other with more than their usual pleasure, owing to the fact that for the last five days their little outings had been marred by an unwelcome third, in the person of Major Dallas.

"I never knew such a tactless booby in my life!" Ray said irritably, in commenting on this fact. "Can't he see for himself that his room would be preferred to his company?"

"I wish he could," said little Mrs. Ralph ruefully. "But he is so fond of going about, and it would offend Ralph awfully if I refused to take him now he is our guest. And besides, he is an old dear! I believe if I asked him to cut off his head, he would give it me."

Ray glanced at her askance. This almost childish fashion of taking his speeches literally lent her an odd fascination which sometimes piqued, sometimes delighted him. What was the use of pretending to him? When one watches a man fall over a precipice, it is a pretty safe conclusion to warrant him dead at the bottom. And there are certain flirtations which are bound to



"SHE WAS A PALE-FACED GIRL."

find their last chapter in the night train to Paris, and in a fool's paradise located somewhere south of Monte Carlo.

"You'll make me jealous," he said suddenly, and she turned and laughed at him.

"You," she said, and Ray's ill-humour vanished. Dallas might blunder on as he would, for there was no other in all the world who could bring such a look to her face as that.

"Where are you supposed to be now?" he asked her presently, for it worried her to look at pictures systematically, and her plan of sitting on a central couch, and just glancing at whatever, by virtue of frame or colouring,



"WHERE ARE YOU SUPPOSED TO BE NOW?"

caught her eye, was conducive to much cosy chatter.

"At the dressmaker's," she answered, with a blithe little laugh. "Even the most devoted of fathers-in-law could not pretend to any authority on gowns."

"Or coats," said Ray with a smile.

"Did I quite ruin you over it?" she returned. "I can't help it, Ju. When you told me to give the tailor *carte blanche*, I could not resist this beauty. You like me in fur, don't you?"

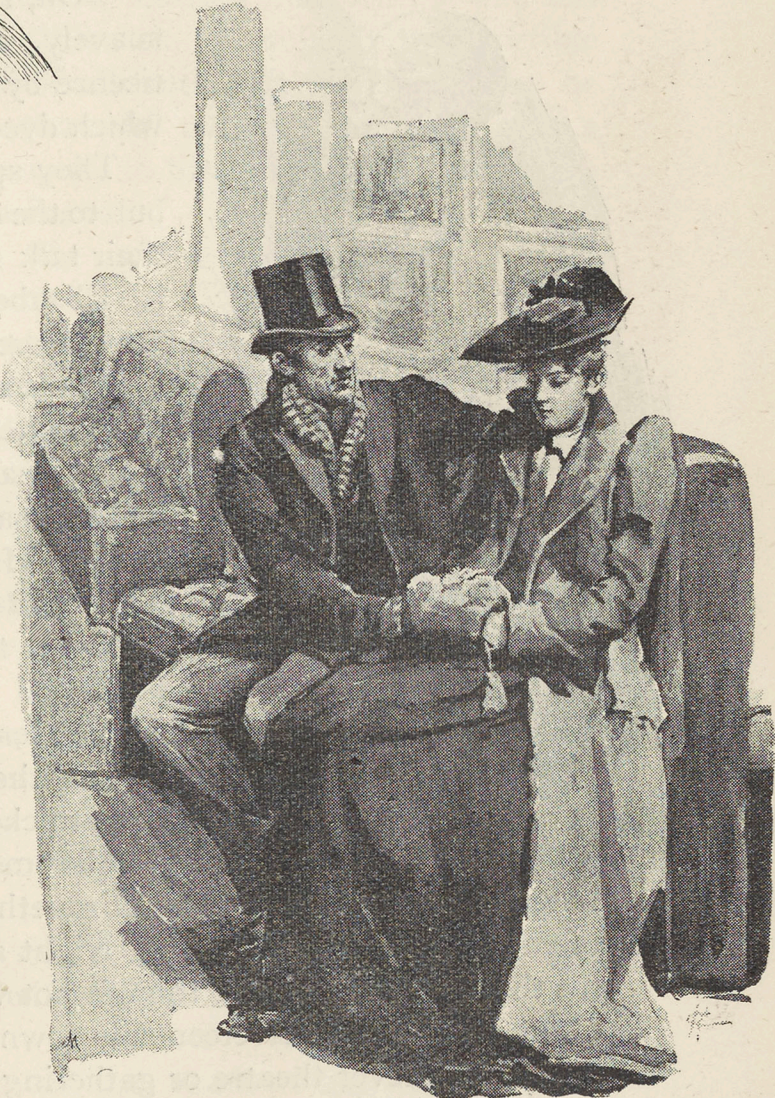
"Yes."

"Or out of it, Ju?"

"Yes."

"In fact, you think me ——"

"What you would have me think, dear." His hand stole



"WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE ME THINK, DEAR."

forward and imprisoned hers: the room was deserted, save for the secretary, who, at the farther corner, was discreetly mending the fire: the scent of the violets she had fastened to her muff rose fragrantly in the hushed, warm air. "I want to be just the complement of you, supplying—well, furs, if the whim so takes you, or friendship when you choose to take it. Sympathy always—have I not proved it?—and more than sympathy when you—when you let me. Is this a very low ambition?"

"It is a very comfortable one for me," said the girl. "But more than sympathy? What can be more?" She freed her hand, and began toying with the violets. "I don't see what can be more."

Julius Ray possessed the great gift of being able to hold his tongue, and it was only when she turned to him enquiringly that he broke the marked silence.

"Oh, nothing, of course," he agreed suavely, and was rewarded for his reticence by the sudden flood of crimson which dyed her face.

They spoke of other things certainly, but to the calculations of both that ended their talk for the time being, and after it, Elizabeth's visits to her dressmaker grew more frequent.

"It is so provoking," she would explain to her visitor, "but I daren't offend the woman, and she is so fidgety she insists on a fresh fitting for each wrinkle."

The Major always begged that he might not be allowed to trespass too far upon her time, with that flavour of old-fashioned courtesy in the words which she found so pleasant. He also was in a fool's paradise just then, and whenever the cough which had attacked him suddenly became peculiarly troublesome, he solaced himself with the

reflection that at all events Elizabeth and Julius Ray met far less often. But it was hard work. Night after night he used to get into his thin evening clothes, though not without a wistful recollection of the shabby old velveteen suit down in Dorsetshire, and take her out to whatever theatre or gathering she might select; and then hang about for hours, a pathetic enough looking figure, had it occurred to anyone to notice him, with his bright eyes, and thin, flushed cheeks.



"USED TO GET INTO HIS THIN EVENING CLOTHES."

"It is awfully good of you, father," Ralph said to him once. "You make me positively ashamed of myself. But I daren't risk my chances by taking holiday from Ledbury just now."

The young man intended to stand at the next election, and the pivot of his hopes was Lord Ledbury's influence.

"Set your mind at rest. I like it," returned the elder man quietly.

He was dotingly fond of his boy, but that was not the reason he spent that winter with so silent a tongue. Had the ambitious, self-absorbed, trusting young husband possessed a different nature, he might have hinted somewhat of his suspicions, but as it was Ralph would either have pooh-poohed the whole affair, or would have created such a loud-voiced disturbance that the home happiness would have been effectually injured. Besides, the Major had learnt that Ray was a married man with a wife and child shut away somewhere in Chiswick, so probably that horrible club rumour had been devoid of all truth. It was only when he heard by the merest accident that the two met invariably once a day, and often twice, that he spoke to his daughter-in-law for the first time about her husband's friend.

"I may be unreasonable," he said, "but I do not like Mr. Ray."

"Don't you?" asked Elizabeth, indifferently.

It was late afternoon, and she and her self-invited guest were together in the fire-lit drawing-room. Tea and the lamps were not due for some minutes, and the Major decided it was fairer to speak to her in the half-lights, when he could not watch her face.

"Yes, it may be a foolish prejudice, but personally I dislike men who socially ignore their wives."

"Ignore their wives?"

"Yes. Go out and about without them, I mean. We have often met him; we have never met Mrs. Ray."

"But Julius is not married."

In the extremity of her surprise, the name slipped out unnoticed.

"Pardon me," said the Major politely, "but he is. Mrs. Ray lives at 3, Sydney Villas, Bedford Park."

"How do you know?"

The girl was completely in the shadow, but the question sounded breathless.

"Oh, quite casually. I forget how." The Major blushed at

the lie as he uttered it. "But naturally you know this, knowing him so well. I only mentioned it as the reason of my dislike. A foolish prejudice, as I said."

Here a servant opened the door to bring in the lamp, but at the first glimmer of its tell-tale light, Elizabeth cried out sharply, and as if in sudden pain.

"Take it away! Take it away instantly," she said. "I have neuralgia, neuralgia in my eyes. I will not have a light."

"And I have been prosing away and making your pain worse," said her companion. "I will take myself off at once. Forgive me."

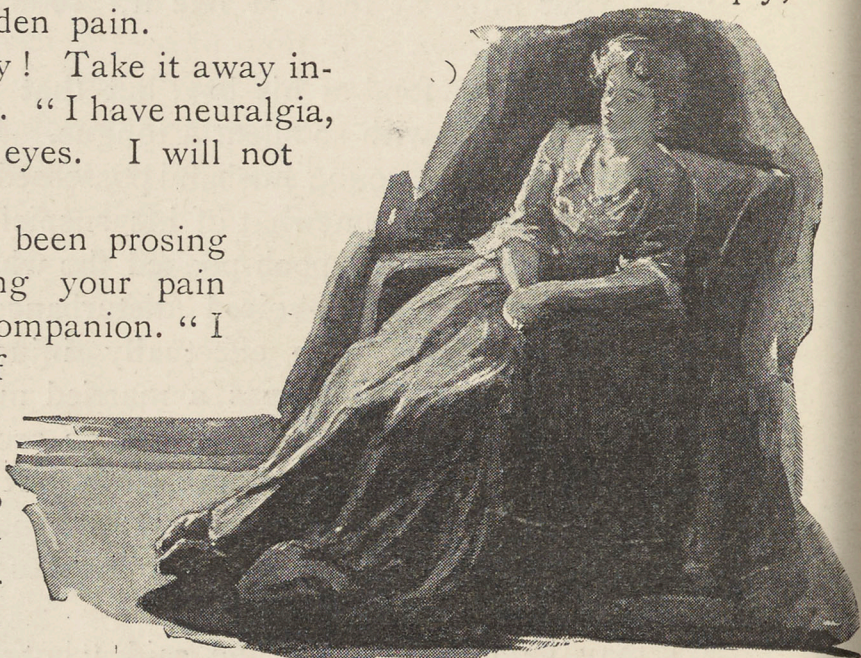
Those two words came very earnestly, for after all she was very young, and Ray a most consummate villain.

He went away slowly to the smoking room, and there sat thinking, while upstairs, in the very chair he had occupied, his place was soon taken by Julius Ray. It was very seldom he called upon her now, but there were sundry last arrangements to be made which he dared not entrust to a letter. As a matter of fact, he never had sent her a letter at all which might not have been opened by her husband, and Elizabeth had been equally cautious; that he had never written a line since school days without imagining how it would read if inspected by counsel's eyes was one of Ray's few boasts.

"It was good of you to see me, my darling," he said tenderly, "but I did not want to leave you to fireside fancies. Sitting alone here, they might possibly be sad ones."

The girl did not answer. Was it true? Was it true? Had he lied to her when he had planned their future, when he had dwelt upon his right to make her happy? The figure in the opposite chair, with its ugly, oddly-attractive face, seemed swaying in the firelight, and she gripped at the arms of her chair. No, it could not be true.

She brushed her hand across her eyes, and made a great effort to speak naturally.



"THE GIRL WAS COMPLETELY IN THE SHADOW."

"Where do you come from?" she said at last. "Is it late?"

"Why, you are trembling!" He rose and came over to her, but she shrank from his touch. Was it true?

"I — I am frightened, I think." She gave a nervous little laugh.

"Of me?" He dropped on one knee, his arms lying forward on hers as they leaned on the big chair. "You can't be frightened of me. I love you too dearly."



"I LOVE YOU TOO DEARLY."

"How dearly?" said Elizabeth.

Then he told her. She lay back listlessly, hearing it all, and then of the final preparations he had made for their start, and of how the weather promised a fine crossing. She was gathering up her strength to answer him blithely, for she knew that if once she grew tragic, all her chances of arriving at the truth were lost.

"And then I shall be quite yours," she said contentedly.

"Quite. Always by love, and very soon by law."

"And you will be quite mine?"

"My dearest!"

Ray bent forward and kissed her lips, and she submitted. But she shut her eyes the while, that he might not see the growing

horror in them. This material talk, this solidification of feeling which hitherto had danced through her heart too airily to be defined, awoke a sudden distaste in her, and for the first time she said to herself, "It is true."

"I shall be missed here, shan't I?" she went on. "And you at Sydney Villas."

Opening her eyes she flashed them on him and laughed musically, and for one moment—it was the woman's salvation—he misunderstood her. He did not understand that she was trying to trick him into a confession or he would have fought her with her own weapons: he only thought for the moment that, after all, it had been rather absurd of him to concoct the idea of a speedy marriage, when she knew all the time that such a thing was out of the question, and evidently cared nothing for the lack.

"She'll be all right," he said, and stopped short at the look in her eyes.

"Your wife." She brushed his arms aside and stood up in front of him, very slight and girlish in the utter impotence of her misery. "I didn't know you had a wife."

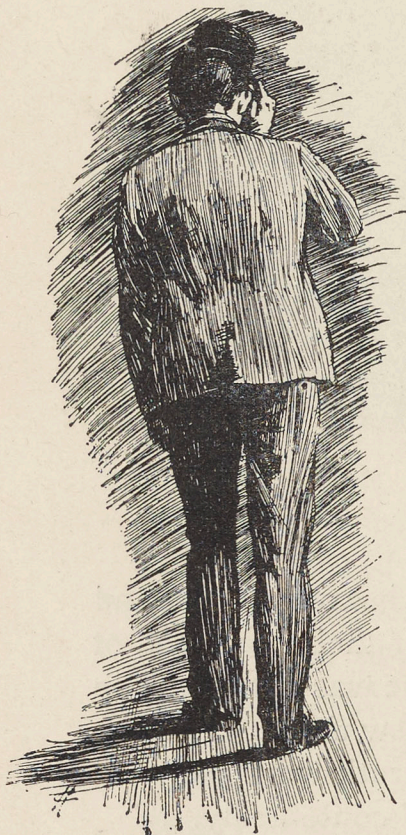
Downstairs the Major sat brooding over the fire. Years ago, in the Crimea, he had held an outpost with a certain amount of difficulty, and to-night, as he sat in the silent room, he was recalling the feeling of delight with which he had learned he was relieved. Something of that same feeling was with him now, and when after a long solitude his son came in to him, the face he turned towards the new-comer was cheery and hopeful. But Ralph looked vexed.

"Julius Ray must be out of his senses," he began. "He was coming out of the house like a whirlwind, and nearly knocked me down as I came up the step. 'So much for manners, old fellow,' I said, and he turned on me as if I had insulted him. 'Manners be damned!' he cried, and bolted off before I could ask him what was the matter."

"Mr. Ray is apt to be impertinent upon occasions, I rather fancy," said his father quietly.

"Probably Elizabeth had been setting him in his place."

"I hope to goodness she had," exclaimed Ralph fervently, and then forgot his vexation in discussing a little trip to Paris he



"COMING OUT OF THE HOUSE."

had planned as a surprise to his wife. "Your devotion to her, father, has shamed your son at last," he added, with a rather conscious laugh.

Major Dallas listened with a well-pleased smile. It was all falling out just as he would have had it, even though he could merely guess at, and would never really know of, that scene in the drawing-room.

"Amen! to your new endeavours," he said soberly. And thinking some weeks later of this talk together, his son remembered it as the time when it first struck him his father was breaking up. Acute inflammation of the lungs, they called it in the obituary notice, and Ralph, who honestly grieved for him, used to lament the constant attendance upon his wife which possibly hastened matters, and which ought not by rights to have devolved upon him. But Elizabeth was very firm upon the subject. While going through his letters they had come across more than one remonstrance from his friend the doctor, who had warned him against the London fogs, and Elizabeth took up a very high ground indeed.

"It is a terrible thing for you, since he was your father," she would respond to these outbursts, "but right is right, and wrong is wrong, and we must not make it otherwise. He stayed in town for no earthly reason when he ought to have gone away, and so he killed himself. Let us hope he was forgiven, Ralph, but it was very wrong."

