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PEARSON'S MAGAZINE

CONTENTS FOR MARCH, 1899

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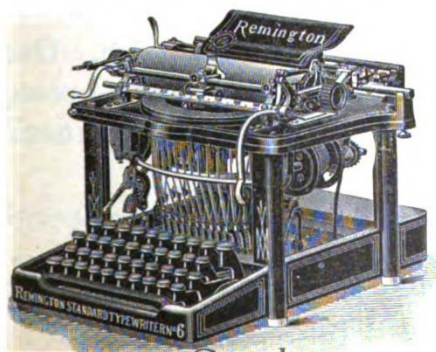
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INTRODUCTION.

THE details of the following true stories have been supplied by the narratives of those persons most concerned, supplemented by the clear and ample notes which Mr. Flaxman Low—under the thin disguise of which name many are sure to recognise one of the leading scientists of the day, with whose works on psychology and kindred subjects they are familiar—has had the courtesy to place in our hands. Since many persons will be inclined to reject as too fantastically absurd for belief the curious revelations contained in Mr. Flaxman Low's notes, it is well to remind our readers that a vast amount of patient investigation has been devoted to a science which is not only in its infancy, but in regard to which there is much misapprehension. Psychic knowledge is still in the initial, crude, and uncertain stage, and honest discoveries and efforts are at all points handicapped by a species of hysterical incredulity. There is nothing of hysteria about Mr. Flaxman Low's methods or personality. He seeks to elucidate the mysteries of spiritual phenomena on the lines of natural law, and though he has met with innumerable checks and disappointments, he has still in a large number of cases been able to satisfy himself and others—amongst whom may be counted not only impartial but even antagonistic witnesses—of the marvellous accuracy of his novel and often most original theories. It may be well to add that Mr. Flaxman Low is quite alone in his treatment of spirit-mysteries. He belongs to no clique, though a school is rapidly growing up which acknowledges him as its head, and he is always desirous to apply to his researches the least artificial mode of expression that will suit his purpose.

No. I.—THE STORY OF SEVENS HALL.

"It may be quite true," said Yarkindale gloomily; "all that I can answer is that we always die the same way. Some of us choose, or are driven, to one form of suicide, and some to another, but the result is alike. For three generations every man of my family has died by his own hand. I have not come to you hoping for help, Mr. Low, I merely want to tell the facts to a man who may possibly believe that we are not insane, that heredity and madness have nothing to do with our leaving the world; but that we are forced out of it by some external power acting upon us, I do not know how. If we inherit anything it is clear-headedness and strength of will, but this curse of ours is stronger. That is all."

Flaxman Low kicked the fire into a blaze. It shone on the silver and china of the breakfast service, and on the sallow, despairing face of the man in the arm-chair opposite. He was still young, but already the cloud that rested upon his life had carved deep lines upon his forehead in addition to the long tell-tale groove from mouth to nostril.

"I conclude death does not occur without some premonition. Tell me something more. What precedes death?" inquired Flaxman Low.

"A regular and well-marked series of events—I insist upon calling them events," replied Yarkindale. "This is not a disease with a sequence of symptoms. Whatever it

is it comes from the outside. First we fall into an indescribable depression, causeless except as being the beginning of the end, for we are all healthy men, fairly rich, and even lucky in the other affairs of life—and of love. Next comes the ghost or apparition or whatever you like to call it. Lastly we die by our own hands." Yarkindale brought down a sinewy brown hand upon the arm of his chair. "And because we have been powers in the land, and there must be as little scandal as possible, the doctors and the coroner's jury bring it in 'Temporary insanity.'"

"How long does this depression last before the end?" Flaxman Low's voice broke in upon the other's moody thinking.

"That varies, but the conclusion never. I am the last of the lot, and though I am full of life and health and resolve to-day, I don't give myself a week to live. It is ghastly! To kill oneself is bad enough, but to know that one is being driven to do it, to know

that no power on earth can save us, is an outlook of which words can't give the colour."

"But you have not yet seen the apparition—which is the second stage."

"It will come to-day or to-morrow—as soon as I go back to Sevens Hall. I have watched two others of my family go through the same mill. This irresistible depression always comes first. I tell you, in two weeks I shall be dead. And the thought is maddening me!

"I have a wife and child," he went on after an interval; "and to think of the poor little beggar growing up only to suffer this!"

"Where are they?" asked Low.

"I left them in Florence. I hope the truth can be kept from my wife; but that also is too much to hope. 'Another suicide at

Sevens Hall.' I can see the headlines. Those rags of newspapers would sell their mothers for half-a-crown!"

"Then the other deaths took place at Sevens Hall?"

"All of them." He stopped and looked hard at Mr. Low.

"Tell me about your brothers," said Low. Yarkindale burst into laughter.

"Well done, Mr. Low! Why didn't you advise me not to go back to Sevens Hall? That is the admirable counsel which the two brain specialists, whom I have seen since I came up to town, have given me. Go back to the Hall? Of course I shouldn't—if I could help it. That's the difficulty—I can't help it! I must go. They thought me mad!"

"I hardly wonder," said Mr. Low calmly, "if you exhibited the same excitement. Now, hear me. If, as you wish me to suppose, you are fighting against supernatural powers, the very first

point is to keep a firm and calm control of your feelings and thoughts. It is possible that you and I together may be able to meet this trouble of yours in some new and possibly successful way. Tell me all you can remember with regard to the deaths of your brothers."

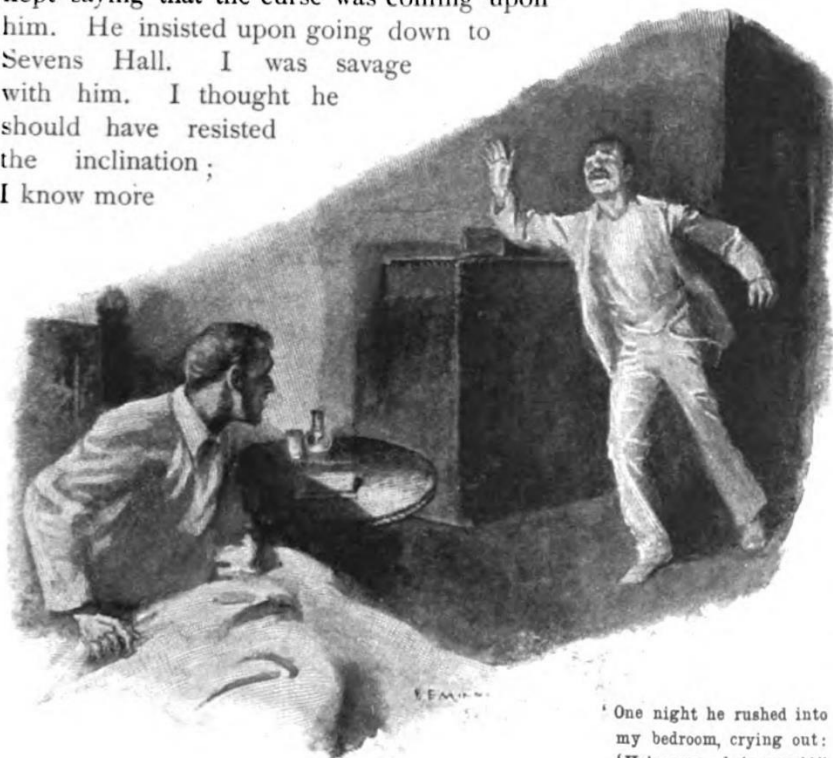
"You are right," said Yarkindale sadly enough. "I am behaving like a maniac, and yet I'm sane, Heaven knows!—To begin with, there were three of us, and we made up our minds long ago when we were kids to see each other through to the last, and we determined not to yield to the influence without a good fight for it. Five years ago my eldest brother went to Somaliland on a shooting trip. He was a big, vigorous, self-willed man, and I was not anxious about him. My second brother, Jack, was an R.E.,



Sevens Hall.

From a photograph.

a clever, sensitive, quiet fellow, more likely to be affected by the tradition of the family. While he was out in Gib., Vane suddenly returned from Africa. I found him changed. He had become gloomy and abstracted, and kept saying that the curse was coming upon him. He insisted upon going down to Sevens Hall. I was savage with him. I thought he should have resisted the inclination ;
I know more



‘ One night he rushed into my bedroom, crying out : ‘ He’s come ; he’s come ! ’ ’

about it now. One night he rushed into my bedroom, crying out : ‘ He’s come ; he’s come ! ’ ”

“ Did he ever describe what he had seen ? ” asked Low.

“ Never. None of us know definitely what shape the cursed thing takes. No one of us has ever seen it ; or, at any rate, in time to describe it. But once it comes—and this is the horrible part—it never leaves us. Step by step it dogs us, till——” Yarkindale stopped, and in a minute or two resumed. “ For two nights I sat up with him. He said very little, for Vane never talked much ; but I saw the agony in his face, the fear, the loathing, the growing horror—he who, I believe, had never before feared anything in his life.

“ The third night I fell asleep. I was worn out, though I don’t offer that as an excuse. I am a light sleeper, yet while I slept Vane killed himself within six feet of me ! At the inquest it was proved that he had bought a

silken waist-robe at Cairo, and it was contended that he must have concealed it from me, as I had never seen it. I found him with his head nearly twisted off, and a red rubbed weal across his face. He was lying in a heap upon the floor, for the rope was frayed and broken by his struggles. The theory was that he had hanged himself, and then repented of it, and in his efforts to get free had wrenched his head round, and scarred his face.”

Yarkindale stopped, and shuddered violently.

“ I tried to hush the matter up as well as I could, but of course the news of it reached Jack. Then a couple of years passed, and he went from Gib. to India, and wrote in

splendid spirits, for he had met a girl he liked out there, and he told me there was never so happy a man on earth before. So you can fancy how I felt when I had a wire from the Hall imploring me to go down at once for Jack had arrived. It is very hard to tell you what he suffered.” Yarkindale broke off and wiped his forehead. “ For I have been through it all within the last two weeks myself. He cared for that girl beyond anything on earth ; yet within a couple of days of their marriage, he had felt himself impelled to rush home to England without so much as bidding her good-bye, though he knew that at the end of his journey death was waiting for him. We talked it over rationally, Mr. Low, and we determined to combine against the power, whatever it was, that was driving him out of the world. We are not monomaniacs. We want to live ; we have all that makes life worth living ; and yet I am going the same way, and not any effort

or desire or resolution on my part can save me!"

"It is a pity you make up your mind to that," said Flaxman Low. "One will pitted against another will has at least a chance of success. And a second point I beg you will bear in mind. Good is always inherently stronger than evil. If, for instance, health were not, broadly speaking, stronger than disease, the poisonous germs floating about the world would kill off the human race inside twelve months."

"Yes," said Yarkindale; "but where two of us failed before, it is not likely that I alone will succeed."

"You need not be alone," said Flaxman Low; "for if you have no objection, I should be glad to accompany you to Sevens Hall, and to give you any aid that may be in my power."

It is not necessary to record what Yarkindale had to say in answer to this offer. Presently he resumed his story:

"Jack was dispirited, and, unlike Vane, desperately afraid of his fate. He hardly dared to fall asleep. He recalled all he knew of our father's death, and tried to draw me on to describe Vane's, but I knew better than that. Still, with all my care, he went the same way! I did not trust my own watchfulness a second time; I had a man in the house who was a trained attendant. He sat outside Jack's door of nights. One morning early—it was summer-time, and he must have dropped into a doze—he was shoved over, chair and all, and before he could pick himself up, Jack had flung himself from the balcony outside one of the gallery windows."

Sevens Hall is a large Elizabethan mansion hidden away among acres of rich pasture lands, where wild flowers bloom abundantly in their seasons and rooks build and caw in the great elms. But none of the natural beauties of the country were visible when Mr. Low arrived late on a November evening with Yarkindale. The interior of the house, however, made up for the bleakness outside. Fires and lights blazed in the hall and in the principal rooms.

During dinner, Yarkindale seemed to have relapsed into his most dejected mood. He scarcely opened his lips, and his face looked black, not only with depression, but anger. For he was by no means ready to give up life; he rebelled against his fate with the strenuous fury of a man whose pride and strength of will and nearest desires are baffled by an antagonist he cannot evade.

During the evening they played billiards, for Low was aware that the less his companion thought over his own position, the better.

Flaxman Low arranged to occupy a room opposite Yarkindale's. So far the latter was in the same state as on the day when first he saw Mr.

Low. He was conscious of the same deep and causeless depression, and the wish to return to Sevens Hall had grown beyond his power to resist. But the second of the fatal signs, the following footsteps, had not yet been heard.

During the next forenoon, to Yarkindale's surprise, Flaxman Low, instead of avoiding the subject, threshed out the details of the former deaths at Sevens Hall, especially those of which Yarkindale could give the fullest particulars. He examined the balcony



Jack had flung himself from the balcony."

from which Jack Yarkindale had thrown himself. The ironwork was wrenched and broken in one part.

"When did this happen?" asked Low, pointing to it.

"On the night that Jack died," was the reply. "I have been very little at home since, and I did not care at the time to bother about having it put right."

"It looks," said Flaxman Low, "as if he had had a struggle for his life, and clung to the upper bar here where it is bent outwards. He had wounds on his hands, had he not?" he continued looking at a dull long splash of rust upon the iron.

"Yes, his hands were bleeding."

"Please try to recollect exactly. Were they cut or bruised upon the palm? Or was it on the back?"

"Now I come to think of it, his hands were a good deal injured, especially on the knuckles—one wrist was broken—by the fall no doubt."

Flaxman Low made no remark.

Next they went into the spacious bedroom where Vane and more than one of those who went before him had died, and which Yarkindale now occupied. His companion asked to see the rope with which Vane had hanged himself. Most unwillingly Yarkindale brought it out. The two pieces, with their broken strands and brown stains, appeared to be of great interest to Low. He next saw the exact spot on the great bedstead from which it been suspended, and searching along the back, he discovered the jagged edge of wood against which Vane in his last agony had endeavoured to free himself by fraying the rope.

"We suppose the rope gave after he was dead, and that was because of his great weight," said Yarkindale. "This is the room in which most of the tragedies have taken place. You will probably witness the last one."

"That will depend on yourself," answered Flaxman Low. "I am inclined to think there will be no tragedy if you will stiffen your back, and hold out. Did either of your brothers on waking complain of dreams?"

Yarkindale looked suspiciously at him from under drawn brows. "Yes," he said harshly,

"they both spoke of tormenting dreams, which they could not recall after waking, but that also was taken as a symptom of brain disease by the experts. And now that you have learned more about the matter, you, too, begin upon the old, worn theory."

"On the contrary, my theory has nothing whatever to do with insanity, though the phenomena connected with the deaths of your brothers seem to be closely associated with sleep. You tell me your brother Jack was afraid to sleep. Your other brother awoke to find his death somehow. Therefore, we may be certain that at a certain stage of these series of events, as you call them, sleep becomes both a dread and a danger."

Yarkindale shivered and glanced nervously over his shoulder.

"This room is growing very cold. Let us go down to the hall. As to sleep, I have been afraid of it for a long time."

All the day Low noticed that his companion continued to look excessively pale and nervous. Every now and then he would turn his face round as if listening. In the evening they again played billiards late into the night. The house was full of silence before they went upstairs. A long strip of polished flooring led from the billiard-room door to the hall. Yarkindale motioned to Low to stand still while he walked slowly to the foot of the staircase. In the stillness Flaxman Low distinctly heard mingled steps, a softer tread following upon Yarkindale's purposely loud footfalls. The hall was in darkness with the exception of a gas jet at the staircase. Yarkindale stopped, leant heavily against the pillar of the balustrade, and with a ghastly face waited for Low to join him. Then he gripped Low by the arm and pointed downwards. Beside his shadow, a second dim, hooded, formless shadow showed faintly on the floor.

"Stage two," said Yarkindale. "You see it is no fancy of our unhealthy brains."

Mr. Low has placed it upon record that the following week contained one of the most painful experiences through which it has been his lot to pass. Yarkindale fought doggedly for his life. He thrust aside his dejection. He followed the advice given him with marvellous courage. But still the ominous days dragged

on, seeming at times too slow, at times too rapid in their passage. Yarkindale's physical strength began to fail—a mental battle is the most exhausting of all struggles.

"The next point in which you can help," said Low on the eighth night, "is to try to recollect what you have been dreaming of immediately before waking."

Yarkindale shook his head despondently.

"I have tried over and over again, and though I wake in a cold sweat of terror, I cannot gather my senses quickly enough to seize the remembrance of the thing that has spoiled my sleep," he answered with a pallid smile.

"You think the psychological moment with us is undoubtedly the first waking moment?"

Low admitted that he thought it was so.

"I understand now why you have emptied this room of everything except the two couches on which we lie. You are afraid I shall lay hands upon myself! I feel the danger and yet I have no suicidal desire. I want to live—Heaven, how I long to live! To be happy, and prosperous, and light-hearted as I once was!"

Yarkindale lay back upon the couch.

"I wish I could give you the faintest notion of the desperate misery in my mind to-night! I could almost ask to die to escape from it!" he went on; "the burden only appears to grow heavier and more unbearable every day—I sometimes feel I can no longer endure it."

"Think, on the contrary, how much you have to live for. For your own self it matters less than for your boy. Your victory may mean his."

"How? Tell me how?"

"It is rather a long explanation, and I think we had better defer it until I can form some rather more definite ideas on the subject."

"Very well." Yarkindale turned his face from the light. "I will try to sleep and forget all this wretchedness if I can. You will not leave me?"

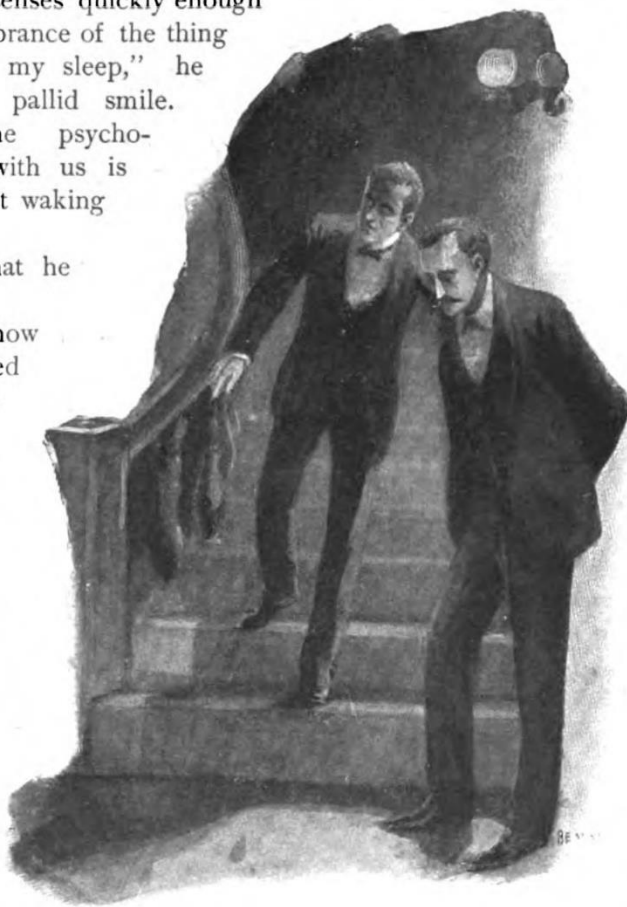
Throughout the long winter night Flaxman Low watched beside him.

He felt he dared not leave him for one moment. The room was almost dark, for Yarkindale could not sleep otherwise. The flickering fire-light died slowly down, until nothing was left of the last layer of glowing wood ashes. The night lamp in a distant corner threw long shadows across the empty floor, that wavered now and then as if a wind touched the flame.

Outside the night was still and black; not a sound disturbed the silence except those strange unaccountable creakings and groanings which seem like inarticulate voices in an old house.

Yarkindale was sleeping heavily, and as the night deepened Low got up and walked about the room in circles, always keeping his face towards the sleeper. The air had grown very cold, and when he sat down again he drew a rug about him, and lit a cigar. The change in the atmosphere was sudden and peculiar, and he softly pulled his couch close to Yarkindale's and waited.

Creakings and groanings floated up and



Then he gripped Low by the arm and pointed downwards.

down the gaunt old corridors, the mystery and loneliness of night became oppressive. The shadow from the night lamp swayed and fluttered as if a door had been opened. Mr. Low glanced at both doors. He had locked both, and both were closed, yet the flame bent and fluttered until Low put his hand across his companion's chest, so that he might at once detect any waking movement, for the light had now become too dim to see by.

To his intense surprise he found his hand at once in the chill of a cold draught blowing upon it from above. But Flaxman Low had no time to think about it, for a horrible feeling of cold and numbness was also stealing upwards through his feet, and a sense of weight and deadly chill seemed pressing in upon his shoulders and back. The back of his neck ached, his outstretched hand began to stiffen.

Yarkindale still slept heavily.

New sensations were borne in slowly upon Low. The chill around him was the repulsive clammy chill of a thing long dead. Desperate desires awoke in his mind; something that could almost be felt was beating down his will.

Then Yarkindale moved slightly in his sleep.

Low was conscious of a supreme struggle, whether of mind or body he does not know, but to him it appeared to extend to the ultimate effort a man can make. A

hideous temptation rushed wildly across his thoughts to murder Yarkindale! A dreadful longing to feel the man's strong throat yielding and crushing under his own sinewy strangling fingers, was forced into his mind.

Suddenly, Low became aware that, although the couch and part of Yarkindale's figure were visible, his head and the upper part of the body were blotted out as if by some black intervening object. But there was

no outline of the interposed form, nothing but a vague thick blackness.

He sprang to his feet as he heard an ominous choking gasp from Yarkindale, and with swift hands he felt over the body through the darkness. Yarkindale lay tense and stiff.

"Yarkindale!" shouted Low, as his fingers felt the angle of an elbow, then hands upon Yarkindale's throat, hands that clutched savagely with fingers of iron.

"Wake, man!" shouted Low again, trying to loosen the desperate clutch.

Then he knew that the hands were Yarkindale's hands, and that the man was apparently strangling himself.

The ghastly struggle, that, in the darkness, seemed half a dream and half reality, ceased abruptly when Yarkindale moved and his hands fell limp and slack into Low's as the darkness between them cleared away.

"Are you awake?" Low called again.

"Yes. What is it? I feel as if I had



"Wake, man!" shouted Low again.

been fighting for my life. Or have I been very ill?"

"Both, in a sense. You have passed the crisis, and you are still living. Hold on, the lamp's gone out."

But, as he spoke, the light resumed its steady glimmer, and, when a couple of candles added their brightness, the room was shown bare and empty, and as securely closed as ever. The only change to be noted was that the temperature had risen.

* * * * *

A frosty sun was shining into the library windows next morning when Flaxman Low talked out the matter of the haunting presence which had exerted so sinister an influence upon generations of the Yarkindale family.

"Before you say anything, I wish to admit, Mr. Low, that I, and no doubt those who have gone before me, have certainly suffered from a transient touch of suicidal mania," began Yarkindale gloomily.

"And I am very sure you make a mistake," replied Low. "In suicidal mania the idea is not transient, but persistent, often extending over months, during which time the patient watches for an opportunity

to make away with himself. In your own case, when I woke you last night, you were aware of a desire to strangle yourself, but directly you became thoroughly awake the idea left you?"

"That is so. Still——"

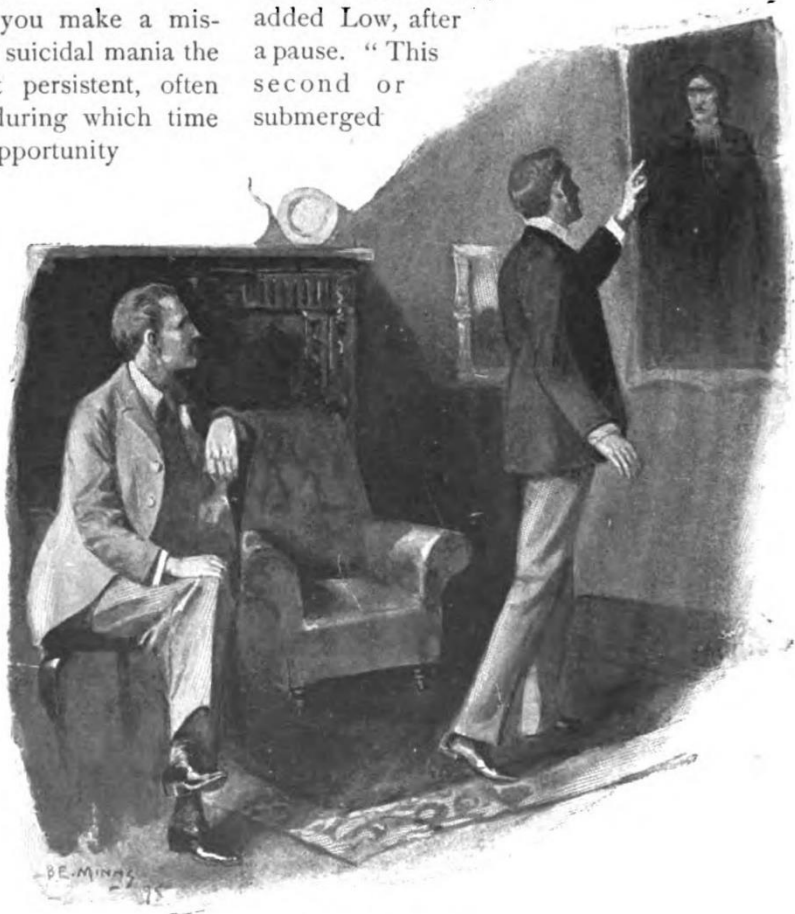
"You know that often when dreaming one imagines oneself to do many things which in the waking state would be entirely impossible, yet one continues subject to the idea for a moment or so during the intermittent stage between waking and sleeping. If one has nightmare,

one continues to feel a beating of the heart and a sensation of fright even for some interval after waking. Yours was an analogous condition."

"But look here, Mr. Low. How do you account for it that I, who at this moment have not the slightest desire to make away with myself, should, at the moment of awaking from sleep, be driven to doing precisely that which I detest and wish to avoid?"

"In every particular," said Flaxman Low, "your brothers' cases were similar. Each of them attempted his life in that transient moment while the will and reason were still passive, and action was still subject to an abnormally vivid idea which had evidently been impressed upon the consciousness during sleep. We have clear proof of this, I say, in the struggles of each to save himself when actually *in extremis*. Contemporary psychology has arrived at the conclusion that every man possesses a subconscious as well as a conscious self,"

added Low, after a pause. "This second or submerged



"Here it is!" he shouted.

self appears to be infinitely more susceptible of spiritual influences than the conscious personality. Such influences work most strongly when the normal self is in abeyance during sleep, dreaming, or the hypnotic condition. In your own family you have an excellent example of the idea of self-destruction being suggested during sleep, and carried into action during the first confused, unmastered moments of waking."

"But how do you account for the following footsteps? Whose wishes or suggestions do we obey?"

"I believe them to be different manifestations of the same evil intelligence. Ghosts sometimes, as possibly you are aware, pursue a purpose, and your family has been held in subjection by a malicious spirit that has goaded them on to destroy themselves. I could bring forward a number of other examples; there is the Black Friar of the Sinclairs and the Fox of the Oxenholms. To come back to your own case—do you remember of what you dreamed before I woke you?"

Yarkindale looked troubled.

"I have a dim recollection, but it eludes me. I cannot fix it." He glanced round the room, as if searching for a reminder. Suddenly he sprang up and approached a picture on the wall—"Here it is!" he shouted. "I remember now. A dark figure stood over me; I saw the long face and the sinister eyes; it was this man—Jules Cevaine!"

"You have not spoken of Cevaine before. Who was he?"

"He was the last of the old Cevaines. You know this house is called Sevens Hall—a

popular corruption of the Norman name Cevaine. We Yarkindales were distant cousins, and inherited this place after the death of Jules Cevaines, about a hundred years ago. He was said to have taken a prominent part—under another name—in the Reign of Terror. However that may be—he resented our inheriting the Hall."

"He died here?" asked Flaxman Low.

"Yes."

"His purpose in haunting you," said Low, "was doubtless the extermination of your family. His spirit lingers about this spot where the final intense passion of terror, pain, and hatred was felt. And you yourselves have unknowingly fostered his power by dwelling upon and dreading his influence, thus opening the way to spirit communication, until from time to time his disembodied will has superimposed itself upon your wills during the bewildered moment of waking, and the several successive tragedies of which you told me have been the result."

"Then how can we ever escape?"

"You have already won one and your most important victory; for the rest, think of him as seldom as may be. Destroy this painting and any other articles that may have belonged to him; and if you take my advice you will travel for a while."

In pursuance of Mr. Flaxman Low's advice, Yarkindale went for the cold weather to India. He has had no recurrence of the old trouble, but he loathes Sevens Hall, and he is only waiting for his son to be old enough to break the entail, when the property will be placed on the market.

