

His voice broke.

'A wife, sir?' Oh, no, not a wife. Rather, sir, an angel. Oh, sir, an angel—'

'Lent to me, and taken back again.'

'That is it, sir. Taken back, but taken back too soon.' Stephen coughed and turned his grey head away, ashamed a little of the tears in his eyes.

'You know also all the rest. And, Stephen, knowing what you know, it pleases me to tell you that I dine with

What visions of that absent one came before him! The little girl in her white robe, with its black ribbons—that first, lonely, heart-breaking Christmas after his wife's death. The schoolgirl with her shining, youthful, beautiful face. The young woman, accomplished, graceful, winning, lovable.

And after that?

Nothing.

For it was then, just then, that she had defied him, not openly, but with a quiet self-will which enraged the man of self-will. She married—married beneath her in wealth and station.

To-night she sat before him, the gracious, graceful girl he loved, and who, he knew, had loved him dearly. The beautiful girl, with her gentle voice so like her mother's, and her gentle face and her gentle ways. The meal went on, and as it did so he bent forward, thinking that he heard her speak.

Stephen withdrew to the side of the room, standing with glance riveted on his master's countenance, his master's glance riveted on that empty chair.

Ah! Gradually the dream was fading. Gradually the sorrow of his own self-deception was being forced upon him. For no keenness of the imagination could bring that sweet presence before him, and even as he gazed he saw another face, a lovable face, set above a slim, white-robed body. And the woman whom now his vision contemplated held out to him her beseeching hands.

'Gordon,' she prayed, 'where is the little one I gave into your care? Husband and father, what have you done with my little girl?'

A groan burst from his lips, his head fell forward on his breast, his eyes closed. And while he sat thus, his white hair shining in the candle light, his white hands resting on the polished table, Stephen moved with noiseless steps toward the door. He opened it. A woman en-



NEAR THE FALLS, HAAST VALLEY, WESTLAND.

my daughter this Christmas night, when all the world sits down amidst its own, rejoicing, merry and glad. Place the empty chair at the head of my table, Stephen, that chair which has been so long unoccupied, and serve your Miss Adele as if she were really present. Come now, good and blest old man,' he put shaking, cold fingers on the other's shoulders, 'good Stephen, come. It is my fancy that to-night she sits opposite to me—the girl I sent away, the flowers that she loved best about her, their perfume surrounding her. It is my fancy that her beautiful eyes meet mine with their old joyousness. Dead or living, God gives me this grace to-night, this happy Christmas night, to see her once again as she was, as she is; my own, of my own flesh and my own blood, the child I loved with all my heart, and whom, Stephen, whom I still love—as dearly.'

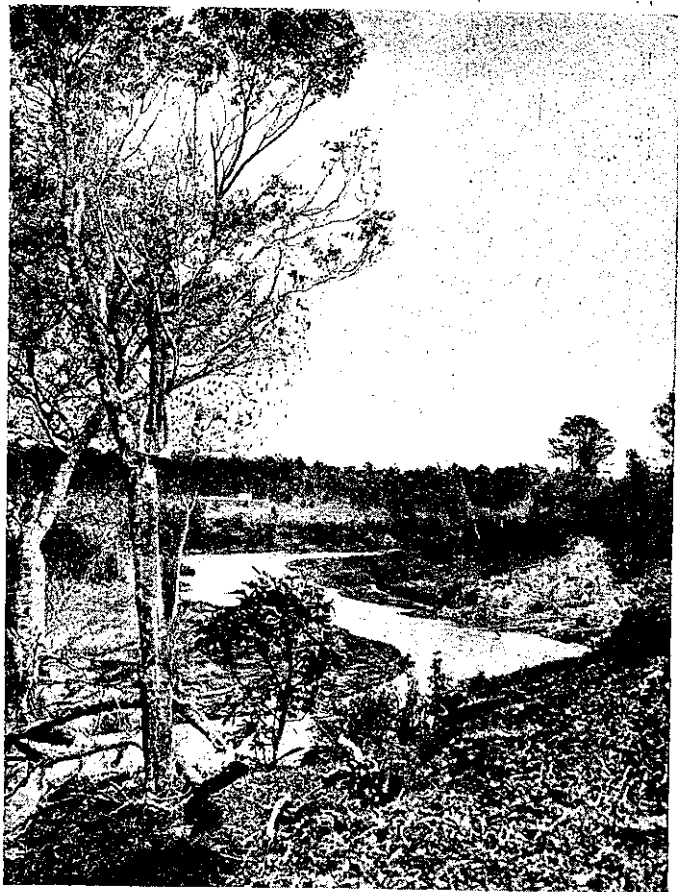
His hands dropped. Stephen made no pretence now of hiding the tears. He looked at him.

'Mr. Gordon, sir—'

Gordon Raymond raised his head.

'That is all, Stephen. When dinner is ready, you will find me in the library, as usual.'

Fifteen minutes later Stephen tapped lightly and announced the serving of the meal. Gordon Raymond bowed to some imaginary person, offered her his arm, escorted her to the door, which Stephen held wide open. In silence the meal began, and as Gordon Raymond ate he looked at the empty chair under the softly-shaded light. Stephen served at it first, and then brought the dishes to his master. In every movement the old butler, too, carried out the illusion. And presently Gordon Raymond's face lighted up, so keenly did his imagination take possession of him, and his eyes shone with a brighter gleam.



SCENE ON THE MANAWATU RIVER.

tered, stately as Gordon Raymond's self, beautiful; advanced to the table, and sat down in that empty chair without footstep or breath to herald her coming.

Gordon Raymond did not lift his eyes. As he sat silent, his mental gaze concentrated on the past, he heard a voice:

'Give that to father, please, Stephen.'