THE north wind, driving the snow in icy whirls through the deserted streets of Brightondale, paused in its farewell to the town to buffet the old house of the Annerlings, which every storm found more nearly a ruin. Brightondale itself was going to decay. Some fifteen years before our story opens, Henry Annerling, who had not been seen in the village since he was a boy, returned to live there, and occupied the house he had inherited from his father.

There was a rumor, which, at some time in his life, every one in Brightondale believed, that underneath the unproductive fields, that grudged their cultivators a scanty living, were beds of coal, ready to yield an abundant return whenever some one should appear who would be courageous enough to undertake the difficulties of working them. It was a proof that Henry Annerling's friends were justified in calling him unpractical, that he accepted this village tradition as a fact. He employed experts to investigate and make reports. There was no doubt that there was coal, they said. That in sight was too hard and slaty for profitable mining; the lower seams were probably better, and but for the cost of reaching them would very likely repay working, but only trial would show whether the quality was such as to be worth bringing to the surface. This trial Henry Annerling determined to make. He spoke to his friends, but they were shy of putting capital into an uncertain and costly enterprise; in fact, his old associates in business tried to persuade him to forego the plan. Their coolness, in place of discouraging, only served to fix him in his purpose, and single-handed he undertook the execution of his design.

For a time it seemed as if his perseverance would win success, and his returns, small as they were, urged him on to greater expense. But as the shaft went deeper the coal continued of the same poor quality, and it became evident that the work, if it went on, could go on only at a loss. Not until nearly all his fortune was involved, did Henry Annerling realize the total failure of the venture on which he had risked so much. Then gathering together the remnants of what he had possessed, he left his house in the charge of two old servants and sailed for Europe, where, with an ocean between him and the scene of his shattered fortunes, he hoped he might be free from all reminders of his failure.

After his departure, the brief prosperity that Brightondale had enjoyed deserted it. The business that had been attracted by his efforts fell away, and the village was abandoned, except by the few who, having found a home there for many years, were contented to remain, and, as it were, die slowly with the town itself.

One of them was John Elton, who, with his wife, had for ten years occupied the mansion that had been his master's, and who, on the night of which we speak, was sitting in the kitchen of the old house, close before the fire, listening to the storm, which, rattling the windows and roaring down the chimney, paused only to return again with greater violence. During one of these pauses in the fury of the elements a knock sounded upon the door. John and his wife started up and looked at one another, listening, and, as they hesitated, another knock came louder than before.