

NO NAME
WILKIE COLLINS

LONDON

1862

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ABOUT AUTHOR



Wilkie Collins (1824–1889) was a pioneering English Victorian author who fathered the modern English detective novel. Renowned for intricate plots and suspense, his most famous works, *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), revolutionized mystery and sensation fiction.

Key Works:

- **The Woman in White (1860):** The archetypal "sensation novel," famous for its multiple narrators and gripping mystery.
- **The Moonstone (1868):** Widely celebrated as the first true English detective novel and a pioneer of the police procedural genre.
- **Armadale (1866) & No Name (1862):** Further examples of his complex plotting and exploration of social issues.

Life & Legacy:

- **Partnership with Dickens:** Collins was a close friend, mentor, and collaborator of Charles Dickens. They often co-wrote plays and published fiction in Dickens' magazines, such as *All the Year Round*.
- **Unconventional Lifestyle:** A vocal critic of Victorian marriage, Collins never married. He divided his time between his long-term partner Caroline Graves and his common-law wife Martha Rudd.
- **Opium Addiction:** Collins suffered from chronic gout and arthritis, leading to a severe addiction to laudanum (an opium-alcohol mix). He famously hallucinated parts of *The Moonstone* while under the drug's influence.

TO FRANCIS CARR BEARD
(FELLOW OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS
OF ENGLAND),
IN REMEMBRANCE OF THE TIME WHEN
THE CLOSING SCENES OF THIS STORY WERE
WRITTEN

PREFACE

A Stolen Name. A Shattered Fortune.

A Woman Bound for Ruthless Vengeance.

The main purpose of this story is to appeal to the reader's interest in a subject which has been the theme of some of the greatest writers, living and dead—but which has never been, and can never be, exhausted, because it is a subject eternally interesting to all mankind. Here is one more book that depicts the struggle of a human creature, under those opposing influences of Good and Evil, which we have all felt, which we have all known. It has been my aim to make the character of “Magdalen,” which personifies this struggle, a pathetic character even in its perversity and its error; and I have tried hard to attain this result by the least obtrusive and the least artificial of all means—by a resolute adherence throughout to the truth as it is in Nature. This design was no easy one to accomplish; and it has been a great encouragement to me (during the publication of my story in its periodical form) to know, on the authority of many readers, that the object which I had proposed to myself, I might, in some degree, consider as an object achieved.

Round the central figure in the narrative other characters will be found grouped, in sharp contrast—contrast, for the most part, in which I have endeavored to make the element of humor mainly predominant. I have sought to impart this relief to the more serious passages in the book, not only because I believe myself to be justified in doing so by the laws of art—but because experience has taught me (what the experience of my readers will doubtless confirm) that there is no such moral phenomenon as unmixed

tragedy to be found in the world around us. Look where we may, the dark threads and the light cross each other perpetually in the texture of human life.

To pass from the Characters to the Story, it will be seen that the narrative related in these pages has been constructed on a plan which differs from the plan followed in my last novel, and in some other of my works published at an earlier date. The only Secret contained in this book is revealed midway in the first volume. From that point, all the main events of the story are purposely foreshadowed before they take place—my present design being to rouse the reader's interest in following the train of circumstances by which these foreseen events are brought about. In trying this new ground, I am not turning my back in doubt on the ground which I have passed over already. My one object in following a new course is to enlarge the range of my studies in the art of writing fiction, and to vary the form in which I make my appeal to the reader, as attractively as I can.

There is no need for me to add more to these few prefatory words than is here written. What I might otherwise have wished to say in this place, I have endeavored to make the book itself say for me.

* * *

Magdalen Vanstone has everything a young Victorian woman could dream of: wealth, a loving family, a brilliant future, and a charming beauty. But in a single, catastrophic afternoon, her perfect world is completely obliterated. Following the sudden death of her parents, a cruel legal loophole reveals that their marriage was technically invalid. Instantly, Magdalen and her sister are declared illegitimate by the state—stripped of their inheritance, cast out of their home, and left legally with "no name" in a society that judges a person entirely by their birth.

While her elder sister resigns herself to a life of quiet poverty, the fierce and proud Magdalen refuses to be a victim. Driven by a burning desire for justice, she weaponizes her extraordinary talent for acting and disguise. Launching a high-stakes, deceptive

campaign against the greedy relative who stole her family fortune, she steps into a dangerous underworld of false identities, forged documents, and psychological warfare. How far will an innocent woman go when the law itself leaves her with nothing to lose?

Experience one of Wilkie Collins's most controversial and gripping sensation novels. A masterful blend of gothic suspense, complex legal intrigue, and a deeply emotional character study, this timeless masterpiece delivers a breathtaking exploration of social hypocrisy and the terrifying cost of ultimate revenge.

THE FIRST SCENE

Combe-Raven, Somersetshire.

I

The hands on the hall-clock pointed to half-past six in the morning. The house was a country residence in West Somersetshire, called Combe-Raven. The day was the fourth of March, and the year was eighteen hundred and forty-six.

No sounds but the steady ticking of the clock, and the lumpish snoring of a large dog stretched on a mat outside the dining-room door, disturbed the mysterious morning stillness of hall and staircase. Who were the sleepers hidden in the upper regions? Let the house reveal its own secrets; and, one by one, as they descend the stairs from their beds, let the sleepers disclose themselves.

As the clock pointed to a quarter to seven, the dog woke and shook himself. After waiting in vain for the footman, who was accustomed to let him out, the animal wandered restlessly from one closed door to another on the ground-floor; and, returning to his mat in great perplexity, appealed to the sleeping family with a long and melancholy howl.

Before the last notes of the dog's remonstrance had died away, the oaken stairs in the higher regions of the house creaked under slowly-descending footsteps. In a minute more the first of the female servants made her appearance, with a dingy woollen shawl

over her shoulders—for the March morning was bleak; and rheumatism and the cook were old acquaintances.

Receiving the dog's first cordial advances with the worst possible grace, the cook slowly opened the hall door and let the animal out. It was a wild morning. Over a spacious lawn, and behind a black plantation of firs, the rising sun rent its way upward through piles of ragged gray cloud; heavy drops of rain fell few and far between; the March wind shuddered round the corners of the house, and the wet trees swayed wearily.

Seven o'clock struck; and the signs of domestic life began to show themselves in more rapid succession.

The housemaid came down—tall and slim, with the state of the spring temperature written redly on her nose. The lady's-maid followed—young, smart, plump, and sleepy. The kitchen-maid came next—afflicted with the face-ache, and making no secret of her sufferings. Last of all, the footman appeared, yawning disconsolately; the living picture of a man who felt that he had been defrauded of his fair night's rest.

The conversation of the servants, when they assembled before the slowly lighting kitchen fire, referred to a recent family event, and turned at starting on this question: Had Thomas, the footman, seen anything of the concert at Clifton, at which his master and the two young ladies had been present on the previous night? Yes; Thomas had heard the concert; he had been paid for to go in at the back; it was a loud concert; it was a hot concert; it was described at the top of the bills as Grand; whether it was worth traveling sixteen miles to hear by railway, with the additional hardship of going back nineteen miles by road, at half-past one in the morning—was a question which he would leave his master and the young ladies to decide; his own opinion, in the meantime, being unhesitatingly, No. Further inquiries, on the part of all the female servants in succession, elicited no additional information of any sort. Thomas could hum none of the songs, and could describe none of the ladies' dresses. His audience, accordingly, gave him up in despair; and the kitchen small-talk flowed back into its ordinary channels, until the clock struck eight and startled the assembled servants into separating for their morning's work.

A quarter past eight, and nothing happened. Half-past—and more signs of life appeared from the bedroom regions. The next member of the family who came downstairs was Mr. Andrew Vanstone, the master of the house.

Tall, stout, and upright—with bright blue eyes, and healthy, florid complexion—his brown plush shooting-jacket carelessly buttoned awry; his vixenish little Scotch terrier barking unrebuked at his heels; one hand thrust into his waistcoat pocket, and the other smacking the banisters cheerfully as he came downstairs humming a tune—Mr. Vanstone showed his character on the surface of him freely to all men. An easy, hearty, handsome, good-humored gentleman, who walked on the sunny side of the way of life, and who asked nothing better than to meet all his fellow-passengers in this world on the sunny side, too. Estimating him by years, he had turned fifty. Judging him by lightness of heart, strength of constitution, and capacity for enjoyment, he was no older than most men who have only turned thirty.

“Thomas!” cried Mr. Vanstone, taking up his old felt hat and his thick walking stick from the hall table. “Breakfast, this morning, at ten. The young ladies are not likely to be down earlier after the concert last night.—By the by, how did you like the concert yourself, eh? You thought it was grand? Quite right; so it was. Nothing but crash-bang, varied now and then by bang-crash; all the women dressed within an inch of their lives; smothering heat, blazing gas, and no room for anybody—yes, yes, Thomas; grand’s the word for it, and comfortable isn’t.” With that expression of opinion, Mr. Vanstone whistled to his vixenish terrier; flourished his stick at the hall door in cheerful defiance of the rain; and set off through wind and weather for his morning walk.

The hands, stealing their steady way round the dial of the clock, pointed to ten minutes to nine. Another member of the family appeared on the stairs—Miss Garth, the governess.

No observant eyes could have surveyed Miss Garth without seeing at once that she was a north-countrywoman. Her hard featured face; her masculine readiness and decision of movement; her obstinate honesty of look and manner, all proclaimed her border birth and border training. Though little more than forty

years of age, her hair was quite gray; and she wore over it the plain cap of an old woman. Neither hair nor headdress was out of harmony with her face—it looked older than her years: the hard handwriting of trouble had scored it heavily at some past time. The self-possession of her progress downstairs, and the air of habitual authority with which she looked about her, spoke well for her position in Mr. Vanstone's family. This was evidently not one of the forlorn, persecuted, pitiably dependent order of governesses. Here was a woman who lived on ascertained and honorable terms with her employers—a woman who looked capable of sending any parents in England to the right-about, if they failed to rate her at her proper value.

"Breakfast at ten?" repeated Miss Garth, when the footman had answered the bell, and had mentioned his master's orders. "Ha! I thought what would come of that concert last night. When people who live in the country patronize public amusements, public amusements return the compliment by upsetting the family afterward for days together. *You're* upset, Thomas, I can see your eyes are as red as a ferret's, and your cravat looks as if you had slept in it. Bring the kettle at a quarter to ten—and if you don't get better in the course of the day, come to me, and I'll give you a dose of physic. That's a well-meaning lad, if you only let him alone," continued Miss Garth, in soliloquy, when Thomas had retired; "but he's not strong enough for concerts twenty miles off. They wanted *me* to go with them last night. Yes: catch me!"

Nine o'clock struck; and the minute-hand stole on to twenty minutes past the hour, before any more footsteps were heard on the stairs. At the end of that time, two ladies appeared, descending to the breakfast-room together—Mrs. Vanstone and her eldest daughter.

If the personal attractions of Mrs. Vanstone, at an earlier period of life, had depended solely on her native English charms of complexion and freshness, she must have long since lost the last relics of her fairer self. But her beauty as a young woman had passed beyond the average national limits; and she still preserved the advantage of her more exceptional personal gifts. Although she was now in her forty-fourth year; although she had been tried, in bygone times, by the premature loss of more than one of her

children, and by long attacks of illness which had followed those bereavements of former years—she still preserved the fair proportion and subtle delicacy of feature, once associated with the all-adorning brightness and freshness of beauty, which had left her never to return. Her eldest child, now descending the stairs by her side, was the mirror in which she could look back and see again the reflection of her own youth. There, folded thick on the daughter's head, lay the massive dark hair, which, on the mother's, was fast turning gray. There, in the daughter's cheek, glowed the lovely dusky red which had faded from the mother's to bloom again no more. Miss Vanstone had already reached the first maturity of womanhood; she had completed her six-and-twentieth year. Inheriting the dark majestic character of her mother's beauty, she had yet hardly inherited all its charms. Though the shape of her face was the same, the features were scarcely so delicate, their proportion was scarcely so true. She was not so tall. She had the dark-brown eyes of her mother—full and soft, with the steady luster in them which Mrs. Vanstone's eyes had lost—and yet there was less interest, less refinement and depth of feeling in her expression: it was gentle and feminine, but clouded by a certain quiet reserve, from which her mother's face was free. If we dare to look closely enough, may we not observe that the moral force of character and the higher intellectual capacities in parents seem often to wear out mysteriously in the course of transmission to children? In these days of insidious nervous exhaustion and subtly-spreading nervous malady, is it not possible that the same rule may apply, less rarely than we are willing to admit, to the bodily gifts as well?

The mother and daughter slowly descended the stairs together—the first dressed in dark brown, with an Indian shawl thrown over her shoulders; the second more simply attired in black, with a plain collar and cuffs, and a dark orange-colored ribbon over the bosom of her dress. As they crossed the hall and entered the breakfast-room, Miss Vanstone was full of the all-absorbing subject of the last night's concert.

"I am so sorry, mamma, you were not with us," she said. "You have been so strong and so well ever since last summer—you have felt so many years younger, as you said yourself—that I am sure the exertion would not have been too much for you."

"Perhaps not, my love—but it was as well to keep on the safe side."

"Quite as well," remarked Miss Garth, appearing at the breakfast-room door. "Look at Norah (good morning, my dear)—look, I say, at Norah. A perfect wreck; a living proof of your wisdom and mine in staying at home. The vile gas, the foul air, the late hours—what can you expect? She's not made of iron, and she suffers accordingly. No, my dear, you needn't deny it. I see you've got a headache."

Norah's dark, handsome face brightened into a smile—then lightly clouded again with its accustomed quiet reserve.

"A very little headache; not half enough to make me regret the concert," she said, and walked away by herself to the window.

On the far side of a garden and paddock the view overlooked a stream, some farm buildings which lay beyond, and the opening of a wooded, rocky pass (called, in Somersetshire, a "Combe"), which here cleft its way through the hills that closed the prospect. A winding strip of road was visible, at no great distance, amid the undulations of the open ground; and along this strip the stalwart figure of Mr. Vanstone was now easily recognizable, returning to the house from his morning walk. He flourished his stick gayly, as he observed his eldest daughter at the window. She nodded and waved her hand in return, very gracefully and prettily—but with something of old-fashioned formality in her manner, which looked strangely in so young a woman, and which seemed out of harmony with a salutation addressed to her father.

The hall-clock struck the adjourned breakfast-hour. When the minute hand had recorded the lapse of five minutes more a door banged in the bedroom regions—a clear young voice was heard singing blithely—light, rapid footsteps pattered on the upper stairs, descended with a jump to the landing, and pattered again, faster than ever, down the lower flight. In another moment the youngest of Mr. Vanstone's two daughters (and two only surviving children) dashed into view on the dingy old oaken stairs, with the suddenness of a flash of light; and clearing the last three steps into the hall at a jump, presented herself breathless in the breakfast-room to make the family circle complete.

By one of those strange caprices of Nature, which science leaves still unexplained, the youngest of Mr. Vanstone's children presented no recognizable resemblance to either of her parents. How had she come by her hair? how had she come by her eyes? Even her father and mother had asked themselves those questions, as she grew up to girlhood, and had been sorely perplexed to answer them. Her hair was of that purely light-brown hue, unmixed with flaxen, or yellow, or red—which is oftener seen on the plumage of a bird than on the head of a human being. It was soft and plentiful, and waved downward from her low forehead in regular folds—but, to some tastes, it was dull and dead, in its absolute want of glossiness, in its monotonous purity of plain light color. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were just a shade darker than her hair, and seemed made expressly for those violet-blue eyes, which assert their most irresistible charm when associated with a fair complexion. But it was here exactly that the promise of her face failed of performance in the most startling manner. The eyes, which should have been dark, were incomprehensibly and discordantly light; they were of that nearly colorless gray which, though little attractive in itself, possesses the rare compensating merit of interpreting the finest gradations of thought, the gentlest changes of feeling, the deepest trouble of passion, with a subtle transparency of expression which no darker eyes can rival. Thus quaintly self-contradictory in the upper part of her face, she was hardly less at variance with established ideas of harmony in the lower. Her lips had the true feminine delicacy of form, her cheeks the lovely roundness and smoothness of youth—but the mouth was too large and firm, the chin too square and massive for her sex and age. Her complexion partook of the pure monotony of tint which characterized her hair—it was of the same soft, warm, creamy fairness all over, without a tinge of color in the cheeks, except on occasions of unusual bodily exertion or sudden mental disturbance. The whole countenance—so remarkable in its strongly opposed characteristics—was rendered additionally striking by its extraordinary mobility. The large, electric, light-gray eyes were hardly ever in repose; all varieties of expression followed each other over the plastic, ever-changing face, with a

giddy rapidity which left sober analysis far behind in the race. The girl's exuberant vitality asserted itself all over her, from head to foot. Her figure—taller than her sister's, taller than the average of woman's height; instinct with such a seductive, serpentine suppleness, so lightly and playfully graceful, that its movements suggested, not unnaturally, the movements of a young cat—her figure was so perfectly developed already that no one who saw her could have supposed that she was only eighteen. She bloomed in the full physical maturity of twenty years or more—bloomed naturally and irresistibly, in right of her matchless health and strength. Here, in truth, lay the mainspring of this strangely-constituted organization. Her headlong course down the house stairs; the brisk activity of all her movements; the incessant sparkle of expression in her face; the enticing gayety which took the hearts of the quietest people by storm—even the reckless delight in bright colors which showed itself in her brilliantly-striped morning dress, in her fluttering ribbons, in the large scarlet rosettes on her smart little shoes—all sprang alike from the same source; from the overflowing physical health which strengthened every muscle, braced every nerve, and set the warm young blood tingling through her veins, like the blood of a growing child.

On her entry into the breakfast-room, she was saluted with the customary remonstrance which her flighty disregard of all punctuality habitually provoked from the long-suffering household authorities. In Miss Garth's favorite phrase, "Magdalen was born with all the senses—except a sense of order."

Magdalen! It was a strange name to have given her? Strange, indeed; and yet, chosen under no extraordinary circumstances. The name had been borne by one of Mr. Vanstone's sisters, who had died in early youth; and, in affectionate remembrance of her, he had called his second daughter by it—just as he had called his eldest daughter Norah, for his wife's sake. Magdalen! Surely, the grand old Bible name—suggestive of a sad and somber dignity; recalling, in its first association, mournful ideas of penitence and seclusion—had been here, as events had turned out, inappropriately bestowed? Surely, this self-contradictory girl had perversely accomplished one contradiction more, by developing

into a character which was out of all harmony with her own Christian name!

“Late again!” said Mrs. Vanstone, as Magdalen breathlessly kissed her.

“Late again!” chimed in Miss Garth, when Magdalen came her way next. “Well?” she went on, taking the girl’s chin familiarly in her hand, with a half-satirical, half-fond attention which betrayed that the youngest daughter, with all her faults, was the governess’s favorite—“Well? and what has the concert done for *you*? What form of suffering has dissipation inflicted on *your* system this morning?”

“Suffering!” repeated Magdalen, recovering her breath, and the use of her tongue with it. “I don’t know the meaning of the word: if there’s anything the matter with me, I’m too well. Suffering! I’m ready for another concert tonight, and a ball tomorrow, and a play the day after. Oh,” cried Magdalen, dropping into a chair and crossing her hands rapturously on the table, “how I do like pleasure!”

“Come! that’s explicit at any rate,” said Miss Garth. “I think Pope must have had you in his mind when he wrote his famous lines:

“ ‘Men some to business, some to pleasure take,

But every woman is at heart a rake.’ ”

“The deuce she is!” cried Mr. Vanstone, entering the room while Miss Garth was making her quotation, with the dogs at his heels. “Well; live and learn. If you’re all rakes, Miss Garth, the sexes are turned topsy-turvy with a vengeance; and the men will have nothing left for it but to stop at home and darn the stockings.—Let’s have some breakfast.”

“How-d’ye-do, papa?” said Magdalen, taking Mr. Vanstone as boisterously round the neck as if he belonged to some larger order of Newfoundland dog, and was made to be romped with at his daughter’s convenience. “I’m the rake Miss Garth means; and I want to go to another concert—or a play, if you like—or a ball, if

you prefer it—or anything else in the way of amusement that puts me into a new dress, and plunges me into a crowd of people, and illuminates me with plenty of light, and sets me in a tingle of excitement all over, from head to foot. Anything will do, as long as it doesn't send us to bed at eleven o'clock."

Mr. Vanstone sat down composedly under his daughter's flow of language, like a man who was well used to verbal inundation from that quarter. "If I am to be allowed my choice of amusements next time," said the worthy gentleman, "I think a play will suit me better than a concert. The girls enjoyed themselves amazingly, my dear," he continued, addressing his wife. "More than I did, I must say. It was altogether above my mark. They played one piece of music which lasted forty minutes. It stopped three times, by-the-way; and we all thought it was done each time, and clapped our hands, rejoiced to be rid of it. But on it went again, to our great surprise and mortification, till we gave it up in despair, and all wished ourselves at Jericho. Norah, my dear! when we had crash-bang for forty minutes, with three stoppages by-the-way, what did they call it?"

"A symphony, papa," replied Norah.

"Yes, you darling old Goth, a symphony by the great Beethoven!" added Magdalen. "How can you say you were not amused? Have you forgotten the yellow-looking foreign woman, with the unpronounceable name? Don't you remember the faces she made when she sang? and the way she courtesied and courtesied, till she cheated the foolish people into crying encore? Look here, mamma—look here, Miss Garth!"

She snatched up an empty plate from the table, to represent a sheet of music, held it before her in the established concert-room position, and produced an imitation of the unfortunate singer's grimaces and courtesying, so accurately and quaintly true to the original, that her father roared with laughter; and even the footman (who came in at that moment with the postbag) rushed out of the room again, and committed the indecorum of echoing his master audibly on the other side of the door.

"Letters, papa. I want the key," said Magdalen, passing from the imitation at the breakfast-table to the postbag on the sideboard with the easy abruptness which characterized all her actions.

Mr. Vanstone searched his pockets and shook his head. Though his youngest daughter might resemble him in nothing else, it was easy to see where Magdalen's unmethodical habits came from.

"I dare say I have left it in the library, along with my other keys," said Mr. Vanstone. "Go and look for it, my dear."

"You really should check Magdalen," pleaded Mrs. Vanstone, addressing her husband when her daughter had left the room. "Those habits of mimicry are growing on her; and she speaks to you with a levity which it is positively shocking to hear."

"Exactly what I have said myself, till I am tired of repeating it," remarked Miss Garth. "She treats Mr. Vanstone as if he was a kind of younger brother of hers."

"You are kind to us in everything else, papa; and you make kind allowances for Magdalen's high spirits—don't you?" said the quiet Norah, taking her father's part and her sister's with so little show of resolution on the surface that few observers would have been sharp enough to detect the genuine substance beneath it.

"Thank you, my dear," said good-natured Mr. Vanstone. "Thank you for a very pretty speech. As for Magdalen," he continued, addressing his wife and Miss Garth, "she's an unbroken filly. Let her caper and kick in the paddock to her heart's content. Time enough to break her to harness when she gets a little older."

The door opened, and Magdalen returned with the key. She unlocked the postbag at the sideboard and poured out the letters in a heap. Sorting them gayly in less than a minute, she approached the breakfast-table with both hands full, and delivered the letters all round with the businesslike rapidity of a London postman.

"Two for Norah," she announced, beginning with her sister. "Three for Miss Garth. None for mamma. One for me. And the other six all for papa. You lazy old darling, you hate answering letters, don't you?" pursued Magdalen, dropping the postman's

character and assuming the daughter's. "How you will grumble and fidget in the study! and how you will wish there were no such things as letters in the world! and how red your nice old bald head will get at the top with the worry of writing the answers; and how many of the answers you will leave until tomorrow after all! *The Bristol Theater's open, papa,*" she whispered, slyly and suddenly, in her father's ear; "I saw it in the newspaper when I went to the library to get the key. Let's go tomorrow night!"

While his daughter was chattering, Mr. Vanstone was mechanically sorting his letters. He turned over the first four in succession and looked carelessly at the addresses. When he came to the fifth his attention, which had hitherto wandered toward Magdalen, suddenly became fixed on the postmark of the letter.

Stooping over him, with her head on his shoulder, Magdalen could see the postmark as plainly as her father saw it—NEW ORLEANS.

"An American letter, papa!" she said. "Who do you know at New Orleans?"

Mrs. Vanstone started, and looked eagerly at her husband the moment Magdalen spoke those words.

Mr. Vanstone said nothing. He quietly removed his daughter's arm from his neck, as if he wished to be free from all interruption. She returned, accordingly, to her place at the breakfast-table. Her father, with the letter in his hand, waited a little before he opened it; her mother looking at him, the while, with an eager, expectant attention which attracted Miss Garth's notice, and Norah's, as well as Magdalen's.

After a minute or more of hesitation Mr. Vanstone opened the letter.

His face changed color the instant he read the first lines; his cheeks fading to a dull, yellow-brown hue, which would have been ashy paleness in a less florid man; and his expression becoming saddened and overclouded in a moment. Norah and Magdalen, watching anxiously, saw nothing but the change that passed over their father. Miss Garth alone observed the effect

which that change produced on the attentive mistress of the house.

It was not the effect which she, or anyone, could have anticipated. Mrs. Vanstone looked excited rather than alarmed. A faint flush rose on her cheeks—her eyes brightened—she stirred the tea round and round in her cup in a restless, impatient manner which was not natural to her.

Magdalen, in her capacity of spoiled child, was, as usual, the first to break the silence.

“What *is* the matter, papa?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Mr. Vanstone, sharply, without looking up at her.

“I’m sure there must be something,” persisted Magdalen. “I’m sure there is bad news, papa, in that American letter.”

“There is nothing in the letter that concerns *you*,” said Mr. Vanstone.

It was the first direct rebuff that Magdalen had ever received from her father. She looked at him with an incredulous surprise, which would have been irresistibly absurd under less serious circumstances.

Nothing more was said. For the first time, perhaps, in their lives, the family sat round the breakfast-table in painful silence. Mr. Vanstone’s hearty morning appetite, like his hearty morning spirits, was gone. He absently broke off some morsels of dry toast from the rack near him, absently finished his first cup of tea—then asked for a second, which he left before him untouched.

“Norah,” he said, after an interval, “you needn’t wait for me. Magdalen, my dear, you can go when you like.”

His daughters rose immediately; and Miss Garth considerably followed their example. When an easy-tempered man does assert himself in his family, the rarity of the demonstration invariably has its effect; and the will of that easy-tempered man is Law.

“What can have happened?” whispered Norah, as they closed the breakfast-room door and crossed the hall.

"What does papa mean by being cross with me?" exclaimed Magdalen, chafing under a sense of her own injuries.

"May I ask—what right you had to pry into your father's private affairs?" retorted Miss Garth.

"Right?" repeated Magdalen. "I have no secrets from papa—what business has papa to have secrets from me! I consider myself insulted."

"If you considered yourself properly reproved for not minding your own business," said the plainspoken Miss Garth, "you would be a trifle nearer the truth. Ah! you are like all the rest of the girls in the present day. Not one in a hundred of you knows which end of her's uppermost."

The three ladies entered the morning-room; and Magdalen acknowledged Miss Garth's reproof by banging the door.

Half an hour passed, and neither Mr. Vanstone nor his wife left the breakfast-room. The servant, ignorant of what had happened, went in to clear the table—found his master and mistress seated close together in deep consultation—and immediately went out again. Another quarter of an hour elapsed before the breakfast-room door was opened, and the private conference of the husband and wife came to an end.

"I hear mamma in the hall," said Norah. "Perhaps she is coming to tell us something."

Mrs. Vanstone entered the morning-room as her daughter spoke. The color was deeper on her cheeks, and the brightness of half-dried tears glistened in her eyes; her step was more hasty, all her movements were quicker than usual.

"I bring news, my dears, which will surprise you," she said, addressing her daughters. "Your father and I are going to London tomorrow."

Magdalen caught her mother by the arm in speechless astonishment. Miss Garth dropped her work on her lap; even the sedate Norah started to her feet, and amazedly repeated the words, "Going to London!"

"Without us?" added Magdalen.

"Your father and I are going alone," said Mrs. Vanstone. "Perhaps, for as long as three weeks—but not longer. We are going"—she hesitated—"we are going on important family business. Don't hold me, Magdalen. This is a sudden necessity—I have a great deal to do today—many things to set in order before tomorrow. There, there, my love, let me go."

She drew her arm away; hastily kissed her youngest daughter on the forehead; and at once left the room again. Even Magdalen saw that her mother was not to be coaxed into hearing or answering any more questions.

The morning wore on, and nothing was seen of Mr. Vanstone. With the reckless curiosity of her age and character, Magdalen, in defiance of Miss Garth's prohibition and her sister's remonstrances, determined to go to the study and look for her father there. When she tried the door, it was locked on the inside. She said, "It's only me, papa;" and waited for the answer. "I'm busy now, my dear," was the answer. "Don't disturb me."

Mrs. Vanstone was, in another way, equally inaccessible. She remained in her own room, with the female servants about her, immersed in endless preparations for the approaching departure. The servants, little used in that family to sudden resolutions and unexpected orders, were awkward and confused in obeying directions. They ran from room to room unnecessarily, and lost time and patience in jostling each other on the stairs. If a stranger had entered the house that day, he might have imagined that an unexpected disaster had happened in it, instead of an unexpected necessity for a journey to London. Nothing proceeded in its ordinary routine. Magdalen, who was accustomed to pass the morning at the piano, wandered restlessly about the staircases and passages, and in and out of doors when there were glimpses of fine weather. Norah, whose fondness for reading had passed into a family proverb, took up book after book from table and shelf, and laid them down again, in despair of fixing her attention. Even Miss Garth felt the all-pervading influence of the household disorganization, and sat alone by the morning-room fire, with her head shaking ominously, and her work laid aside.

"Family affairs?" thought Miss Garth, pondering over Mrs. Vanstone's vague explanatory words. "I have lived twelve years at

Combe-Raven; and these are the first family affairs which have got between the parents and the children, in all my experience. What does it mean? Change? I suppose I'm getting old. I don't like change."

II

At ten o'clock the next morning Norah and Magdalen stood alone in the hall at Combe-Raven watching the departure of the carriage which took their father and mother to the London train.

Up to the last moment, both the sisters had hoped for some explanation of that mysterious "family business" to which Mrs. Vanstone had so briefly alluded on the previous day. No such explanation had been offered. Even the agitation of the leave-taking, under circumstances entirely new in the home experience of the parents and children, had not shaken the resolute discretion of Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone. They had gone—with the warmest testimonies of affection, with farewell embraces fervently reiterated again and again—but without dropping one word, from first to last, of the nature of their errand.

As the grating sound of the carriage-wheels ceased suddenly at a turn in the road, the sisters looked one another in the face; each feeling, and each betraying in her own way, the dreary sense that she was openly excluded, for the first time, from the confidence of her parents. Norah's customary reserve strengthened into sullen silence—she sat down in one of the hall chairs and looked out frowningly through the open house door. Magdalen, as usual when her temper was ruffled, expressed her dissatisfaction in the plainest terms. "I don't care who knows it—I think we are both of us shamefully ill-used!" With those words, the young lady followed her sister's example by seating herself on a hall chair and looking aimlessly out through the open house door.

Almost at the same moment Miss Garth entered the hall from the morning-room. Her quick observation showed her the necessity for interfering to some practical purpose; and her ready good sense at once pointed the way.

"Look up, both of you, if you please, and listen to me," said Miss Garth. "If we are all three to be comfortable and happy

together, now we are alone, we must stick to our usual habits and go on in our regular way. There is the state of things in plain words. Accept the situation—as the French say. Here am I to set you the example. I have just ordered an excellent dinner at the customary hour. I am going to the medicine-chest next, to physic the kitchen-maid—an unwholesome girl, whose face-ache is all stomach. In the meantime, Norah, my dear, you will find your work and your books, as usual, in the library. Magdalen, suppose you leave off tying your handkerchief into knots and use your fingers on the keys of the piano instead? We'll lunch at one, and take the dogs out afterward. Be as brisk and cheerful both of you as I am. Come, rouse up directly. If I see those gloomy faces any longer, as sure as my name's Garth, I'll give your mother written warning and go back to my friends by the mixed train at twelve forty."

Concluding her address of expostulation in those terms, Miss Garth led Norah to the library door, pushed Magdalen into the morning-room, and went on her own way sternly to the regions of the medicine-chest.

In this half-jesting, half-earnest manner she was accustomed to maintain a sort of friendly authority over Mr. Vanstone's daughters, after her proper functions as governess had necessarily come to an end. Norah, it is needless to say, had long since ceased to be her pupil; and Magdalen had, by this time, completed her education. But Miss Garth had lived too long and too intimately under Mr. Vanstone's roof to be parted with for any purely formal considerations; and the first hint at going away which she had thought it her duty to drop was dismissed with such affectionate warmth of protest that she never repeated it again, except in jest. The entire management of the household was, from that time forth, left in her hands; and to those duties she was free to add what companionable assistance she could render to Norah's reading, and what friendly superintendence she could still exercise over Magdalen's music. Such were the terms on which Miss Garth was now a resident in Mr. Vanstone's family.

Toward the afternoon the weather improved. At half-past one the sun was shining brightly; and the ladies left the house, accompanied by the dogs, to set forth on their walk.

They crossed the stream, and ascended by the little rocky pass to the hills beyond; then diverged to the left, and returned by a crossroad which led through the village of Combe-Raven.

As they came in sight of the first cottages, they passed a man, hanging about the road, who looked attentively, first at Magdalen, then at Norah. They merely observed that he was short, that he was dressed in black, and that he was a total stranger to them—and continued their homeward walk, without thinking more about the loitering foot-passenger whom they had met on their way back.

After they had left the village, and had entered the road which led straight to the house, Magdalen surprised Miss Garth by announcing that the stranger in black had turned, after they had passed him, and was now following them. "He keeps on Norah's side of the road," she said, mischievously. "I'm not the attraction—don't blame *me*."

Whether the man was really following them, or not, made little difference, for they were now close to the house. As they passed through the lodge-gates, Miss Garth looked round, and saw that the stranger was quickening his pace, apparently with the purpose of entering into conversation. Seeing this, she at once directed the young ladies to go on to the house with the dogs, while she herself waited for events at the gate.

There was just time to complete this discreet arrangement, before the stranger reached the lodge. He took off his hat to Miss Garth politely, as she turned round. What did he look like, on the face of him? He looked like a clergyman in difficulties.

Taking his portrait, from top to toe, the picture of him began with a tall hat, broadly encircled by a mourning band of crumpled crape. Below the hat was a lean, long, sallow face, deeply pitted with the smallpox, and characterized, very remarkably, by eyes of two different colors—one bilious green, one bilious brown, both sharply intelligent. His hair was iron-gray, carefully brushed round at the temples. His cheeks and chin were in the bluest bloom of smooth shaving; his nose was short Roman; his lips long, thin, and supple, curled up at the corners with a mildly-humorous smile. His white cravat was high, stiff, and dingy; the

collar, higher, stiffer, and dingier, projected its rigid points on either side beyond his chin. Lower down, the lithe little figure of the man was arrayed throughout in sober-shabby black. His frock-coat was buttoned tight round the waist, and left to bulge open majestically at the chest. His hands were covered with black cotton gloves neatly darned at the fingers; his umbrella, worn down at the ferule to the last quarter of an inch, was carefully preserved, nevertheless, in an oilskin case. The front view of him was the view in which he looked oldest; meeting him face to face, he might have been estimated at fifty or more. Walking behind him, his back and shoulders were almost young enough to have passed for five-and-thirty. His manners were distinguished by a grave serenity. When he opened his lips, he spoke in a rich bass voice, with an easy flow of language, and a strict attention to the elocutionary claims of words in more than one syllable. Persuasion distilled from his mildly-curling lips; and, shabby as he was, perennial flowers of courtesy bloomed all over him from head to foot.

“This is the residence of Mr. Vanstone, I believe?” he began, with a circular wave of his hand in the direction of the house. “Have I the honor of addressing a member of Mr. Vanstone’s family?”

“Yes,” said the plainspoken Miss Garth. “You are addressing Mr. Vanstone’s governess.”

The persuasive man fell back a step—admired Mr. Vanstone’s governess—advanced a step again—and continued the conversation.

“And the two young ladies,” he went on, “the two young ladies who were walking with you are doubtless Mr. Vanstone’s daughters? I recognized the darker of the two, and the elder as I apprehend, by her likeness to her handsome mother. The younger lady—”

“You are acquainted with Mrs. Vanstone, I suppose?” said Miss Garth, interrupting the stranger’s flow of language, which, all things considered, was beginning, in her opinion, to flow rather freely. The stranger acknowledged the interruption by one

of his polite bows, and submerged Miss Garth in his next sentence as if nothing had happened.

"The younger lady," he proceeded, "takes after her father, I presume? I assure you, her face struck me. Looking at it with my friendly interest in the family, I thought it very remarkable. I said to myself—Charming, Characteristic, Memorable. Not like her sister, not like her mother. No doubt, the image of her father?"

Once more Miss Garth attempted to stem the man's flow of words. It was plain that he did not know Mr. Vanstone, even by sight—otherwise he would never have committed the error of supposing that Magdalen took after her father. Did he know Mrs. Vanstone any better? He had left Miss Garth's question on that point unanswered. In the name of wonder, who was he? Powers of impudence! what did he want?

"You may be a friend of the family, though I don't remember your face," said Miss Garth. "What may your commands be, if you please? Did you come here to pay Mrs. Vanstone a visit?"

"I had anticipated the pleasure of communicating with Mrs. Vanstone," answered this inveterately evasive and inveterately civil man. "How is she?"

"Much as usual," said Miss Garth, feeling her resources of politeness fast failing her.

"Is she at home?"

"No."

"Out for long?"

"Gone to London with Mr. Vanstone."

The man's long face suddenly grew longer. His bilious brown eye looked disconcerted, and his bilious green eye followed its example. His manner became palpably anxious; and his choice of words was more carefully selected than ever.

"Is Mrs. Vanstone's absence likely to extend over any very lengthened period?" he inquired.

"It will extend over three weeks," replied Miss Garth. "I think you have now asked me questions enough," she went on,

beginning to let her temper get the better of her at last. "Be so good, if you please, as to mention your business and your name. If you have any message to leave for Mrs. Vanstone, I shall be writing to her by tonight's post, and I can take charge of it."

"A thousand thanks! A most valuable suggestion. Permit me to take advantage of it immediately."

He was not in the least affected by the severity of Miss Garth's looks and language—he was simply relieved by her proposal, and he showed it with the most engaging sincerity. This time his bilious green eye took the initiative, and set his bilious brown eye the example of recovered serenity. His curling lips took a new twist upward; he tucked his umbrella briskly under his arm; and produced from the breast of his coat a large old-fashioned black pocketbook. From this he took a pencil and a card—hesitated and considered for a moment—wrote rapidly on the card—and placed it, with the politest alacrity, in Miss Garth's hand.

"I shall feel personally obliged if you will honor me by enclosing that card in your letter," he said. "There is no necessity for my troubling you additionally with a message. My name will be quite sufficient to recall a little family matter to Mrs. Vanstone, which has no doubt escaped her memory. Accept my best thanks. This has been a day of agreeable surprises to me. I have found the country hereabouts remarkably pretty; I have seen Mrs. Vanstone's two charming daughters; I have become acquainted with an honored preceptress in Mr. Vanstone's family. I congratulate myself—I apologize for occupying your valuable time—I beg my renewed acknowledgments—I wish you good morning."

He raised his tall hat. His brown eye twinkled, his green eye twinkled, his curly lips smiled sweetly. In a moment he turned on his heel. His youthful back appeared to the best advantage; his active little legs took him away trippingly in the direction of the village. One, two, three—and he reached the turn in the road. Four, five, six—and he was gone.

Miss Garth looked down at the card in her hand, and looked up again in blank astonishment. The name and address of the clerical-looking stranger (both written in pencil) ran as follows:

Captain Wragge. Post-office, Bristol.

III

When she returned to the house, Miss Garth made no attempt to conceal her unfavorable opinion of the stranger in black. His object was, no doubt, to obtain pecuniary assistance from Mrs. Vanstone. What the nature of his claim on her might be seemed less intelligible—unless it was the claim of a poor relation. Had Mrs. Vanstone ever mentioned, in the presence of her daughters, the name of Captain Wragge? Neither of them recollected to have heard it before. Had Mrs. Vanstone ever referred to any poor relations who were dependent on her? On the contrary, she had mentioned of late years that she doubted having any relations at all who were still living. And yet Captain Wragge had plainly declared that the name on his card would recall “a family matter” to Mrs. Vanstone’s memory. What did it mean? A false statement, on the stranger’s part, without any intelligible reason for making it? Or a second mystery, following close on the heels of the mysterious journey to London?

All the probabilities seemed to point to some hidden connection between the “family affairs” which had taken Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone so suddenly from home and the “family matter” associated with the name of Captain Wragge. Miss Garth’s doubts thronged back irresistibly on her mind as she sealed her letter to Mrs. Vanstone, with the captain’s card added by way of enclosure.

By return of post the answer arrived.

Always the earliest riser among the ladies of the house, Miss Garth was alone in the breakfast-room when the letter was brought in. Her first glance at its contents convinced her of the necessity of reading it carefully through in retirement, before any embarrassing questions could be put to her. Leaving a message with the servant requesting Norah to make the tea that morning, she went upstairs at once to the solitude and security of her own room.

Mrs. Vanstone's letter extended to some length. The first part of it referred to Captain Wragge, and entered unreservedly into all necessary explanations relating to the man himself and to the motive which had brought him to Combe-Raven.

It appeared from Mrs. Vanstone's statement that her mother had been twice married. Her mother's first husband had been a certain Doctor Wragge—a widower with young children; and one of those children was now the unmilitary-looking captain, whose address was "Post-office, Bristol." Mrs. Wragge had left no family by her first husband; and had afterward married Mrs. Vanstone's father. Of that second marriage Mrs. Vanstone herself was the only issue. She had lost both her parents while she was still a young woman; and, in course of years, her mother's family connections (who were then her nearest surviving relatives) had been one after another removed by death. She was left, at the present writing, without a relation in the world—excepting, perhaps, certain cousins whom she had never seen, and of whose existence even, at the present moment, she possessed no positive knowledge.

Under these circumstances, what family claim had Captain Wragge on Mrs. Vanstone?

None whatever. As the son of her mother's first husband, by that husband's first wife, not even the widest stretch of courtesy could have included him at any time in the list of Mrs. Vanstone's most distant relations. Well knowing this (the letter proceeded to say), he had nevertheless persisted in forcing himself upon her as a species of family connection: and she had weakly sanctioned the intrusion, solely from the dread that he would otherwise introduce himself to Mr. Vanstone's notice, and take unblushing advantage of Mr. Vanstone's generosity. Shrinking, naturally, from allowing her husband to be annoyed, and probably cheated as well, by any person who claimed, however preposterously, a family connection with herself, it had been her practice, for many years past, to assist the captain from her own purse, on the condition that he should never come near the house, and that he should not presume to make any application whatever to Mr. Vanstone.

Readily admitting the imprudence of this course, Mrs. Vanstone further explained that she had perhaps been the more

inclined to adopt it through having been always accustomed, in her early days, to see the captain living now upon one member, and now upon another, of her mother's family. Possessed of abilities which might have raised him to distinction in almost any career that he could have chosen, he had nevertheless, from his youth upward, been a disgrace to all his relatives. He had been expelled the militia regiment in which he once held a commission. He had tried one employment after another, and had discredibly failed in all. He had lived on his wits, in the lowest and basest meaning of the phrase. He had married a poor ignorant woman, who had served as a waitress at some low eating-house, who had unexpectedly come into a little money, and whose small inheritance he had mercilessly squandered to the last farthing. In plain terms, he was an incorrigible scoundrel; and he had now added one more to the list of his many misdemeanors by impudently breaking the conditions on which Mrs. Vanstone had hitherto assisted him. She had written at once to the address indicated on his card, in such terms and to such purpose as would prevent him, she hoped and believed, from ever venturing near the house again. Such were the terms in which Mrs. Vanstone concluded that first part of her letter which referred exclusively to Captain Wragge.

Although the statement thus presented implied a weakness in Mrs. Vanstone's character which Miss Garth, after many years of intimate experience, had never detected, she accepted the explanation as a matter of course; receiving it all the more readily inasmuch as it might, without impropriety, be communicated in substance to appease the irritated curiosity of the two young ladies. For this reason especially she perused the first half of the letter with an agreeable sense of relief. Far different was the impression produced on her when she advanced to the second half, and when she had read it to the end.

The second part of the letter was devoted to the subject of the journey to London.

Mrs. Vanstone began by referring to the long and intimate friendship which had existed between Miss Garth and herself. She now felt it due to that friendship to explain confidentially the motive which had induced her to leave home with her husband.

Miss Garth had delicately refrained from showing it, but she must naturally have felt, and must still be feeling, great surprise at the mystery in which their departure had been involved; and she must doubtless have asked herself why Mrs. Vanstone should have been associated with family affairs which (in her independent position as to relatives) must necessarily concern Mr. Vanstone alone.

Without touching on those affairs, which it was neither desirable nor necessary to do, Mrs. Vanstone then proceeded to say that she would at once set all Miss Garth's doubts at rest, so far as they related to herself, by one plain acknowledgment. Her object in accompanying her husband to London was to see a certain celebrated physician, and to consult him privately on a very delicate and anxious matter connected with the state of her health. In plainer terms still, this anxious matter meant nothing less than the possibility that she might again become a mother.

When the doubt had first suggested itself she had treated it as a mere delusion. The long interval that had elapsed since the birth of her last child; the serious illness which had afflicted her after the death of that child in infancy; the time of life at which she had now arrived—all inclined her to dismiss the idea as soon as it arose in her mind. It had returned again and again in spite of her. She had felt the necessity of consulting the highest medical authority; and had shrunk, at the same time, from alarming her daughters by summoning a London physician to the house. The medical opinion, sought under the circumstances already mentioned, had now been obtained. Her doubt was confirmed as a certainty; and the result, which might be expected to take place toward the end of the summer, was, at her age and with her constitutional peculiarities, a subject for serious future anxiety, to say the least of it. The physician had done his best to encourage her; but she had understood the drift of his questions more clearly than he supposed, and she knew that he looked to the future with more than ordinary doubt.

Having disclosed these particulars, Mrs. Vanstone requested that they might be kept a secret between her correspondent and herself. She had felt unwilling to mention her suspicions to Miss Garth, until those suspicions had been confirmed—and she now recoiled, with even greater reluctance, from allowing her

daughters to be in any way alarmed about her. It would be best to dismiss the subject for the present, and to wait hopefully till the summer came. In the meantime they would all, she trusted, be happily reunited on the twenty-third of the month, which Mr. Vanstone had fixed on as the day for their return. With this intimation, and with the customary messages, the letter, abruptly and confusedly, came to an end.

For the first few minutes, a natural sympathy for Mrs. Vanstone was the only feeling of which Miss Garth was conscious after she had laid the letter down. Ere long, however, there rose obscurely on her mind a doubt which perplexed and distressed her. Was the explanation which she had just read really as satisfactory and as complete as it professed to be? Testing it plainly by facts, surely not.

On the morning of her departure, Mrs. Vanstone had unquestionably left the house in good spirits. At her age, and in her state of health, were good spirits compatible with such an errand to a physician as the errand on which she was bent? Then, again, had that letter from New Orleans, which had necessitated Mr. Vanstone's departure, no share in occasioning his wife's departure as well? Why, otherwise, had she looked up so eagerly the moment her daughter mentioned the postmark. Granting the avowed motive for her journey—did not her manner, on the morning when the letter was opened, and again on the morning of departure, suggest the existence of some other motive which her letter kept concealed?

If it was so, the conclusion that followed was a very distressing one. Mrs. Vanstone, feeling what was due to her long friendship with Miss Garth, had apparently placed the fullest confidence in her, on one subject, by way of unsuspectingly maintaining the strictest reserve toward her on another. Naturally frank and straightforward in all her own dealings, Miss Garth shrank from plainly pursuing her doubts to this result: a want of loyalty toward her tried and valued friend seemed implied in the mere dawning of it on her mind.

She locked up the letter in her desk; roused herself resolutely to attend to the passing interests of the day; and went downstairs again to the breakfast-room. Amid many uncertainties, this at least was clear, Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone were coming back on the twenty-third of the month. Who could say what new revelations might not come back with them?

IV

No new revelations came back with them: no anticipations associated with their return were realized. On the one forbidden subject of their errand in London, there was no moving either the master or the mistress of the house. Whatever their object might have been, they had to all appearance successfully accomplished it—for they both returned in perfect possession of their everyday looks and manners. Mrs. Vanstone's spirits had subsided to their natural quiet level; Mr. Vanstone's imperturbable cheerfulness sat as easily and indolently on him as usual. This was the one noticeable result of their journey—this, and no more. Had the household revolution run its course already? Was the secret thus far hidden impenetrably, hidden forever?

Nothing in this world is hidden forever. The gold which has lain for centuries unsuspected in the ground, reveals itself one day on the surface. Sand turns traitor, and betrays the footstep that has passed over it; water gives back to the telltale surface the body that has been drowned. Fire itself leaves the confession, in ashes, of the substance consumed in it. Hate breaks its prison-secrecy in the thoughts, through the doorway of the eyes; and Love finds the Judas who betrays it by a kiss. Look where we will, the inevitable law of revelation is one of the laws of nature: the lasting preservation of a secret is a miracle which the world has never yet seen.

How was the secret now hidden in the household at Combe-Raven doomed to disclose itself? Through what coming event in the daily lives of the father, the mother, and the daughters, was the law of revelation destined to break the fatal way to discovery? The way opened (unseen by the parents, and unsuspected by the children) through the first event that happened after Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone's return—an event which presented, on the surface of it, no interest of greater importance than the trivial social ceremony of a morning call.

Three days after the master and mistress of Combe-Raven had come back, the female members of the family happened to be assembled together in the morning-room. The view from the windows looked over the flower-garden and shrubbery; this last being protected at its outward extremity by a fence, and approached from the lane beyond by a wicket-gate. During an interval in the conversation, the attention of the ladies was suddenly attracted to this gate, by the sharp sound of the iron latch falling in its socket. Someone had entered the shrubbery from the lane; and Magdalen at once placed herself at the window to catch the first sight of the visitor through the trees.

After a few minutes, the figure of a gentleman became visible, at the point where the shrubbery path joined the winding garden-walk which led to the house. Magdalen looked at him attentively, without appearing, at first, to know who he was. As he came nearer, however, she started in astonishment; and, turning quickly to her mother and sister, proclaimed the gentleman in the garden to be no other than "Mr. Francis Clare."

The visitor thus announced was the son of Mr. Vanstone's oldest associate and nearest neighbor.

Mr. Clare the elder inhabited an unpretending little cottage, situated just outside the shrubbery fence which marked the limit of the Combe-Raven grounds. Belonging to the younger branch of a family of great antiquity, the one inheritance of importance that he had derived from his ancestors was the possession of a magnificent library, which not only filled all the rooms in his modest little dwelling, but lined the staircases and passages as well. Mr. Clare's books represented the one important interest of Mr. Clare's life. He had been a widower for many years past, and made no secret of his philosophical resignation to the loss of his wife. As a father, he regarded his family of three sons in the light of a necessary domestic evil, which perpetually threatened the sanctity of his study and the safety of his books. When the boys went to school, Mr. Clare said "goodbye" to them—and "thank God" to himself. As for his small income, and his still smaller domestic establishment, he looked at them both from the same

satirically indifferent point of view. He called himself a pauper with a pedigree. He abandoned the entire direction of his household to the slatternly old woman who was his only servant, on the condition that she was never to venture near his books, with a duster in her hand, from one year's end to the other. His favorite poets were Horace and Pope; his chosen philosophers, Hobbes and Voltaire. He took his exercise and his fresh air under protest; and always walked the same distance to a yard, on the ugliest high road in the neighborhood. He was crooked of back, and quick of temper. He could digest radishes, and sleep after green tea. His views of human nature were the views of Diogenes, tempered by Rochefoucauld; his personal habits were slovenly in the last degree; and his favorite boast was that he had outlived all human prejudices.

Such was this singular man, in his more superficial aspects. What nobler qualities he might possess below the surface, no one had ever discovered. Mr. Vanstone, it is true, stoutly asserted that "Mr. Clare's worst side was his outside"—but in this expression of opinion he stood alone among his neighbors. The association between these two widely-dissimilar men had lasted for many years, and was almost close enough to be called a friendship. They had acquired a habit of meeting to smoke together on certain evenings in the week, in the cynic-philosopher's study, and of there disputing on every imaginable subject—Mr. Vanstone flourishing the stout cudgels of assertion, and Mr. Clare meeting him with the keen edged-tools of sophistry. They generally quarreled at night, and met on the neutral ground of the shrubbery to be reconciled together the next morning. The bond of intercourse thus curiously established between them was strengthened on Mr. Vanstone's side by a hearty interest in his neighbor's three sons—an interest by which those sons benefited all the more importantly, seeing that one of the prejudices which their father had outlived was a prejudice in favor of his own children.

"I look at those boys," the philosopher was accustomed to say, "with a perfectly impartial eye; I dismiss the unimportant accident of their birth from all consideration; and I find them below the average in every respect. The only excuse which a poor gentleman has for presuming to exist in the nineteenth century, is the excuse

of extraordinary ability. My boys have been addle-headed from infancy. If I had any capital to give them, I should make Frank a butcher, Cecil a baker, and Arthur a grocer—those being the only human vocations I know of which are certain to be always in request. As it is, I have no money to help them with; and they have no brains to help themselves. They appear to me to be three human superfluities in dirty jackets and noisy boots; and, unless they clear themselves off the community by running away, I don't myself profess to see what is to be done with them."

Fortunately for the boys, Mr. Vanstone's views were still fast imprisoned in the ordinary prejudices. At his intercession, and through his influence, Frank, Cecil, and Arthur were received on the foundation of a well-reputed grammar-school. In holiday-time they were mercifully allowed the run of Mr. Vanstone's paddock; and were humanized and refined by association, indoors, with Mrs. Vanstone and her daughters. On these occasions, Mr. Clare used sometimes to walk across from his cottage (in his dressing-gown and slippers), and look at the boys disparagingly, through the window or over the fence, as if they were three wild animals whom his neighbor was attempting to tame. "You and your wife are excellent people," he used to say to Mr. Vanstone. "I respect your honest prejudices in favor of those boys of mine with all my heart. But you are *so* wrong about them—you are indeed! I wish to give no offense; I speak quite impartially—but mark my words, Vanstone: they'll all three turn out ill, in spite of everything you can do to prevent it."

In later years, when Frank had reached the age of seventeen, the same curious shifting of the relative positions of parent and friend between the two neighbors was exemplified more absurdly than ever. A civil engineer in the north of England, who owed certain obligations to Mr. Vanstone, expressed his willingness to take Frank under superintendence, on terms of the most favorable kind. When this proposal was received, Mr. Clare, as usual, first shifted his own character as Frank's father on Mr. Vanstone's shoulders—and then moderated his neighbor's parental enthusiasm from the point of view of an impartial spectator.

"It's the finest chance for Frank that could possibly have happened," cried Mr. Vanstone, in a glow of fatherly enthusiasm.

"My good fellow, he won't take it," retorted Mr. Clare, with the icy composure of a disinterested friend.

"But he *shall* take it," persisted Mr. Vanstone.

"Say he shall have a mathematical head," rejoined Mr. Clare; "say he shall possess industry, ambition, and firmness of purpose. Pooh! pooh! you don't look at him with my impartial eyes. I say, No mathematics, no industry, no ambition, no firmness of purpose. Frank is a compound of negatives—and there they are."

"Hang your negatives!" shouted Mr. Vanstone. "I don't care a rush for negatives, or affirmatives either. Frank shall have this splendid chance; and I'll lay you any wager you like he makes the best of it."

"I am not rich enough to lay wagers, usually," replied Mr. Clare; "but I think I have got a guinea about the house somewhere; and I'll lay you that guinea Frank comes back on our hands like a bad shilling."

"Done!" said Mr. Vanstone. "No: stop a minute! I won't do the lad's character the injustice of backing it at even money. I'll lay you five to one Frank turns up trumps in this business! You ought to be ashamed of yourself for talking of him as you do. What sort of hocus-pocus you bring it about by, I don't pretend to know; but you always end in making me take his part, as if I was his father instead of you. Ah yes! give you time, and you'll defend yourself. I won't give you time; I won't have any of your special pleading. Black's white according to you. I don't care: it's black for all that. You may talk nineteen to the dozen—I shall write to my friend and say yes, in Frank's interests, by today's post."

Such were the circumstances under which Mr. Francis Clare departed for the north of England, at the age of seventeen, to start in life as a civil engineer.

From time to time, Mr. Vanstone's friend communicated with him on the subject of the new pupil. Frank was praised, as a quiet, gentleman-like, interesting lad—but he was also reported to be rather slow at acquiring the rudiments of engineering science. Other letters, later in date, described him as a little too ready to despond about himself; as having been sent away, on that

account, to some new railway works, to see if change of scene would rouse him; and as having benefited in every respect by the experiment—except perhaps in regard to his professional studies, which still advanced but slowly. Subsequent communications announced his departure, under care of a trustworthy foreman, for some public works in Belgium; touched on the general benefit he appeared to derive from this new change; praised his excellent manners and address, which were of great assistance in facilitating business communications with the foreigners—and passed over in ominous silence the main question of his actual progress in the acquirement of knowledge. These reports, and many others which resembled them, were all conscientiously presented by Frank's friend to the attention of Frank's father. On each occasion, Mr. Clare exulted over Mr. Vanstone, and Mr. Vanstone quarreled with Mr. Clare. "One of these days you'll wish you hadn't laid that wager," said the cynic philosopher. "One of these days I shall have the blessed satisfaction of pocketing your guinea," cried the sanguine friend. Two years had then passed since Frank's departure. In one year more results asserted themselves, and settled the question.

Two days after Mr. Vanstone's return from London, he was called away from the breakfast-table before he had found time enough to look over his letters, delivered by the morning's post. Thrusting them into one of the pockets of his shooting-jacket, he took the letters out again, at one grasp, to read them when occasion served, later in the day. The grasp included the whole correspondence, with one exception—that exception being a final report from the civil engineer, which notified the termination of the connection between his pupil and himself, and the immediate return of Frank to his father's house.

While this important announcement lay unsuspected in Mr. Vanstone's pocket, the object of it was traveling home, as fast as railways could take him. At half-past ten at night, while Mr. Clare was sitting in studious solitude over his books and his green tea, with his favorite black cat to keep him company, he heard footsteps in the passage—the door opened—and Frank stood before him.

Ordinary men would have been astonished. But the philosopher's composure was not to be shaken by any such trifle as the unexpected return of his eldest son. He could not have looked up more calmly from his learned volume if Frank had been absent for three minutes instead of three years.

"Exactly what I predicted," said Mr. Clare. "Don't interrupt me by making explanations; and don't frighten the cat. If there is anything to eat in the kitchen, get it and go to bed. You can walk over to Combe-Raven tomorrow and give this message from me to Mr. Vanstone: 'Father's compliments, sir, and I have come back upon your hands like a bad shilling, as he always said I should. He keeps his own guinea, and takes your five; and he hopes you'll mind what he says to you another time.' That is the message. Shut the door after you. Good night."

Under these unfavorable auspices, Mr. Francis Clare made his appearance the next morning in the grounds at Combe-Raven; and, something doubtful of the reception that might await him, slowly approached the precincts of the house.

It was not wonderful that Magdalen should have failed to recognize him when he first appeared in view. He had gone away a backward lad of seventeen; he returned a young man of twenty. His slim figure had now acquired strength and grace, and had increased in stature to the medium height. The small regular features, which he was supposed to have inherited from his mother, were rounded and filled out, without having lost their remarkable delicacy of form. His beard was still in its infancy; and nascent lines of whisker traced their modest way sparsely down his cheeks. His gentle, wandering brown eyes would have looked to better advantage in a woman's face—they wanted spirit and firmness to fit them for the face of a man. His hands had the same wandering habit as his eyes; they were constantly changing from one position to another, constantly twisting and turning any little stray thing they could pick up. He was undeniably handsome, graceful, well-bred—but no close observer could look at him without suspecting that the stout old family stock had begun to wear out in the later generations, and that Mr. Francis Clare had more in him of the shadow of his ancestors than of the substance.

When the astonishment caused by his appearance had partially subsided, a search was instituted for the missing report. It was found in the remotest recesses of Mr. Vanstone's capacious pocket, and was read by that gentleman on the spot.

The plain facts, as stated by the engineer, were briefly these: Frank was not possessed of the necessary abilities to fit him for his new calling; and it was useless to waste time by keeping him any longer in an employment for which he had no vocation. This, after three years' trial, being the conviction on both sides, the master had thought it the most straightforward course for the pupil to go home and candidly place results before his father and his friends. In some other pursuit, for which he was more fit, and in which he could feel an interest, he would no doubt display the industry and perseverance which he had been too much discouraged to practice in the profession that he had now abandoned. Personally, he was liked by all who knew him; and his future prosperity was heartily desired by the many friends whom he had made in the North. Such was the substance of the report, and so it came to an end.

Many men would have thought the engineer's statement rather too carefully worded; and, suspecting him of trying to make the best of a bad case, would have entertained serious doubts on the subject of Frank's future. Mr. Vanstone was too easy-tempered and sanguine—and too anxious, as well, not to yield his old antagonist an inch more ground than he could help—to look at the letter from any such unfavorable point of view. Was it Frank's fault if he had not got the stuff in him that engineers were made of? Did no other young men ever begin life with a false start? Plenty began in that way, and got over it, and did wonders afterward. With these commentaries on the letter, the kindhearted gentleman patted Frank on the shoulder. "Cheer up, my lad!" said Mr. Vanstone. "We will be even with your father one of these days, though he *has* won the wager this time!"

The example thus set by the master of the house was followed at once by the family—with the solitary exception of Norah, whose incurable formality and reserve expressed themselves, not too graciously, in her distant manner toward the visitor. The rest, led by Magdalen (who had been Frank's favorite playfellow in

past times) glided back into their old easy habits with him without an effort. He was "Frank" with all of them but Norah, who persisted in addressing him as "Mr. Clare." Even the account he was now encouraged to give of the reception accorded to him by his father, on the previous night, failed to disturb Norah's gravity. She sat with her dark, handsome face steadily averted, her eyes cast down, and the rich color in her cheeks warmer and deeper than usual. All the rest, Miss Garth included, found old Mr. Clare's speech of welcome to his son quite irresistible. The noise and merriment were at their height when the servant came in, and struck the whole party dumb by the announcement of visitors in the drawing-room. "Mr. Marrable, Mrs. Marrable, and Miss Marrable; Evergreen Lodge, Clifton."

Norah rose as readily as if the new arrivals had been a relief to her mind. Mrs. Vanstone was the next to leave her chair. These two went away first, to receive the visitors. Magdalen, who preferred the society of her father and Frank, pleaded hard to be left behind; but Miss Garth, after granting five minutes' grace, took her into custody and marched her out of the room. Frank rose to take his leave.

"No, no," said Mr. Vanstone, detaining him. "Don't go. These people won't stop long. Mr. Marrable's a merchant at Bristol. I've met him once or twice, when the girls forced me to take them to parties at Clifton. Mere acquaintances, nothing more. Come and smoke a cigar in the greenhouse. Hang all visitors—they worry one's life out. I'll appear at the last moment with an apology; and you shall follow me at a safe distance, and be a proof that I was really engaged."

Proposing this ingenious stratagem in a confidential whisper, Mr. Vanstone took Frank's arm and led him round the house by the back way. The first ten minutes of seclusion in the conservatory passed without events of any kind. At the end of that time, a flying figure in bright garments flashed upon the two gentlemen through the glass—the door was flung open—flowerpots fell in homage to passing petticoats—and Mr. Vanstone's youngest daughter ran up to him at headlong speed, with every external appearance of having suddenly taken leave of her senses.

"Papa! the dream of my whole life is realized," she said, as soon as she could speak. "I shall fly through the roof of the greenhouse if somebody doesn't hold me down. The Marrables have come here with an invitation. Guess, you darling—guess what they're going to give at Evergreen Lodge!"

"A ball!" said Mr. Vanstone, without a moment's hesitation.

"Private Theatricals!!!" cried Magdalen, her clear young voice ringing through the conservatory like a bell; her loose sleeves falling back and showing her round white arms to the dimpled elbows, as she clapped her hands ecstatically in the air. "*The Rivals* is the play, papa—*The Rivals*, by the famous what's-his-name—and they want *me* to act! The one thing in the whole universe that I long to do most. It all depends on you. Mamma shakes her head; and Miss Garth looks daggers; and Norah's as sulky as usual—but if you say yes, they must all three give way and let me do as I like. Say yes," she pleaded, nestling softly up to her father, and pressing her lips with a fond gentleness to his ear, as she whispered the next words. "Say yes, and I'll be a good girl for the rest of my life."

"A good girl?" repeated Mr. Vanstone—"a mad girl, I think you must mean. Hang these people and their theatricals! I shall have to go indoors and see about this matter. You needn't throw away your cigar, Frank. You're well out of the business, and you can stop here."

"No, he can't," said Magdalen. "He's in the business, too."

Mr. Francis Clare had hitherto remained modestly in the background. He now came forward with a face expressive of speechless amazement.

"Yes," continued Magdalen, answering his blank look of inquiry with perfect composure. "You are to act. Miss Marrable and I have a turn for business, and we settled it all in five minutes. There are two parts in the play left to be filled. One is Lucy, the waiting-maid; which is the character I have undertaken—with papa's permission," she added, slyly pinching her father's arm; "and he won't say no, will he? First, because he's a darling; secondly, because I love him, and he loves me; thirdly, because there is never any difference of opinion between us (is there?);

fourthly, because I give him a kiss, which naturally stops his mouth and settles the whole question. Dear me, I'm wandering. Where was I just now? Oh yes! explaining myself to Frank—"

"I beg your pardon," began Frank, attempting, at this point, to enter his protest.

"The second character in the play," pursued Magdalen, without taking the smallest notice of the protest, "is Falkland—a jealous lover, with a fine flow of language. Miss Marrable and I discussed Falkland privately on the window-seat while the rest were talking. She is a delightful girl—so impulsive, so sensible, so entirely unaffected. She confided in me. She said: 'One of our miseries is that we can't find a gentleman who will grapple with the hideous difficulties of Falkland.' Of course I soothed her. Of course I said: 'I've got the gentleman, and he shall grapple immediately.'—'Oh heavens! who is he?'—'Mr. Francis Clare.'—'And where is he?'—'In the house at this moment.'—'Will you be so very charming, Miss Vanstone, as to fetch him?'—'I'll fetch him, Miss Marrable, with the greatest pleasure.' I left the window-seat—I rushed into the morning-room—I smelled cigars—I followed the smell—and here I am."

"It's a compliment, I know, to be asked to act," said Frank, in great embarrassment. "But I hope you and Miss Marrable will excuse me—"

"Certainly not. Miss Marrable and I are both remarkable for the firmness of our characters. When we say Mr. So-and-So is positively to act the part of Falkland, we positively mean it. Come in and be introduced."

"But I never tried to act. I don't know how."

"Not of the slightest consequence. If you don't know how, come to me and I'll teach you."

"You!" exclaimed Mr. Vanstone. "What do you know about it?"

"Pray, papa, be serious! I have the strongest internal conviction that I could act every character in the play—Falkland included. Don't let me have to speak a second time, Frank. Come and be introduced."

She took her father's arm, and moved on with him to the door of the greenhouse. At the steps, she turned and looked round to see if Frank was following her. It was only the action of a moment; but in that moment her natural firmness of will rallied all its resources—strengthened itself with the influence of her beauty—commanded—and conquered. She looked lovely: the flush was tenderly bright in her cheeks; the radiant pleasure shone and sparkled in her eyes; the position of her figure, turned suddenly from the waist upward, disclosed its delicate strength, its supple firmness, its seductive, serpentine grace. "Come!" she said, with a coquettish beckoning action of her head. "Come, Frank!"

Few men of forty would have resisted her at that moment. Frank was twenty last birthday. In other words, he threw aside his cigar, and followed her out of the greenhouse.

As he turned and closed the door—in the instant when he lost sight of her—his disinclination to be associated with the private theatricals revived. At the foot of the house-steps he stopped again; plucked a twig from a plant near him; broke it in his hand; and looked about him uneasily, on this side and on that. The path to the left led back to his father's cottage—the way of escape lay open. Why not take it?

While he still hesitated, Mr. Vanstone and his daughter reached the top of the steps. Once more, Magdalen looked round—looked with her resistless beauty, with her all-conquering smile. She beckoned again; and again he followed her—up the steps, and over the threshold. The door closed on them.

So, with a trifling gesture of invitation on one side, with a trifling act of compliance on the other: so—with no knowledge in his mind, with no thought in hers, of the secret still hidden under the journey to London—they took the way which led to that secret's discovery, through many a darker winding that was yet to come.

V

Mr. Vanstone's inquiries into the proposed theatrical entertainment at Evergreen Lodge were answered by a narrative of dramatic disasters; of which Miss Marrable impersonated the innocent cause, and in which her father and mother played the parts of chief victims.

Miss Marrable was that hardest of all born tyrants—an only child. She had never granted a constitutional privilege to her oppressed father and mother since the time when she cut her first tooth. Her seventeenth birthday was now near at hand; she had decided on celebrating it by acting a play; had issued her orders accordingly; and had been obeyed by her docile parents as implicitly as usual. Mrs. Marrable gave up the drawing-room to be laid waste for a stage and a theater. Mr. Marrable secured the services of a respectable professional person to drill the young ladies and gentlemen, and to accept all the other responsibilities incidental to creating a dramatic world out of a domestic chaos. Having further accustomed themselves to the breaking of furniture and the staining of walls—to thumping, tumbling, hammering, and screaming; to doors always banging, and to footsteps perpetually running up and down stairs—the nominal master and mistress of the house fondly believed that their chief troubles were over. Innocent and fatal delusion! It is one thing in private society to set up the stage and choose the play—it is another thing altogether to find the actors. Hitherto, only the small preliminary annoyances proper to the occasion had shown themselves at Evergreen Lodge. The sound and serious troubles were all to come.

The Rivals having been chosen as the play, Miss Marrable, as a matter of course, appropriated to herself the part of “Lydia Languish.” One of her favored swains next secured “Captain Absolute,” and another laid violent hands on “Sir Lucius O'Trigger.” These two were followed by an accommodating

spinster relative, who accepted the heavy dramatic responsibility of "Mrs. Malaprop"—and there the theatrical proceedings came to a pause. Nine more speaking characters were left to be fitted with representatives; and with that unavoidable necessity the serious troubles began.

All the friends of the family suddenly became unreliable people, for the first time in their lives. After encouraging the idea of the play, they declined the personal sacrifice of acting in it—or, they accepted characters, and then broke down in the effort to study them—or they volunteered to take the parts which they knew were already engaged, and declined the parts which were waiting to be acted—or they were afflicted with weak constitutions, and mischievously fell ill when they were wanted at rehearsal—or they had Puritan relatives in the background, and, after slipping into their parts cheerfully at the week's beginning, oozed out of them penitently, under serious family pressure, at the week's end. Meanwhile, the carpenters hammered and the scenes rose. Miss Marrable, whose temperament was sensitive, became hysterical under the strain of perpetual anxiety; the family doctor declined to answer for the nervous consequences if something was not done. Renewed efforts were made in every direction. Actors and actresses were sought with a desperate disregard of all considerations of personal fitness. Necessity, which knows no law, either in the drama or out of it, accepted a lad of eighteen as the representative of "Sir Anthony Absolute"; the stage-manager undertaking to supply the necessary wrinkles from the illimitable resources of theatrical art. A lady whose age was unknown, and whose personal appearance was stout—but whose heart was in the right place—volunteered to act the part of the sentimental "Julia," and brought with her the dramatic qualification of habitually wearing a wig in private life. Thanks to these vigorous measures, the play was at last supplied with representatives—always excepting the two unmanageable characters of "Lucy" the waiting-maid, and "Falkland," Julia's jealous lover. Gentlemen came; saw Julia at rehearsal; observed her stoutness and her wig; omitted to notice that her heart was in the right place; quailed at the prospect, apologized, and retired. Ladies read the part of "Lucy"; remarked that she appeared to great advantage in the first half of the play, and faded out of it altogether in the latter half;

objected to pass from the notice of the audience in that manner, when all the rest had a chance of distinguishing themselves to the end; shut up the book, apologized, and retired. In eight days more the night of performance would arrive; a phalanx of social martyrs two hundred strong had been convened to witness it; three full rehearsals were absolutely necessary; and two characters in the play were not filled yet. With this lamentable story, and with the humblest apologies for presuming on a slight acquaintance, the Marrables appeared at Combe-Raven, to appeal to the young ladies for a "Lucy," and to the universe for a "Falkland," with the mendicant pertinacity of a family in despair.

This statement of circumstances—addressed to an audience which included a father of Mr. Vanstone's disposition, and a daughter of Magdalen's temperament—produced the result which might have been anticipated from the first.

Either misinterpreting, or disregarding, the ominous silence preserved by his wife and Miss Garth, Mr. Vanstone not only gave Magdalen permission to assist the forlorn dramatic company, but accepted an invitation to witness the performance for Norah and himself. Mrs. Vanstone declined accompanying them on account of her health; and Miss Garth only engaged to make one among the audience conditionally on not being wanted at home. The "parts" of "Lucy" and "Falkland" (which the distressed family carried about with them everywhere, like incidental maladies) were handed to their representatives on the spot. Frank's faint remonstrances were rejected without a hearing; the days and hours of rehearsal were carefully noted down on the covers of the parts; and the Marrables took their leave, with a perfect explosion of thanks—father, mother, and daughter sowing their expressions of gratitude broadcast, from the drawing-room door to the garden-gates.

As soon as the carriage had driven away, Magdalen presented herself to the general observation under an entirely new aspect.

"If any more visitors call today," she said, with the profoundest gravity of look and manner, "I am not at home. This is a far more serious matter than any of you suppose. Go somewhere by yourself, Frank, and read over your part, and don't let your attention wander if you can possibly help it. I shall not be

accessible before the evening. If you will come here—with papa's permission—after tea, my views on the subject of Falkland will be at your disposal. Thomas! whatever else the gardener does, he is not to make any floricultural noises under my window. For the rest of the afternoon I shall be immersed in study—and the quieter the house is, the more obliged I shall feel to everybody."

Before Miss Garth's battery of reproof could open fire, before the first outburst of Mr. Vanstone's hearty laughter could escape his lips, she bowed to them with imperturbable gravity; ascended the house-steps, for the first time in her life, at a walk instead of a run, and retired then and there to the bedroom regions. Frank's helpless astonishment at her disappearance added a new element of absurdity to the scene. He stood first on one leg and then on the other; rolling and unrolling his part, and looking piteously in the faces of the friends about him. "I know I can't do it," he said. "May I come in after tea, and hear Magdalen's views? Thank you—I'll look in about eight. Don't tell my father about this acting, please; I should never hear the last of it." Those were the only words he had spirit enough to utter. He drifted away aimlessly in the direction of the shrubbery, with the part hanging open in his hand—the most incapable of Falklands, and the most helpless of mankind.

Frank's departure left the family by themselves, and was the signal accordingly for an attack on Mr. Vanstone's inveterate carelessness in the exercise of his paternal authority.

"What could you possibly be thinking of, Andrew, when you gave your consent?" said Mrs. Vanstone. "Surely my silence was a sufficient warning to you to say no?"

"A mistake, Mr. Vanstone," chimed in Miss Garth. "Made with the best intentions—but a mistake for all that."

"It may be a mistake," said Norah, taking her father's part, as usual. "But I really don't see how papa, or anyone else, could have declined, under the circumstances."

"Quite right, my dear," observed Mr. Vanstone. "The circumstances, as you say, were dead against me. Here were these unfortunate people in a scrape on one side; and Magdalen, on the other, mad to act. I couldn't say I had methodistical objections—

I've nothing methodistical about me. What other excuse could I make? The Marrables are respectable people, and keep the best company in Clifton. What harm can she get in their house? If you come to prudence and that sort of thing—why shouldn't Magdalen do what Miss Marrable does? There! there! let the poor things act, and amuse themselves. We were their age once—and it's no use making a fuss—and that's all I've got to say about it."

With that characteristic defense of his own conduct, Mr. Vanstone sauntered back to the greenhouse to smoke another cigar.

"I didn't say so to papa," said Norah, taking her mother's arm on the way back to the house, "but the bad result of the acting, in my opinion, will be the familiarity it is sure to encourage between Magdalen and Francis Clare."

"You are prejudiced against Frank, my love," said Mrs. Vanstone.

Norah's soft, secret, hazel eyes sank to the ground; she said no more. Her opinions were unchangeable—but she never disputed with anybody. She had the great failing of a reserved nature—the failing of obstinacy; and the great merit—the merit of silence. "What is your head running on now?" thought Miss Garth, casting a sharp look at Norah's dark, downcast face. "You're one of the impenetrable sort. Give me Magdalen, with all her perversities; I can see daylight through her. You're as dark as night."

The hours of the afternoon passed away, and still Magdalen remained shut up in her own room. No restless footsteps pattered on the stairs; no nimble tongue was heard chattering here, there, and everywhere, from the garret to the kitchen—the house seemed hardly like itself, with the one ever-disturbing element in the family serenity suddenly withdrawn from it. Anxious to witness with her own eyes the reality of a transformation in which past experience still inclined her to disbelieve, Miss Garth ascended to Magdalen's room, knocked twice at the door, received no answer, opened it and looked in.

There sat Magdalen, in an armchair before the long looking-glass, with all her hair let down over her shoulders; absorbed in

the study of her part and comfortably arrayed in her morning wrapper, until it was time to dress for dinner. And there behind her sat the lady's-maid, slowly combing out the long heavy locks of her young mistress's hair, with the sleepy resignation of a woman who had been engaged in that employment for some hours past. The sun was shining; and the green shutters outside the window were closed. The dim light fell tenderly on the two quiet seated figures; on the little white bed, with the knots of rose-colored ribbon which looped up its curtains, and the bright dress for dinner laid ready across it; on the gayly painted bath, with its pure lining of white enamel; on the toilet-table with its sparkling trinkets, its crystal bottles, its silver bell with Cupid for a handle, its litter of little luxuries that adorn the shrine of a woman's bedchamber. The luxurious tranquillity of the scene; the cool fragrance of flowers and perfumes in the atmosphere; the rapt attitude of Magdalen, absorbed over her reading; the monotonous regularity of movement in the maid's hand and arm, as she drew the comb smoothly through and through her mistress's hair—all conveyed the same soothing impression of drowsy, delicious quiet. On one side of the door were the broad daylight and the familiar realities of life. On the other was the dreamland of Elysian serenity—the sanctuary of unruffled repose.

Miss Garth paused on the threshold, and looked into the room in silence.

Magdalen's curious fancy for having her hair combed at all times and seasons was among the peculiarities of her character which were notorious to everybody in the house. It was one of her father's favorite jokes that she reminded him, on such occasions, of a cat having her back stroked, and that he always expected, if the combing were only continued long enough, to hear her *purr*. Extravagant as it may seem, the comparison was not altogether inappropriate. The girl's fervid temperament intensified the essentially feminine pleasure that most women feel in the passage of the comb through their hair, to a luxury of sensation which absorbed her in enjoyment, so serenely self-demonstrative, so drowsily deep that it did irresistibly suggest a pet cat's enjoyment under a caressing hand. Intimately as Miss Garth was acquainted with this peculiarity in her pupil, she now saw it asserting itself for the first time, in association with mental exertion of any kind on

Magdalen's part. Feeling, therefore, some curiosity to know how long the combing and the studying had gone on together, she ventured on putting the question, first to the mistress; and (receiving no answer in that quarter) secondly to the maid.

"All the afternoon, miss, off and on," was the weary answer. "Miss Magdalen says it soothes her feelings and clears her mind."

Knowing by experience that interference would be hopeless, under these circumstances, Miss Garth turned sharply and left the room. She smiled when she was outside on the landing. The female mind does occasionally—though not often—project itself into the future. Miss Garth was prophetically pitying Magdalen's unfortunate husband.

Dinnertime presented the fair student to the family eye in the same mentally absorbed aspect. On all ordinary occasions Magdalen's appetite would have terrified those feeble sentimentalists who affect to ignore the all-important influence which female feeding exerts in the production of female beauty. On this occasion she refused one dish after another with a resolution which implied the rarest of all modern martyrdoms—gastric martyrdom. "I have conceived the part of Lucy," she observed, with the demurest gravity. "The next difficulty is to make Frank conceive the part of Falkland. I see nothing to laugh at—you would all be serious enough if you had my responsibilities. No, papa—no wine today, thank you. I must keep my intelligence clear. Water, Thomas—and a little more jelly, I think, before you take it away."

When Frank presented himself in the evening, ignorant of the first elements of his part, she took him in hand, as a middle-aged schoolmistress might have taken in hand a backward little boy. The few attempts he made to vary the sternly practical nature of the evening's occupation by slipping in compliments sidelong she put away from her with the contemptuous self-possession of a woman of twice her age. She literally forced him into his part. Her father fell asleep in his chair. Mrs. Vanstone and Miss Garth lost their interest in the proceedings, retired to the further end of the room, and spoke together in whispers. It grew later and later; and still Magdalen never flinched from her task—still, with equal perseverance, Norah, who had been on the watch all through the

evening, kept on the watch to the end. The distrust darkened and darkened on her face as she looked at her sister and Frank; as she saw how close they sat together, devoted to the same interest and working to the same end. The clock on the mantelpiece pointed to half-past eleven before Lucy the resolute permitted Falkland the helpless to shut up his task-book for the night. "She's wonderfully clever, isn't she?" said Frank, taking leave of Mr. Vanstone at the hall door. "I'm to come tomorrow, and hear more of her views—if you have no objection. I shall never do it; don't tell her I said so. As fast as she teaches me one speech, the other goes out of my head. Discouraging, isn't it? Goodnight."

The next day but one was the day of the first full rehearsal. On the previous evening Mrs. Vanstone's spirits had been sadly depressed. At a private interview with Miss Garth she had referred again, of her own accord, to the subject of her letter from London—had spoken self-reproachfully of her weakness in admitting Captain Wragge's impudent claim to a family connection with her—and had then reverted to the state of her health and to the doubtful prospect that awaited her in the coming summer in a tone of despondency which it was very distressing to hear. Anxious to cheer her spirits, Miss Garth had changed the conversation as soon as possible—had referred to the approaching theatrical performance—and had relieved Mrs. Vanstone's mind of all anxiety in that direction, by announcing her intention of accompanying Magdalen to each rehearsal, and of not losing sight of her until she was safely back again in her father's house. Accordingly, when Frank presented himself at Combe-Raven on the eventful morning, there stood Miss Garth, prepared—in the interpolated character of Argus—to accompany Lucy and Falkland to the scene of trial. The railway conveyed the three, in excellent time, to Evergreen Lodge; and at one o'clock the rehearsal began.

VI

"I hope Miss Vanstone knows her part?" whispered Mrs. Marrable, anxiously addressing herself to Miss Garth, in a corner of the theater.

"If airs and graces make an actress, ma'am, Magdalen's performance will astonish us all." With that reply, Miss Garth took out her work, and seated herself, on guard, in the center of the pit.

The manager perched himself, book in hand, on a stool close in front of the stage. He was an active little man, of a sweet and cheerful temper; and he gave the signal to begin with as patient an interest in the proceedings as if they had caused him no trouble in the past and promised him no difficulty in the future. The two characters which opened the comedy of *The Rivals*, "Fag" and "The Coachman," appeared on the scene—looked many sizes too tall for their canvas background, which represented a "Street in Bath"—exhibited the customary inability to manage their own arms, legs, and voices—went out severally at the wrong exits—and expressed their perfect approval of results, so far, by laughing heartily behind the scenes. "Silence, gentlemen, if you please," remonstrated the cheerful manager. "As loud as you like *on* the stage, but the audience mustn't hear you *off* it. Miss Marrable ready? Miss Vanstone ready? Easy there with the 'Street in Bath'; it's going up crooked! Face this way, Miss Marrable; full face, if you please. Miss Vanstone—" he checked himself suddenly. "Curious," he said, under his breath—"she fronts the audience of her own accord!" Lucy opened the scene in these words: "Indeed, ma'am, I traversed half the town in search of it: I don't believe there's a circulating library in Bath I haven't been at." The manager started in his chair. "My heart alive! she speaks out without telling!" The dialogue went on. Lucy produced the novels for Miss Lydia Languish's private reading from under her cloak. The manager rose excitably to his feet. Marvelous! No hurry with

the books; no dropping them. She looked at the titles before she announced them to her mistress; she set down *Humphrey Clinker* on *The Tears of Sensibility* with a smart little smack which pointed the antithesis. One moment—and she announced Julia's visit; another—and she dropped the brisk waiting-maid's courtesy; a third—and she was off the stage on the side set down for her in the book. The manager wheeled round on his stool, and looked hard at Miss Garth. "I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said. "Miss Marrable told me, before we began, that this was the young lady's first attempt. It can't be, surely!"

"It is," replied Miss Garth, reflecting the manager's look of amazement on her own face. Was it possible that Magdalen's unintelligible industry in the study of her part really sprang from a serious interest in her occupation—an interest which implied a natural fitness for it.

The rehearsal went on. The stout lady with the wig (and the excellent heart) personated the sentimental Julia from an inveterately tragic point of view, and used her handkerchief distractedly in the first scene. The spinster relative felt Mrs. Malaprop's mistakes in language so seriously, and took such extraordinary pains with her blunders, that they sounded more like exercises in elocution than anything else. The unhappy lad who led the forlorn hope of the company, in the person of "Sir Anthony Absolute," expressed the age and irascibility of his character by tottering incessantly at the knees, and thumping the stage perpetually with his stick. Slowly and clumsily, with constant interruptions and interminable mistakes, the first act dragged on, until Lucy appeared again to end it in soliloquy, with the confession of her assumed simplicity and the praise of her own cunning.

Here the stage artifice of the situation presented difficulties which Magdalen had not encountered in the first scene—and here, her total want of experience led her into more than one palpable mistake. The stage-manager, with an eagerness which he had not shown in the case of any other member of the company, interfered immediately, and set her right. At one point she was to pause, and take a turn on the stage—she did it. At another, she was to stop, toss her head, and look pertly at the audience—she

did it. When she took out the paper to read the list of the presents she had received, could she give it a tap with her finger (Yes)? And lead off with a little laugh (Yes—after twice trying)? Could she read the different items with a sly look at the end of each sentence, straight at the pit (Yes, straight at the pit, and as sly as you please)? The manager's cheerful face beamed with approval. He tucked the play under his arm, and clapped his hands gayly; the gentlemen, clustered together behind the scenes, followed his example; the ladies looked at each other with dawning doubts whether they had not better have left the new recruit in the retirement of private life. Too deeply absorbed in the business of the stage to heed any of them, Magdalen asked leave to repeat the soliloquy, and make quite sure of her own improvement. She went all through it again without a mistake, this time, from beginning to end; the manager celebrating her attention to his directions by an outburst of professional approbation, which escaped him in spite of himself. "She can take a hint!" cried the little man, with a hearty smack of his hand on the promptbook. "She's a born actress, if ever there was one yet!"

"I hope not," said Miss Garth to herself, taking up the work which had dropped into her lap, and looking down at it in some perplexity. Her worst apprehension of results in connection with the theatrical enterprise had foreboded levity of conduct with some of the gentlemen—she had not bargained for this. Magdalen, in the capacity of a thoughtless girl, was comparatively easy to deal with. Magdalen, in the character of a born actress, threatened serious future difficulties.

The rehearsal proceeded. Lucy returned to the stage for her scenes in the second act (the last in which she appears) with Sir Lucius and Fag. Here, again, Magdalen's inexperience betrayed itself—and here once more her resolution in attacking and conquering her own mistakes astonished everybody. "Bravo!" cried the gentlemen behind the scenes, as she steadily trampled down one blunder after another. "Ridiculous!" said the ladies, "with such a small part as hers." "Heaven forgive me!" thought Miss Garth, coming round unwillingly to the general opinion. "I almost wish we were Papists, and I had a convent to put her in tomorrow." One of Mr. Marrable's servants entered the theater as that desperate aspiration escaped the governess. She instantly sent

the man behind the scene with a message: "Miss Vanstone has done her part in the rehearsal; request her to come here and sit by me." The servant returned with a polite apology: "Miss Vanstone's kind love, and she begs to be excused—she's prompting Mr. Clare." She prompted him to such purpose that he actually got through his part. The performances of the other gentlemen were obtrusively imbecile. Frank was just one degree better—he was modestly incapable; and he gained by comparison. "Thanks to Miss Vanstone," observed the manager, who had heard the prompting. "She pulled him through. We shall be flat enough at night, when the drop falls on the second act, and the audience have seen the last of her. It's a thousand pities she hasn't got a better part!"

"It's a thousand mercies she's no more to do than she has," muttered Miss Garth, overhearing him. "As things are, the people can't well turn her head with applause. She's out of the play in the second act—that's one comfort!"

No well-regulated mind ever draws its inferences in a hurry; Miss Garth's mind was well regulated; therefore, logically speaking, Miss Garth ought to have been superior to the weakness of rushing at conclusions. She had committed that error, nevertheless, under present circumstances. In plainer terms, the consoling reflection which had just occurred to her assumed that the play had by this time survived all its disasters, and entered on its long-deferred career of success. The play had done nothing of the sort. Misfortune and the Marrable family had not parted company yet.

When the rehearsal was over, nobody observed that the stout lady with the wig privately withdrew herself from the company; and when she was afterward missed from the table of refreshments, which Mr. Marrable's hospitality kept ready spread in a room near the theater, nobody imagined that there was any serious reason for her absence. It was not till the ladies and gentlemen assembled for the next rehearsal that the true state of the case was impressed on the minds of the company. At the appointed hour no Julia appeared. In her stead, Mrs. Marrable portentously approached the stage, with an open letter in her hand. She was naturally a lady of the mildest good breeding: she

was mistress of every bland conventionality in the English language—but disasters and dramatic influences combined, threw even this harmless matron off her balance at last. For the first time in her life Mrs. Marrable indulged in vehement gesture, and used strong language. She handed the letter sternly, at arms-length, to her daughter. “My dear,” she said, with an aspect of awful composure, “we are under a Curse.” Before the amazed dramatic company could petition for an explanation, she turned and left the room. The manager’s professional eye followed her out respectfully—he looked as if he approved of the exit, from a theatrical point of view.

What new misfortune had befallen the play? The last and worst of all misfortunes had assailed it. The stout lady had resigned her part.

Not maliciously. Her heart, which had been in the right place throughout, remained inflexibly in the right place still. Her explanation of the circumstances proved this, if nothing else did. The letter began with a statement: She had overheard, at the last rehearsal (quite unintentionally), personal remarks of which she was the subject. They might, or might not, have had reference to her—hair; and her—figure. She would not distress Mrs. Marrable by repeating them. Neither would she mention names, because it was foreign to her nature to make bad worse. The only course at all consistent with her own self-respect was to resign her part. She enclosed it, accordingly, to Mrs. Marrable, with many apologies for her presumption in undertaking a youthful character, at—what a gentleman was pleased to term—her Age; and with what two ladies were rude enough to characterize as her disadvantages of—hair, and—figure. A younger and more attractive representative of Julia would no doubt be easily found. In the meantime, all persons concerned had her full forgiveness, to which she would only beg leave to add her best and kindest wishes for the success of the play.

In four nights more the play was to be performed. If ever any human enterprise stood in need of good wishes to help it, that enterprise was unquestionably the theatrical entertainment at Evergreen Lodge!

One armchair was allowed on the stage; and into that armchair Miss Marrable sank, preparatory to a fit of hysterics. Magdalen stepped forward at the first convulsion; snatched the letter from Miss Marrable's hand; and stopped the threatened catastrophe.

"She's an ugly, bald-headed, malicious, middle-aged wretch!" said Magdalen, tearing the letter into fragments, and tossing them over the heads of the company. "But I can tell her one thing—she shan't spoil the play. I'll act Julia."

"Bravo!" cried the chorus of gentlemen—the anonymous gentleman who had helped to do the mischief (otherwise Mr. Francis Clare) loudest of all.

"If you want the truth, I don't shrink from owning it," continued Magdalen. "I'm one of the ladies she means. I said she had a head like a mop, and a waist like a bolster. So she has."

"I am the other lady," added the spinster relative. "But I only said she was too stout for the part."

"I am the gentleman," chimed in Frank, stimulated by the force of example. "I said nothing—I only agreed with the ladies."

Here Miss Garth seized her opportunity, and addressed the stage loudly from the pit.

"Stop! Stop!" she said. "You can't settle the difficulty that way. If Magdalen plays Julia, who is to play Lucy?"

Miss Marrable sank back in the armchair, and gave way to the second convulsion.

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Magdalen, "the thing's simple enough, I'll act Julia and Lucy both together."

The manager was consulted on the spot. Suppressing Lucy's first entrance, and turning the short dialogue about the novels into a soliloquy for Lydia Languish, appeared to be the only changes of importance necessary to the accomplishment of Magdalen's project. Lucy's two telling scenes, at the end of the first and second acts, were sufficiently removed from the scenes in which Julia appeared to give time for the necessary transformations in dress. Even Miss Garth, though she tried hard to find them, could put no fresh obstacles in the way. The question was settled in five

minutes, and the rehearsal went on; Magdalen learning Julia's stage situations with the book in her hand, and announcing afterward, on the journey home, that she proposed sitting up all night to study the new part. Frank thereupon expressed his fears that she would have no time left to help him through his theatrical difficulties. She tapped him on the shoulder coquettishly with her part. "You foolish fellow, how am I to do without you? You're Julia's jealous lover; you're always making Julia cry. Come tonight, and make me cry at teatime. You haven't got a venomous old woman in a wig to act with now. It's *my* heart you're to break—and of course I shall teach you how to do it."

The four days' interval passed busily in perpetual rehearsals, public and private. The night of performance arrived; the guests assembled; the great dramatic experiment stood on its trial. Magdalen had made the most of her opportunities; she had learned all that the manager could teach her in the time. Miss Garth left her when the overture began, sitting apart in a corner behind the scenes, serious and silent, with her smelling-bottle in one hand, and her book in the other, resolutely training herself for the coming ordeal, to the very last.

The play began, with all the proper accompaniments of a theatrical performance in private life; with a crowded audience, an African temperature, a bursting of heated lamp-glasses, and a difficulty in drawing up the curtain. "Fag" and "the Coachman," who opened the scene, took leave of their memories as soon as they stepped on the stage; left half their dialogue unspoken; came to a dead pause; were audibly entreated by the invisible manager to "come off"; and went off accordingly, in every respect sadder and wiser men than when they went on. The next scene disclosed Miss Marrable as "Lydia Languish," gracefully seated, very pretty, beautifully dressed, accurately mistress of the smallest words in her part; possessed, in short, of every personal resource—except her voice. The ladies admired, the gentlemen applauded. Nobody heard anything but the words "Speak up, miss," whispered by the same voice which had already entreated

“Fag” and “the Coachman” to “come off.” A responsive titter rose among the younger spectators; checked immediately by magnanimous applause. The temperature of the audience was rising to Blood Heat—but the national sense of fair play was not boiled out of them yet.

In the midst of the demonstration, Magdalen quietly made her first entrance, as “Julia.” She was dressed very plainly in dark colors, and wore her own hair; all stage adjuncts and alterations (excepting the slightest possible touch of rouge on her cheeks) having been kept in reserve to disguise her the more effectually in her second part. The grace and simplicity of her costume, the steady self-possession with which she looked out over the eager rows of faces before her, raised a low hum of approval and expectation. She spoke—after suppressing a momentary tremor—with a quiet distinctness of utterance which reached all ears, and which at once confirmed the favorable impression that her appearance had produced. The one member of the audience who looked at her and listened to her coldly, was her elder sister. Before the actress of the evening had been five minutes on the stage, Norah detected, to her own indescribable astonishment, that Magdalen had audaciously individualized the feeble amiability of “Julia’s” character, by seizing no less a person than herself as the model to act it by. She saw all her own little formal peculiarities of manner and movement unblushingly reproduced—and even the very tone of her voice so accurately mimicked from time to time, that the accents startled her as if she was speaking herself, with an echo on the stage. The effect of this cool appropriation of Norah’s identity to theatrical purposes on the audience—who only saw results—asserted itself in a storm of applause on Magdalen’s exit. She had won two incontestable triumphs in her first scene. By a dexterous piece of mimicry, she had made a living reality of one of the most insipid characters in the English drama; and she had roused to enthusiasm an audience of two hundred exiles from the blessings of ventilation, all simmering together in their own animal heat. Under the circumstances, where is the actress by profession who could have done much more?

But the event of the evening was still to come. Magdalen’s disguised reappearance at the end of the act, in the character of

"Lucy"—with false hair and false eyebrows, with a bright-red complexion and patches on her cheeks, with the gayest colors flaunting in her dress, and the shrillest vivacity of voice and manner—fairly staggered the audience. They looked down at their programmes, in which the representative of Lucy figured under an assumed name; looked up again at the stage; penetrated the disguise; and vented their astonishment in another round of applause, louder and heartier even than the last. Norah herself could not deny this time that the tribute of approbation had been well deserved. There, forcing its way steadily through all the faults of inexperience—there, plainly visible to the dullest of the spectators, was the rare faculty of dramatic impersonation, expressing itself in every look and action of this girl of eighteen, who now stood on a stage for the first time in her life. Failing in many minor requisites of the double task which she had undertaken, she succeeded in the one important necessity of keeping the main distinctions of the two characters thoroughly apart. Everybody felt that the difficulty lay here—everybody saw the difficulty conquered—everybody echoed the manager's enthusiasm at rehearsal, which had hailed her as a born actress.

When the drop-scene descended for the first time, Magdalen had concentrated in herself the whole interest and attraction of the play. The audience politely applauded Miss Marrable, as became the guests assembled in her father's house: and good-humoredly encouraged the remainder of the company, to help them through a task for which they were all, more or less, palpably unfit. But, as the play proceeded, nothing roused them to any genuine expression of interest when Magdalen was absent from the scene. There was no disguising it: Miss Marrable and her bosom friends had been all hopelessly cast in the shade by the new recruit whom they had summoned to assist them, in the capacity of forlorn hope. And this on Miss Marrable's own birthday! and this in her father's house! and this after the unutterable sacrifices of six weeks past! Of all the domestic disasters which the thankless theatrical enterprise had inflicted on the Marrable family, the crowning misfortune was now consummated by Magdalen's success.

Leaving Mr. Vanstone and Norah, on the conclusion of the play, among the guests in the supper-room, Miss Garth went behind the scenes; ostensibly anxious to see if she could be of any

use; really bent on ascertaining whether Magdalen's head had been turned by the triumphs of the evening. It would not have surprised Miss Garth if she had discovered her pupil in the act of making terms with the manager for her forthcoming appearance in a public theater. As events really turned out, she found Magdalen on the stage, receiving, with gracious smiles, a card which the manager presented to her with a professional bow. Noticing Miss Garth's mute look of inquiry, the civil little man hastened to explain that the card was his own, and that he was merely asking the favor of Miss Vanstone's recommendation at any future opportunity.

"This is not the last time the young lady will be concerned in private theatricals, I'll answer for it," said the manager. "And if a superintendent is wanted on the next occasion, she has kindly promised to say a good word for me. I am always to be heard of, miss, at that address." Saying those words, he bowed again, and discreetly disappeared.

Vague suspicions beset the mind of Miss Garth, and urged her to insist on looking at the card. No more harmless morsel of pasteboard was ever passed from one hand to another. The card contained nothing but the manager's name, and, under it, the name and address of a theatrical agent in London.

"It is not worth the trouble of keeping," said Miss Garth.

Magdalen caught her hand before she could throw the card away—possessed herself of it the next instant—and put it in her pocket.

"I promised to recommend him," she said—"and that's one reason for keeping his card. If it does nothing else, it will remind me of the happiest evening of my life—and that's another. Come!" she cried, throwing her arms round Miss Garth with a feverish gayety—"congratulate me on my success!"

"I will congratulate you when you have got over it," said Miss Garth.

In half an hour more Magdalen had changed her dress; had joined the guests; and had soared into an atmosphere of congratulation high above the reach of any controlling influence

that Miss Garth could exercise. Frank, dilatory in all his proceedings, was the last of the dramatic company who left the precincts of the stage. He made no attempt to join Magdalen in the supper-room—but he was ready in the hall with her cloak when the carriages were called and the party broke up.

“Oh, Frank!” she said, looking round at him as he put the cloak on her shoulders, “I am so sorry it’s all over! Come tomorrow morning, and let’s talk about it by ourselves.”

“In the shrubbery at ten?” asked Frank, in a whisper.

She drew up the hood of her cloak and nodded to him gayly. Miss Garth, standing near, noticed the looks that passed between them, though the disturbance made by the parting guests prevented her from hearing the words. There was a soft, underlying tenderness in Magdalen’s assumed gayety of manner—there was a sudden thoughtfulness in her face, a confidential readiness in her hand, as she took Frank’s arm and went out to the carriage. What did it mean? Had her passing interest in him as her stage-pupil treacherously sown the seeds of any deeper interest in him, as a man? Had the idle theatrical scheme, now that it was all over, graver results to answer for than a mischievous waste of time?

The lines on Miss Garth’s face deepened and hardened: she stood lost among the fluttering crowd around her. Norah’s warning words, addressed to Mrs. Vanstone in the garden, recurred to her memory—and now, for the first time, the idea dawned on her that Norah had seen the consequences in their true light.

VII

Early the next morning Miss Garth and Norah met in the garden and spoke together privately. The only noticeable result of the interview, when they presented themselves at the breakfast-table, appeared in the marked silence which they both maintained on the topic of the theatrical performance. Mrs. Vanstone was entirely indebted to her husband and to her youngest daughter for all that she heard of the evening's entertainment. The governess and the elder daughter had evidently determined on letting the subject drop.

After breakfast was over Magdalen proved to be missing, when the ladies assembled as usual in the morning-room. Her habits were so little regular that Mrs. Vanstone felt neither surprise nor uneasiness at her absence. Miss Garth and Norah looked at one another significantly, and waited in silence. Two hours passed—and there were no signs of Magdalen. Norah rose, as the clock struck twelve, and quietly left the room to look for her.

She was not upstairs dusting her jewelry and disarranging her dresses. She was not in the conservatory, not in the flower-garden; not in the kitchen teasing the cook; not in the yard playing with the dogs. Had she, by any chance, gone out with her father? Mr. Vanstone had announced his intention, at the breakfast-table, of paying a morning visit to his old ally, Mr. Clare, and of rousing the philosopher's sarcastic indignation by an account of the dramatic performance. None of the other ladies at Combe-Raven ever ventured themselves inside the cottage. But Magdalen was reckless enough for anything—and Magdalen might have gone there. As the idea occurred to her, Norah entered the shrubbery.

At the second turning, where the path among the trees wound away out of sight of the house, she came suddenly face to face with Magdalen and Frank: they were sauntering toward her, arm in arm, their heads close together, their conversation apparently proceeding in whispers. They looked suspiciously handsome and

happy. At the sight of Norah both started, and both stopped. Frank confusedly raised his hat, and turned back in the direction of his father's cottage. Magdalen advanced to meet her sister, carelessly swinging her closed parasol from side to side, carelessly humming an air from the overture which had preceded the rising of the curtain on the previous night.

"Luncheon-time already!" she said, looking at her watch. "Surely not?"

"Have you and Mr. Francis Clare been alone in the shrubbery since ten o'clock?" asked Norah.

"*Mr.* Francis Clare! How ridiculously formal you are. Why don't you call him Frank?"

"I asked you a question, Magdalen."

"Dear me, how black you look this morning! I'm in disgrace, I suppose. Haven't you forgiven me yet for my acting last night? I couldn't help it, love; I should have made nothing of Julia, if I hadn't taken you for my model. It's quite a question of art. In your place, I should have felt flattered by the selection."

"In *your* place, Magdalen, I should have thought twice before I mimicked my sister to an audience of strangers."

"That's exactly why I did it—an audience of strangers. How were they to know? Come! come! don't be angry. You are eight years older than I am—you ought to set me an example of good-humor."

"I will set you an example of plain-speaking. I am more sorry than I can say, Magdalen, to meet you as I met you here just now!"

"What next, I wonder? You meet me in the shrubbery at home, talking over the private theatricals with my old playfellow, whom I knew when I was no taller than this parasol. And that is a glaring impropriety, is it? '*Honi soit qui mal y pense.*' You wanted an answer a minute ago—there it is for you, my dear, in the choicest Norman-French."

"I am in earnest about this, Magdalen—"

"Not a doubt of it. Nobody can accuse you of ever making jokes."

"I am seriously sorry—"

"Oh, dear!"

"It is quite useless to interrupt me. I have it on my conscience to tell you—and I *will* tell you—that I am sorry to see how this intimacy is growing. I am sorry to see a secret understanding established already between you and Mr. Francis Clare."

"Poor Frank! How you do hate him, to be sure. What on earth has he done to offend you?"

Norah's self-control began to show signs of failing her. Her dark cheeks glowed, her delicate lips trembled, before she spoke again. Magdalen paid more attention to her parasol than to her sister. She tossed it high in the air and caught it. "Once!" she said—and tossed it up again. "Twice!"—and she tossed it higher. "Thrice—" Before she could catch it for the third time, Norah seized her passionately by the arm, and the parasol dropped to the ground between them.

"You are treating me heartlessly," she said. "For shame, Magdalen—for shame!"

The irrepressible outburst of a reserved nature, forced into open self-assertion in its own despite, is of all moral forces the hardest to resist. Magdalen was startled into silence. For a moment, the two sisters—so strangely dissimilar in person and character—faced one another, without a word passing between them. For a moment the deep brown eyes of the elder and the light gray eyes of the younger looked into each other with steady, unyielding scrutiny on either side. Norah's face was the first to change; Norah's head was the first to turn away. She dropped her sister's arm in silence. Magdalen stooped and picked up her parasol.

"I try to keep my temper," she said, "and you call me heartless for doing it. You always were hard on me, and you always will be."

Norah clasped her trembling hands fast in each other. "Hard on you!" she said, in low, mournful tones—and sighed bitterly.

Magdalen drew back a little, and mechanically dusted the parasol with the end of her garden cloak.

"Yes!" she resumed, doggedly. "Hard on me and hard on Frank."

"Frank!" repeated Norah, advancing on her sister and turning pale as suddenly as she had turned red. "Do you talk of yourself and Frank as if your interests were One already? Magdalen! if I hurt *you*, do I hurt *him*? Is he so near and so dear to you as that?"

Magdalen drew further and further back. A twig from a tree near caught her cloak; she turned petulantly, broke it off, and threw it on the ground. "What right have you to question me?" she broke out on a sudden. "Whether I like Frank, or whether I don't, what interest is it of yours?" As she said the words, she abruptly stepped forward to pass her sister and return to the house.

Norah, turning paler and paler, barred the way to her. "If I hold you by main force," she said, "you shall stop and hear me. I have watched this Francis Clare; I know him better than you do. He is unworthy of a moment's serious feeling on your part; he is unworthy of our dear, good, kindhearted father's interest in him. A man with any principle, any honor, any gratitude, would not have come back as he has come back, disgraced—yes! disgraced by his spiritless neglect of his own duty. I watched his face while the friend who has been better than a father to him was comforting and forgiving him with a kindness he had not deserved: I watched his face, and I saw no shame and no distress in it—I saw nothing but a look of thankless, heartless relief. He is selfish, he is ungrateful, he is ungenerous—he is only twenty, and he has the worst failings of a mean old age already. And this is the man I find you meeting in secret—the man who has taken such a place in your favor that you are deaf to the truth about him, even from *my* lips! Magdalen! this will end ill. For God's sake, think of what I have said to you, and control yourself before it is too late!" She stopped, vehement and breathless, and caught her sister anxiously by the hand.

Magdalen looked at her in unconcealed astonishment.

"You are so violent," she said, "and so unlike yourself, that I hardly know you. The more patient I am, the more hard words I get for my pains. You have taken a perverse hatred to Frank; and you are unreasonably angry with me because I won't hate him, too. Don't, Norah! you hurt my hand."

Norah pushed the hand from her contemptuously. "I shall never hurt your heart," she said; and suddenly turned her back on Magdalen as she spoke the words.

There was a momentary pause. Norah kept her position. Magdalen looked at her perplexedly—hesitated—then walked away by herself toward the house.

At the turn in the shrubbery path she stopped and looked back uneasily. "Oh, dear, dear!" she thought to herself, "why didn't Frank go when I told him?" She hesitated, and went back a few steps. "There's Norah standing on her dignity, as obstinate as ever." She stopped again. "What had I better do? I hate quarreling: I think I'll make up." She ventured close to her sister and touched her on the shoulder. Norah never moved. "It's not often she flies into a passion," thought Magdalen, touching her again; "but when she does, what a time it lasts her!—Come!" she said, "give me a kiss, Norah, and make it up. Won't you let me get at any part of you, my dear, but the back of your neck? Well, it's a very nice neck—it's better worth kissing than mine—and there the kiss is, in spite of you!"

She caught fast hold of Norah from behind, and suited the action to the word, with a total disregard of all that had just passed, which her sister was far from emulating. Hardly a minute since the warm outpouring of Norah's heart had burst through all obstacles. Had the icy reserve frozen her up again already! It was hard to say. She never spoke; she never changed her position—she only searched hurriedly for her handkerchief. As she drew it out, there was a sound of approaching footsteps in the inner recesses of the shrubbery. A Scotch terrier scampered into view; and a cheerful voice sang the first lines of the glee in *As You Like It*. "It's papa!" cried Magdalen. "Come, Norah—come and meet him."

Instead of following her sister, Norah pulled down the veil of her garden hat, turned in the opposite direction, and hurried back

to the house. She ran up to her own room and locked herself in. She was crying bitterly.