

CHAPTER V - HE BETRAYS HIMSELF

The confession was entitled, "Memoirs of a Miserable Man." It began abruptly in these words:

I

"I acknowledge, at the outset, that misfortune has had an effect on me which frail humanity is for the most part anxious to conceal. Under the influence of suffering, I have become of enormous importance to myself. In this frame of mind, I naturally enjoy painting my own portrait in words. Let me add that they must be written words because it is a painful effort to me (since I lost my hearing) to speak to anyone continuously, for any length of time.

"I have also to confess that my brains are not so completely under my own command as I could wish.

"For instance, I possess considerable skill (for an amateur) as a painter in water colors. But I can only produce a work of art, when irresistible impulse urges me to express my thoughts in form and color. The same obstacle to regular exertion stands in my way, if I am using my pen. I can only write when the fit takes me--sometimes at night when I ought to be asleep; sometimes at meals when I ought to be handling my knife and fork; sometimes out of doors when I meet with inquisitive strangers who stare at me. As for paper, the first stray morsel of anything that I can write upon will do, provided I snatch it up in time to catch my ideas as they fly.

"My method being now explained, I proceed to the deliberate act of self-betrayal which I contemplate in producing this picture of myself."

II

"I divide my life into two Epochs--respectively entitled: Before my Deafness, and After my Deafness. Or, suppose I define the melancholy change in my fortunes more sharply still, by contrasting with each other my days of prosperity and my days of disaster? Of these alternatives, I hardly know which to choose. It doesn't matter; the one thing needful is to go on.

"In any case, then, I have to record that I passed a happy childhood--thanks to my good mother. Her generous nature had known adversity, and had not

been deteriorated by undeserved trials. Born of slave-parents, she had not reached her eighteenth year, when she was sold by auction in the Southern States of America. The person who bought her (she never would tell me who he was) freed her by a codicil, added to his will on his deathbed. My father met with her, a few years afterwards, in American society--fell (as I have heard) madly in love with her--and married her in defiance of the wishes of his family. He was quite right: no better wife and mother ever lived. The one vestige of good feeling that I still possess, lives in my empty heart when I dwell at times on the memory of my mother.

"My good fortune followed me when I was sent to school.

"Our head master was more nearly a perfect human being than any other man that I have ever met with. Even the worst-tempered boys among us ended in loving him. Under his encouragement, and especially to please him, I won every prize that industry, intelligence, and good conduct could obtain; and I rose, at an unusually early age, to be the head boy in the first class. When I was old enough to be removed to the University, and when the dreadful day of parting arrived, I fainted under the agony of leaving the teacher--no! the dear friend--whom I devotedly loved. There must surely have been some good in me at that time. What has become of it now?

"The years followed each other--and I was Fortune's spoilt child still.

"Under adverse circumstances, my sociable disposition, my delight in the society of young people of my own age, might have exposed me to serious dangers in my new sphere of action. Happily for me, my father consulted a wise friend, before he sent me to Cambridge. I was entered at one of the smaller colleges; and I fell, at starting, among the right set of men. Good examples were all round me. We formed a little club of steady students; our pleasures were innocent; we were too proud and too poor to get into debt. I look back on my career at Cambridge, as I look back on my career at school, and wonder what has become of my better self."

III

"During my last year at Cambridge, my father died.

"The profession which he had intended that I should follow was the Bar. I believed myself to be quite unfit for the sort of training imperatively required by the Law; and my mother agreed with me. When I left the University, my own choice of a profession pointed to the medical art, and to that particular branch of it called surgery. After three years of unremitting study at one of

the great London hospitals, I started in practice for myself. Once more, my persistent luck was faithful to me at the outset of my new career.

"The winter of that year was remarkable for alternate extremes of frost and thaw. Accidents to passengers in the streets were numerous; and one of them happened close to my own door. A gentleman slipped on the icy pavement, and broke his leg. On sending news of the accident to his house, I found that my chance-patient was a nobleman.

"My lord was so well satisfied with my services that he refused to be attended by any of my elders and betters in the profession. Little did I think at the time, that I had received the last of the favours which Fortune was to bestow on me. I enjoyed the confidence and goodwill of a man possessing boundless social influence; and I was received most kindly by the ladies of his family. In one word, at the time when my professional prospects justified the brightest hopes that I could form, sudden death deprived me of the dearest and truest of all friends--I suffered the one dreadful loss which it is impossible to replace, the loss of my mother. We had parted at night when she was, to all appearance, in the enjoyment of her customary health. The next morning, she was found dead in her bed."

IV

"Keen observers, who read these lines, will remark that I have said nothing about the male members of my family, and that I have even passed over my father with the briefest possible allusion to his death.

"This curious reticence on my part, is simply attributable to pure ignorance. Until affliction lay heavy on me, my father, my uncle, and my grandfather were hardly better known to me, in their true characters, than if they had been strangers passing in the street. How I contrived to become more intimately acquainted with my ancestors, I am now to reveal.

"In the absence of any instructions to guide me, after my mother's death, I was left to use my own discretion in examining the papers which she had left behind her. Reading her letters carefully, before I decided what to keep and what to destroy, I discovered a packet, protected by an unbroken seal, and bearing an inscription, addressed abruptly to my mother in these words:

'For fear of accidents, my dear, we will mention no names in this place. The sight of my handwriting will remind you of my devotion to your interests in the past, and will satisfy you that I am to be trusted in the service that I now

offer to my good sister-friend. In the fewest words, let me tell you that I have heard of the circumstances under which your marriage has taken place. Your origin has unfortunately become known to the members of your husband's family; their pride has been deeply wounded; and the women especially regard you with feelings of malignant hatred. I have good reason for fearing that they may try to excuse their inhuman way of speaking of you, by making public the calamity of your slave-birth. What deplorable influence might be exercised on your husband's mind, by such an exposure as this, I will not stop to inquire. It will be more to the purpose to say that I am able to offer you a sure means of protecting yourself--through information which I have unexpectedly obtained, and the source of which I am obliged to keep secret. If you are ever threatened by your enemies, open the packet which I have now sealed up, and you will command the silence of the bitterest man or woman who longs to injure you. I may add that absolute proof accompanies every assertion which my packet contains. Keep it carefully, as long as you live--and God grant you may never have occasion to break the seal.'

"Such was the inscription; copied exactly, word for word.

"I cannot even guess who my mother's devoted friend may have been. Neither can I doubt that she would have destroyed the packet, but for the circumstance of her sudden death.

"After hesitating a little--I hardly know why--I summoned my resolution, and broke the seal. Of the horror with which I read the contents of the packet I shall say nothing. Who ever yet sympathized with the sorrows and sufferings of strangers? Let me merely announce that I knew my ancestors at last, and that I am now able to present them in their true characters, as follows:

V

"My grandfather was tried on a charge of committing willful murder--was found guilty on the clearest evidence--and died on the scaffold by the hangman's hands.

"His two sons abandoned the family name, and left the family residence. They were, nevertheless, not unworthy representatives of their atrocious father, as will presently appear.

"My uncle (a captain in the Army) was discovered at the hazard table, playing with loaded dice. Before this abject scoundrel could be turned out of his regiment, he was killed in a duel by one of his brother officers whom he

had cheated.

"My father, when he was little more than a lad, deserted a poor girl who had trusted him under a promise of marriage. Friendless and hopeless, she drowned herself and her child. His was the most infamous in the list of the family crimes--and he escaped, without answering to a court of law or a court of honor for what he had done.

"Some of us come of one breed, and some of another. There is the breed from which I drew the breath of life. What do you think of me now?"

VI

"I looked back over the past years of my existence, from the time of my earliest recollections to the miserable day when I opened the sealed packet.

"What wholesome influences had preserved me, so far, from moral contamination by the vile blood that ran in my veins? There were two answers to that question which, in some degree, quieted my mind. In the first place, resembling my good mother physically, I might hope to have resembled her morally. In the second place, the happy accidents of my career had preserved me from temptation, at more than one critical period of my life. On the other hand, in the ordinary course of nature, not one half of that life had yet elapsed. What trials might the future have in store for me? and what protection against them would the better part of my nature be powerful enough to afford?

"While I was still troubled by these doubts, the measure of my disasters was filled by an attack of illness which threatened me with death. My medical advisers succeeded in saving my life--and left me to pay the penalty of their triumph by the loss of one of my senses.

"At an early period of my convalescence, I noticed one day, with languid surprise, that the voices of the doctors, when they asked me how I had slept and if I felt better, sounded singularly dull and distant. A few hours later, I observed that they stooped close over me when they had something important to say. On the same evening, my day nurse and my night nurse happened to be in the room together. To my surprise, they had become so wonderfully quiet in their movements, that they opened the door or stirred the fire, without making the slightest noise. I intended to ask them what it meant; I had even begun to put the question, when I was startled by another discovery relating this time to myself. I was certain that I had spoken--and yet, I had not heard myself speak! As well as my weakness would let me, I

called to the nurses in my loudest tones. "Has anything happened to my voice?" I asked. The two women consulted together, looking at me with pity in their eyes. One of them took the responsibility on herself. She put her lips close to my ear; the horrid words struck me with a sense of physical pain: "Your illness has left you in a sad state, sir. You are deaf."

VII

"As soon as I was able to leave my bed, well-meaning people, in and out of the medical profession, combined to torment me with the best intentions.

"One famous aural surgeon after another came to me, and quoted his experience of cases, in which the disease that had struck me down had affected the sense of hearing in other unhappy persons: they had submitted to surgical treatment, generally with cheering results. I submitted in my turn. All that skill could do for me was done, and without effect. My deafness steadily increased; my case was pronounced to be hopeless; the great authorities retired.

"Judicious friends, who had been waiting for their opportunity, undertook the moral management of me next.

"I was advised to cultivate cheerfulness, to go into society, to encourage kind people who tried to make me hear what was going on, to be on my guard against morbid depression, to check myself when the sense of my own horrible isolation drove me away to my room, and, last but by no means least, to beware of letting my vanity disincline me to use an ear-trumpet.

"I did my best, honestly did my best, to profit by the suggestions that were offered to me--not because I believed in the wisdom of my friends, but because I dreaded the effect of self-imposed solitude on my nature. Since the fatal day when I had opened the sealed packet, I was on my guard against the inherited evil lying dormant, for all I knew to the contrary, in my father's son. Impelled by that horrid dread, I suffered my daily martyrdom with a courage that astonishes me when I think of it now.

"What the self-inflicted torture of the deaf is, none but the deaf can understand.

"When benevolent persons did their best to communicate to me what was clever or amusing, while conversation was going on in my presence, I was secretly angry with them for making my infirmity conspicuous, and directing the general attention to me. When other friends saw in my face that I was

not grateful to them, and gave up the attempt to help me, I suspected them of talking of me contemptuously, and amusing themselves by making my misfortune the subject of coarse jokes.

"Even when I deserved encouragement by honestly trying to atone for my bad behavior, I committed mistakes (arising out of my helpless position) which prejudiced people against me. Sometimes, I asked questions which appeared to be so trivial, to ladies and gentlemen happy in the possession of a sense of hearing, that they evidently thought me imbecile as well as deaf. Sometimes, seeing the company enjoying an interesting story or a good joke, I ignorantly appealed to the most incompetent person present to tell me what had been said--with this result, that he lost the thread of the story or missed the point of the joke, and blamed my unlucky interference as the cause of it.

"These mortifications, and many more, I suffered patiently until, little by little, my last reserves of endurance felt the cruel strain on them, and failed me. My friends detected a change in my manner which alarmed them. They took me away from London, to try the renovating purity of country air.

"So far as any curative influence over the state of my mind was concerned, the experiment proved to be a failure.

"I had secretly arrived at the conclusion that my deafness was increasing, and that my friends knew it and were concealing it from me. Determined to put my suspicions to the test, I took long solitary walks in the neighborhood of my country home, and tried to hear the new sounds about me. I was deaf to everything--with the one exception of the music of the birds.

"How long did I hear the little cheering songsters who comforted me?

"I am unable to measure the interval that elapsed: my memory fails me. I only know that the time came, when I could see the skylark in the heavens, but could no longer hear its joyous notes. In a few weeks more the nightingale, and even the loud thrush, became silent birds to my doomed ears. My last effort to resist my own deafness was made at my bedroom window. For some time I still heard, faintly and more faintly, the shrill twittering just above me, under the eaves of the house. When this last poor enjoyment came to an end--when I listened eagerly, desperately, and heard nothing (think of it, nothing!)--I gave up the struggle. Persuasions, arguments, entreaties were entirely without effect on me. Reckless what came of it, I retired to the one fit place for me--to the solitude in which I have buried myself ever since."

VIII

"With some difficulty, I discovered the lonely habitation of which was in search.

"No language can describe the heavenly composure of mind that came to me, when I first found myself alone; living the death-in-life of deafness, apart from creatures--no longer my fellow-creatures--who could hear: apart also from those privileged victims of hysterical impulse, who wrote me love-letters, and offered to console the 'poor beautiful deaf man' by marrying him. Through the distorting medium of such sufferings as I have described, women and men--even young women--were repellent to me alike. Ungratefully impatient of the admiration excited by my personal advantages, savagely irritated by tender looks and flattering compliments, I only consented take lodgings, on condition that there should be no young women living under the same roof with me. If this confession of morbid feeling looks like vanity, I can only say that appearances lie. I write in sober sadness; determined to present my character, with photographic accuracy, as a true likeness.

"What were my habits in solitude? How did I get through the weary and wakeful hours of the day?

"Living by myself, I became (as I have already acknowledged) important to myself--and, as a necessary consequence, I enjoyed registering my own daily doings. Let passages copied from my journal reveal how I got through the day."

IX

EXTRACTS FROM A DEAF MAN'S DIARY

"Monday.--Six weeks today since I first occupied my present retreat.

"My landlord and landlady are two hideous old people. They look as if they disliked me, on the rare occasions when we meet. So much the better; they don't remind me of my deafness by trying to talk, and they keep as much as possible out of my way. This morning, after breakfast, I altered the arrangement of my books--and then I made my fourth attempt, in the last ten days, to read some of my favorite authors. No: my taste has apparently changed since the time when I could hear. I closed one volume after another; caring nothing for what used to be deeply interesting to me.

"Reckless and savage--with a burning head and a cold heart--I went out to look about me.

"After two hours of walking and thinking, I found that I had wandered to our county town. The rain began to fall heavily just as I happened to be passing a bookseller's shop. After some hesitation--for I hate exposing my deafness to strangers--I asked leave to take shelter, and looked at the books.

"Among them was a collection of celebrated Trials. I thought of my grandfather; consulted the index; and, finding his name there, bought the work. The shopman (as I could guess from his actions and looks) proposed sending the parcel to me. I insisted on taking it away. The sky had cleared; and I was eager to read the details of my grandfather's crime.

"Tuesday--Sat up late last night, reading my new book. My favorite poets, novelists, and historians have failed to interest me. I devoured the Trials with breathless delight; beginning of course with the murder in which I felt a family interest. Prepared to find my grandfather a ruffian, I confess I was surprised by the discovery that he was also a fool. The officers of justice had no merit in tracing the crime to him; his own stupidity delivered him into their hands. I read the evidence twice over, and put myself in his position, and saw the means plainly by which he might have set discovery at defiance.

"In the Preface to the Trials I found an allusion, in terms of praise, to a work of the same kind, published in the French language. I wrote to London at once, and ordered the book."

"Wednesday.--Is there some mysterious influence, in the silent solitude of my life, that is hardening my nature? Is there something unnatural in the existence of a man who never hears a sound? Is there a moral sense that suffers when a bodily sense is lost?

"These questions have been suggested to me by an incident that happened this morning.

"Looking out of window, I saw a brutal carter, on the road before the house, beating an over-loaded horse. A year since I should have interfered to protect the horse, without a moment's hesitation. If the wretch had been insolent, I should have seized his whip, and applied the heavy handle of it to his own shoulders. In past days, I have been more than once fined by a magistrate (privately in sympathy with my offence) for assaults committed

by me in the interests of helpless animals. What did I feel now? Nothing but a selfish sense of uneasiness, at having been accidentally witness of an act which disturbed my composure. I turned away, regretting that I had gone to the window and looked out.

"This was not an agreeable train of thought to follow. What could I do? I was answered by the impulse which commands me to paint.

"I sharpened my pencils, and opened my box of colors, and determined to produce a work of art. To my astonishment, the brutal figure of the carter forced its way into my memory again and again. It (without in the least knowing why) as if the one chance of getting rid of this curious incubus, was to put the persistent image of the man on paper. It was done mechanically, and yet done so well, that I was encouraged to add to the picture. I put in next the poor beaten horse (another good likeness!); and then I introduced a life-like portrait of myself, giving the man the sound thrashing that he had deserved. Strange to say, this representation of what I ought to have done, relieved my mind as if I had actually done it. I looked at the pre-eminent figure of myself, and felt good, and turned to my Trials, and read them over again, and liked them better than ever."

"Thursday.--The bookseller has found a second-hand copy of the French Trials, and has sent them to me (as he expresses it) 'on approval'.

"I more than approve--I admire; and I more than admire--I imitate. These criminal stories are told with a dramatic power, which has impelled me to try if I can rival the clever French narrative. I found a promising subject by putting myself in my grandfather's place, and tracing the means by which it had occurred to me that he might have escaped the discovery of his crime.

"I cannot remember having read any novel with a tenth part of the interest that absorbed me, in constructing my imaginary train of circumstances. So completely did the reality of the narrative impress itself on my mind, that I felt as if the murder that I was relating had been a crime committed by myself. It was my own ingenuity that hid the dead body, and removed the traces of blood--and my own self-control that presented me as an innocent person, when the victim was missing, and I was asked (among other respectable people) to say whether I thought he was living or dead."

"A whole week has passed--and has been occupied by my new literary pursuit.

"My inexhaustible imagination invents plots and conspiracies of which I am

the happy hero. I set traps which invariably catch my enemies. I place myself in positions which are entirely new to me. Yesterday, for instance, I invented a method of spiriting away a young person, whose disappearance was of considerable importance under the circumstances, and succeeded in completely bewildering her father, her friends, and the police: not a trace of her could they find. If I ever have occasion to do, in reality, what I only suppose myself to do in these exercises of ingenuity, what a dangerous man I may yet prove to be!

"This morning, I rose, planning to amuse myself with a new narrative, when the ideal world in which I am now living, became a world annihilated by collision with the sordid interests of real life.

"In plainer words, I received a written message from my landlord which has annoyed me--and not without good cause. This tiresome person finds himself unexpectedly obliged to give up possession of his house. The circumstances are not worth relating. The result is important--I am compelled to find new lodgings. Where am I to go?

"I left it to chance. That is to say, I looked at the railway time-table, and took a ticket for the first place, of which the name happened to catch my eye. Arrived at my destination, I found myself in a dirty manufacturing town, with an ugly river running through it.

"After a little reflection, I turned my back on the town, and followed the course of the river, in search of shelter and solitude on one or the other of its banks. An hour of walking brought me to an odd-looking cottage, half old and half new, attached to a water-mill. A bill in one of the windows announced that rooms were to be let; and a look round revealed a thick wood on my left hand, and a wilderness of sand and heath on my right. So far as appearances went, here was the very place for me.

"I knocked at the door, and was admitted by a little lean sly-looking old man. He showed me the rooms--one for myself, and one for my servant. Wretched as they were, the loneliness of the situation recommended them to me. I made no objections; and I consented to pay the rent that was asked. The one thing that remained to be done, in the interests of my tranquillity, was to ascertain if any other persons lived the cottage besides my new landlord. He wrote his answer to the question: 'Nobody but my daughter.' With serious misgivings, I inquired if his daughter was young. He wrote two fatal figures: '18'.

"Here was a discovery which disarranged all my plans, just as I had formed

them! The prospect of having a girl in the house, at the age associated with my late disagreeable experience of the sensitive sex, was more than my irritable temper could endure. I saw the old man going to the window to take down the bill. Turning in a rage to stop him, I was suddenly brought to a standstill by the appearance of a person who had just entered the room.

"Was this the formidable obstacle to my tranquillity, which had prevented me from taking the rooms that I had chosen? Yes! I knew the miller's daughter intuitively. Delirium possessed me; my eyes devoured her; my heart beat as if it would burst out of my bosom. The old man approached me; he nodded, and grinned, and pointed to her. Did he claim his parental interest in her? Did he mean that she belonged to him? No! she belonged to me. She might be his daughter. She was My Fate.

"I don't know what it was in the girl that took me by storm. Nothing in her look or her manner expressed the slightest interest in me. That famous "beauty" of mine which had worked such ravages in the hearts of other young women, seemed not even to attract her notice. When her father put his hand to his ear, and told her (as I guessed) that I was deaf, there was no pity in her splendid brown eyes; they expressed a momentary curiosity, and nothing more. Possibly she had a hard heart? or perhaps she took a dislike to me, at first sight? It made no difference to my mind, either way. Was she the most beautiful creature I had ever seen? Not even that excuse was to be made for me. I have met with women of her dark complexion who were, beyond dispute, her superiors in beauty, and have looked at them with indifference. Add to this, that I am one of the men whom women offend if they are not perfectly well-dressed. The miller's daughter was badly dressed; her magnificent figure was profaned by the wretchedly-made gown that she wore. I forgave the profanation. In spite of the protest of my own better taste, I resigned myself to her gown. Is it possible adequately to describe such infatuation as this? Quite possible! I have only to acknowledge that I took the rooms at the cottage--and there is the state of my mind, exposed without mercy!

"How will it end?"