BETWEEN THE SCENES - PROGRESS OF THE STORY THROUGH THE POST.

I.

From Norah Vanstone to Mr. Pendril.

"Westmoreland House, Kensington,

"August 14th, 1846.

"DEAR MR. PENDRIL--The date of this letter will show you that the last of many hard partings is over. We have left Combe-Raven; we have said farewell to home.

"I have been thinking seriously of what you said to me on Wednesday, before you went back to town. I entirely agree with you that Miss Garth is more shaken by all she has gone through for our sakes than she is herself willing to admit; and that it is my duty, for the future, to spare her all the anxiety that I can on the subject of my sister and myself. This is very little to do for our dearest friend, for our second mother. Such as it is, I will do it with all my heart.

"But, forgive me for saying that I am as far as ever from agreeing with you about Magdalen. I am so sensible, in our helpless position, of the importance of your assistance; so anxious to be worthy of the interest of my father's trusted adviser and oldest friend, that I feel really and truly disappointed with myself for differing with you--and yet I do differ. Magdalen is very strange, very unaccountable, to those who don't know her intimately. I can understand that she has innocently misled you; and that she has presented herself, perhaps, under her least favorable aspect. But that the clew to her language and her conduct on Wednesday last is to be found in such a feeling toward the man who has ruined us, as the feeling at which you hinted, is what I can not and will not believe of my sister. If you knew, as I do, what a noble nature she has, you would not be surprised at this obstinate resistance of mine to your opinion. Will you try to alter it? I don't mind what Mr. Clare says; he believes in nothing. But I attach a very serious importance to what you say; and, kind as I know your motives to be, it distresses me to think you are doing Magdalen an injustice.

"Having relieved my mind of this confession, I may now come to the proper object of my letter. I promised, if you could not find leisure time to visit us to-day, to write and tell you all that happened after you left us. The day has passed without our seeing you. So I open my writing-case and perform my promise.

"I am sorry to say that three of the women-servants--the house-maid, the kitchen-maid, and even our own maid (to whom I am sure we have always been kind)--took advantage of your having paid them their wages to pack up and go as soon as your back was turned. They came to say good-by with as much ceremony and as little feeling as if they were leaving the house under ordinary circumstances. The cook, for all her violent temper, behaved very differently: she sent up a message to say that she would stop and help us to the last. And Thomas (who has never yet been in any other place than ours) spoke so gratefully of my dear father's unvarying kindness to him, and asked so anxiously to be allowed to go on serving us while his little savings lasted, that Magdalen and I forgot all formal considerations and both shook hands with him. The poor lad went out of the room crying. I wish him well; I hope he will find a kind master and a good place.

"The long, quiet, rainy evening out-of-doors--our last evening at Combe-Raven--was a sad trial to us. I think winter-time would have weighed less on our spirits; the drawn curtains and the bright lamps, and the companionable fires would have helped us. We were only five in the house altogether--after having once been so many! I can't tell you how dreary the gray daylight looked, toward seven o'clock, in the lonely rooms, and on the noiseless staircase. Surely, the prejudice in favor of long summer evenings is the prejudice of happy people? We did our best. We kept ourselves employed, and Miss Garth helped us. The prospect of preparing for our departure, which had seemed so dreadful earlier in the day, altered into the prospect of a refuge from ourselves as the evening came on. We each tried at first to pack up in our own rooms--but the loneliness was more than we could bear. We carried all our possessions downstairs, and heaped them on the large dining-table, and so made our preparations together in the same room. I am sure we have taken nothing away which does not properly belong to us.

"Having already mentioned to you my own conviction that Magdalen was not herself when you saw her on Wednesday, I feel tempted to stop here and give you an instance in proof of what I say. The little circumstance happened on Wednesday night, just before we went up to our rooms.

"After we had packed our dresses and our birthday presents, our books and our music, we began to sort our letters, which had got confused from being placed on the table together. Some of my letters were mixed with Magdalen's, and some of hers with mine. Among these last I found a card, which had been given to my sister early in the year by an actor who managed an amateur theatrical performance in which she took a part. The man had given her the card, containing his name and address, in the belief that she would be invited to many more amusements of the same kind, and in the hope that she would recommend him as a superintendent on future occasions. I only relate these trifling particulars to show you how little worth keeping such a card could be, in such circumstances as ours. Naturally enough, I threw it away from me across the table, meaning to throw it on the floor. It fell short, close to the place in which Magdalen was sitting. She took it up, looked at it, and immediately declared that she would not have had this perfectly worthless thing destroyed for the world. She was almost angry with me for having thrown it away; almost angry with Miss Garth for asking what she could possibly want with it! Could there be any plainer proof than this that our misfortunes--falling so much more heavily on her than on me--have quite unhinged her, and worn her out? Surely her words and looks are not to be interpreted against her, when she is not sufficiently mistress of herself to exert her natural judgment--when she shows the unreasonable petulance of a child on a question which is not of the slightest importance.

"A little after eleven we went upstairs to try if we could get some rest.

"I drew aside the curtain of my window and looked out. Oh, what a cruel last night it was: no moon, no stars; such deep darkness that not one of the dear familiar objects in the garden was visible when I looked for them; such deep stillness that even my own movements about the room almost frightened me! I tried to lie down and sleep, but the sense of loneliness came again and quite overpowered me. You will say I am old enough, at six-and-twenty, to have exerted more control over myself. I hardly know how it happened, but I stole into Magdalen's room, just as I used to steal into it years and years ago, when we were children. She was not in bed; she was sitting with her writing materials before her, thinking. I said I wanted to be with her the last night; and she kissed me, and told me to lie down, and promised soon to follow me. My mind was a little quieted and I fell asleep. It was daylight when I woke--and the first sight I saw was Magdalen, still sitting in the chair, and still thinking. She had never been to bed; she had not slept all through the night.

"'I shall sleep when we have left Combe-Raven,' she said. 'I shall be better when it is all over, and I have bid Frank good-by.' She had in her hand our

father's will, and the letter he wrote to you; and when she had done speaking, she gave them into my possession. I was the eldest (she said), and those last precious relics ought to be in my keeping. I tried to propose to her that we should divide them; but she shook her head. 'I have copied for myself,' was her answer, 'all that he says of us in the will, and all that he says in the letter.' She told me this, and took from her bosom a tiny white silk bag, which she had made in the night, and in which she had put the extracts, so as to keep them always about her. 'This tells me in his own words what his last wishes were for both of us,' she said; 'and this is all I want for the future.'

"These are trifles to dwell on; and I am almost surprised at myself for not feeling ashamed to trouble you with them. But, since I have known what your early connection was with my father and mother, I have learned to think of you (and, I suppose, to write to you) as an old friend. And, besides, I have it so much at heart to change your opinion of Magdalen, that I can't help telling you the smallest things about her which may, in my judgment, end in making you think of her as I do.

"When breakfast-time came (on Thursday morning), we were surprised to find a strange letter on the table. Perhaps I ought to mention it to you, in case of any future necessity for your interference. It was addressed to Miss Garth, on paper with the deepest mourning-border round it; and the writer was the same man who followed us on our way home from a walk one day last spring--Captain Wragge. His object appears to be to assert once more his audacious claim to a family connection with my poor mother, under cover of a letter of condolence; which it is an insolence in such a person to have written at all. He expresses as much sympathy--on his discovery of our affliction in the newspaper--as if he had been really intimate with us; and he begs to know, in a postscript (being evidently in total ignorance of all that has really happened), whether it is thought desirable that he should be present, among the other relatives, at the reading of the will! The address he gives, at which letters will reach him for the next fortnight, is, 'Post-office, Birmingham.' This is all I have to tell you on the subject. Both the letter and the writer seem to me to be equally unworthy of the slightest notice, on our part or on yours.

"After breakfast Magdalen left us, and went by herself into the morning-room. The weather being still showery, we had arranged that Francis Clare should see her in that room, when he presented himself to take his leave. I was upstairs when he came; and I remained upstairs for more than half an hour afterward, sadly anxious, as you may well believe, on Magdalen's account.

"At the end of the half-hour or more, I came downstairs. As I reached the landing I suddenly heard her voice, raised entreatingly, and calling on him by his name--then loud sobs--then a frightful laughing and screaming, both together, that rang through the house. I instantly ran into the room, and found Magdalen on the sofa in violent hysterics, and Frank standing staring at her, with a lowering, angry face, biting his nails.

"I felt so indignant--without knowing plainly why, for I was ignorant, of course, of what had passed at the interview--that I took Mr. Francis Clare by the shoulders and pushed him out of the room. I am careful to tell you how I acted toward him, and what led to it; because I understand that he is excessively offended with me, and that he is likely to mention elsewhere what he calls my unladylike violence toward him. If he should mention it to you, I am anxious to acknowledge, of my own accord, that I forgot myself--not, I hope you will think, without some provocation.

"I pushed him into the hall, leaving Magdalen, for the moment, to Miss Garth's care. Instead of going away, he sat down sulkily on one of the hall chairs. 'May I ask the reason of this extraordinary violence?' he inquired, with an injured look. 'No,' I said. 'You will be good enough to imagine the reason for yourself, and to leave us immediately, if you please.' He sat doggedly in the chair, biting his nails and considering. 'What have I done to be treated in this unfeeling manner?' he asked, after a while. 'I can enter into no discussion with you,' I answered; 'I can only request you to leave us. If you persist in waiting to see my sister again, I will go to the cottage myself and appeal to your father.' He got up in a great hurry at those words. 'I have been infamously used in this business,' he said. 'All the hardships and the sacrifices have fallen to my share. I'm the only one among you who has any heart: all the rest are as hard as stones--Magdalen included. In one breath she says she loves me, and in another she tells me to go to China. What have I done to be treated with this heartless inconsistency? I am consistent myself--I only want to stop at home--and (what's the consequence?) you're all against me!' In that manner he grumbled his way down the steps, and so I saw the last of him. This was all that passed between us. If he gives you any other account of it, what he says will be false. He made no attempt to return. An hour afterward his father came alone to say good-by. He saw Miss Garth and me, but not Magdalen; and he told us he would take the necessary measures, with your assistance, for having his son properly looked after in London, and seen safely on board the vessel when the time came. It was a short visit, and a sad leave-taking. Even Mr. Clare was sorry, though he tried hard to hide it.

"We had barely two hours, after Mr. Clare had left us, before it would be time to go. I went back to Magdalen, and found her quieter and better, though terribly pale and exhausted, and oppressed, as I fancied, by thoughts which she could not prevail on herself to communicate. She would tell me nothing then--she has told me nothing since--of what passed between herself and Francis Clare. When I spoke of him angrily (feeling as I did that he had distressed and tortured her, when she ought to have had all the encouragement and comfort from him that man could give), she refused to hear me: she made the kindest allowances and the sweetest excuses for him, and laid all the blame of the dreadful state in which I had found her entirely on herself. Was I wrong in telling you that she had a noble nature? And won't you alter your opinion when you read these lines?

"We had no friends to come and bid us good-by; and our few acquaintances were too far from us--perhaps too indifferent about us--to call. We employed the little leisure left in going over the house together for the last time. We took leave of our old schoolroom, our bedrooms, the room where our mother died, the little study where our father used to settle his accounts and write his letters--feeling toward them, in our forlorn condition, as other girls might have felt at parting with old friends. From the house, in a gleam of fine weather, we went into the garden, and gathered our last nosegay; with the purpose of drying the flowers when they begin to wither, and keeping them in remembrance of the happy days that are gone. When we had said good-by to the garden, there was only half an hour left. We went together to the grave; we knelt down, side by side, in silence, and kissed the sacred ground. I thought my heart would have broken. August was the month of my mother's birthday; and, this time last year, my father and Magdalen and I were all consulting in secret what present we could make to surprise her with on the birthday morning.

"If you had seen how Magdalen suffered, you would never doubt her again. I had to take her from the last resting-place of our father and mother almost by force. Before we were out of the churchyard she broke from me and ran back. She dropped on her knees at the grave; tore up from it passionately a handful of grass; and said something to herself, at the same moment, which, though I followed her instantly, I did not get near enough to hear. She turned on me in such a frenzied manner, when I tried to raise her from the ground--she looked at me with such a fearful wildness in her eyes--that I felt absolutely terrified at the sight of her. To my relief, the paroxysm left her as suddenly as it had come. She thrust away the tuft of grass into the bosom of her dress, and took my arm and hurried with me out of the churchyard. I asked her why she had gone back--I asked what those words were which she had spoken at the grave. 'A promise to our dead father,' she answered,

with a momentary return of the wild look and the frenzied manner which had startled me already. I was afraid to agitate her by saying more; I left all other questions to be asked at a fitter and a quieter time. You will understand from this how terribly she suffers, how wildly and strangely she acts under violent agitation; and you will not interpret against her what she said or did when you saw her on Wednesday last.

"We only returned to the house in time to hasten away from it to the train. Perhaps it was better for us so--better that we had only a moment left to look back before the turn in the road hid the last of Combe-Raven from our view. There was not a soul we knew at the station; nobody to stare at us, nobody to wish us good-by. The rain came on again as we took our seats in the train. What we felt at the sight of the railway--what horrible remembrances it forced on our minds of the calamity which has made us fatherless--I cannot, and dare not, tell you. I have tried anxiously not to write this letter in a gloomy tone; not to return all your kindness to us by distressing you with our grief. Perhaps I have dwelt too long already on the little story of our parting from home? I can only say, in excuse, that my heart is full of it; and what is not in my heart my pen won't write.

"We have been so short a time in our new abode that I have nothing more to tell you--except that Miss Garth's sister has received us with the heartiest kindness. She considerately leaves us to ourselves, until we are fitter than we are now to think of our future plans, and to arrange as we best can for earning our own living. The house is so large, and the position of our rooms has been so thoughtfully chosen, that I should hardly know--except when I hear the laughing of the younger girls in the garden--that we were living in a school.

"With kindest and best wishes from Miss Garth and my sister, believe me, dear Mr. Pendril, gratefully yours,

"NORAH VANSTONE."

II.

From Miss Garth to Mr. Pendril.

"Westmoreland House, Kensington,

"September 23d, 1846.

"MY DEAR SIR--I write these lines in such misery of mind as no words can describe. Magdalen has deserted us. At an early hour this morning she secretly left the house, and she has not been heard of since.

"I would come and speak to you personally; but I dare not leave Norah. I must try to control myself; I must try to write.

"Nothing happened yesterday to prepare me or to prepare Norah for this last--I had almost said, this worst--of all our afflictions. The only alteration we either of us noticed in the unhappy girl was an alteration for the better when we parted for the night. She kissed me, which she has not done latterly; and she burst out crying when she embraced her sister next. We had so little suspicion of the truth that we thought these signs of renewed tenderness and affection a promise of better things for the future.

"This morning, when her sister went into her room, it was empty, and a note in her handwriting, addressed to Norah, was lying on the dressing-table. I cannot prevail on Norah to part with the note; I can only send you the inclosed copy of it. You will see that it affords no clew to the direction she has taken.

"Knowing the value of time, in this dreadful emergency, I examined her room, and (with my sister's help) questioned the servants immediately on the news of her absence reaching me. Her wardrobe was empty; and all her boxes but one, which she has evidently taken away with her, are empty, too. We are of opinion that she has privately turned her dresses and jewelry into money; that she had the one trunk she took with her removed from the house yesterday; and that she left us this morning on foot. The answers given by one of the servants are so unsatisfactory that we believe the woman has been bribed to assist her; and has managed all those arrangements for her flight which she could not have safely undertaken by herself.

"Of the immediate object with which she has left us, I entertain no doubt.

"I have reasons (which I can tell you at a fitter time) for feeling assured that she has gone away with the intention of trying her fortune on the stage. She has in her possession the card of an actor by profession, who superintended an amateur theatrical performance at Clifton, in which she took part; and to him she has gone to help her. I saw the card at the time, and I know the actor's name to be Huxtable. The address I cannot call to mind quite so correctly; but I am almost sure it was at some theatrical place in Bow Street, Covent Garden. Let me entreat you not to lose a moment in sending to make the necessary inquiries; the first trace of her will, I firmly believe, be found at that address.

"If we had nothing worse to dread than her attempting to go on the stage, I should not feel the distress and dismay which now overpower me. Hundreds of other girls have acted as recklessly as she has acted, and have not ended ill after all. But my fears for Magdalen do not begin and end with the risk she is running at present.

"There has been something weighing on her mind ever since we left Combe-Raven--weighing far more heavily for the last six weeks than at first. Until the period when Francis Clare left England, I am persuaded she was secretly sustained by the hope that he would contrive to see her again. From the day when she knew that the measures you had taken for preventing this had succeeded; from the day when she was assured that the ship had really taken him away, nothing has roused, nothing has interested her. She has given herself up, more and more hopelessly, to her own brooding thoughts; thoughts which I believe first entered her mind on the day when the utter ruin of the prospects on which her marriage depended was made known to her. She has formed some desperate project of contesting the possession of her father's fortune with Michael Vanstone; and the stage career which she has gone away to try is nothing more than a means of freeing herself from all home dependence, and of enabling her to run what mad risks she pleases, in perfect security from all home control. What it costs me to write of her in these terms, I must leave you to imagine. The time has gone by when any consideration of distress to my own feelings can weigh with me. Whatever I can say which will open your eyes to the real danger, and strengthen your conviction of the instant necessity of averting it, I say in despite of myself, without hesitation and without reserve.

"One word more, and I have done.

"The last time you were so good as to come to this house, do you remember how Magdalen embarrassed and distressed us by questioning you about her

right to bear her father's name? Do you remember her persisting in her inquiries, until she had forced you to acknowledge that, legally speaking, she and her sister had No Name? I venture to remind you of this, because you have the affairs of hundreds of clients to think of, and you might well have forgotten the circumstance. Whatever natural reluctance she might otherwise have had to deceiving us, and degrading herself, by the use of an assumed name, that conversation with you is certain to have removed. We must discover her by personal description--we can trace her in no other way.

"I can think of nothing more to guide your decision in our deplorable emergency. For God's sake, let no expense and no efforts be spared. My letter ought to reach you by ten o'clock this morning, at the latest. Let me have one line in answer, to say you will act instantly for the best. My only hope of quieting Norah is to show her a word of encouragement from your pen. Believe me, dear sir, yours sincerely and obliged,

"HARRIET GARTH."

III.

From Magdalen to Norah (inclosed in the preceding Letter).

"MY DARLING--Try to forgive me. I have struggled against myself till I am worn out in the effort. I am the wretchedest of living creatures. Our quiet life here maddens me; I can bear it no longer; I must go. If you knew what my thoughts are; if you knew how hard I have fought against them, and how horribly they have gone on haunting me in the lonely quiet of this house, you would pity and forgive me. Oh, my love, don't feel hurt at my not opening my heart to you as I ought! I dare not open it. I dare not show myself to you as I really am.

"Pray don't send and seek after me; I will write and relieve all your anxieties. You know, Norah, we must get our living for ourselves; I have only gone to get mine in the manner which is fittest for me. Whether I succeed, or whether I fail, I can do myself no harm either way. I have no position to lose, and no name to degrade. Don't doubt I love you--don't let Miss Garth doubt my gratitude. I go away miserable at leaving you; but I must go. If I had loved you less dearly, I might have had the courage to say this in your presence--but how could I trust myself to resist your persuasions, and to bear the sight of your distress? Farewell, my darling! Take a thousand kisses from me, my own best, dearest love, till we meet again.

"MAGDALEN."

IV.

From Sergeant Bulmer (of the Detective Police) to Mr. Pendril.

"Scotland Yard, September 29th, 1846.

"SIR--Your clerk informs me that the parties interested in our inquiry after the missing young lady are anxious for news of the same. I went to your office to speak to you about the matter to-day. Not having found you, and not being able to return and try again to-morrow, I write these lines to save delay, and to tell you how we stand thus far.

"I am sorry to say, no advance has been made since my former report. The trace of the young lady which we found nearly a week since, still remains the last trace discovered of her. This case seems a mighty simple one looked at from a distance. Looked at close, it alters very considerably for the worse, and becomes, to speak the plain truth--a Poser.

"This is how we now stand:

"We have traced the young lady to the theatrical agent's in Bow Street. We know that at an early hour on the morning of the twenty-third the agent was called downstairs, while he was dressing, to speak to a young lady in a cab at the door. We know that, on her production of Mr. Huxtable's card, he wrote on it Mr. Huxtable's address in the country, and heard her order the cabman to drive to the Great Northern terminus. We believe she left by the nine o'clock train. We followed her by the twelve o'clock train. We have ascertained that she called at half-past two at Mr. Huxtable's lodgings; that she found he was away, and not expected back till eight in the evening; that she left word she would call again at eight; and that she never returned. Mr. Huxtable's statement is--he and the young lady have never set eyes on each other. The first consideration which follows, is this: Are we to believe Mr. Huxtable? I have carefully inquired into his character; I know as much, or more, about him than he knows about himself; and my opinion is, that we are to believe him. To the best of my knowledge, he is a perfectly honest man.

"Here, then, is the hitch in the case. The young lady sets out with a certain object before her. Instead of going on to the accomplishment of that object, she stops short of it. Why has she stopped? and where? Those are, unfortunately, just the questions which we can't answer yet.

"My own opinion of the matter is, briefly, as follows: I don't think she has met with any serious accident. Serious accidents, in nine cases out of ten, discover themselves. My own notion is, that she has fallen into the hands of some person or persons interested in hiding her away, and sharp enough to know how to set about it. Whether she is in their charge, with or without her own consent, is more than I can undertake to say at present. I don't wish to raise false hopes or false fears; I wish to stop short at the opinion I have given already.

"In regard to the future, I may tell you that I have left one of my men in daily communication with the authorities. I have also taken care to have the handbills offering a reward for the discovery of her widely circulated. Lastly, I have completed the necessary arrangements for seeing the play-bills of all country theaters, and for having the dramatic companies well looked after. Some years since, this would have cost a serious expenditure of time and money. Luckily for our purpose, the country theaters are in a bad way. Excepting the large cities, hardly one of them is open, and we can keep our eye on them, with little expense and less difficulty.

"These are the steps which I think it needful to take at present. If you are of another opinion, you have only to give me your directions, and I will carefully attend to the same. I don't by any means despair of our finding the young lady and bringing her back to her friends safe and well. Please to tell them so; and allow me to subscribe myself, yours respectfully,

"ABRAHAM BULMER."

V.

Anonymous Letter addressed to Mr. Pendril.

"SIR--A word to the wise. The friends of a certain young lady are wasting time and money to no purpose. Your confidential clerk and your detective policeman are looking for a needle in a bottle of hay. This is the ninth of October, and they have not found her yet: they will as soon find the Northwest Passage. Call your dogs off; and you may hear of the young lady's safety under her own hand. The longer you look for her, the longer she will remain, what she is now--lost."

[The preceding letter is thus indorsed, in Mr. Pendril's handwriting: "No apparent means of tracing the inclosed to its source. Post-mark, 'Charing Cross.' Stationer's stamp cut off the inside of the envelope. Handwriting, probably a man's, in disguise. Writer, whoever he is, correctly informed. No further trace of the younger Miss Vanstone discovered yet."]