

BETWEEN THE SCENES.

CHRONICLE OF EVENTS: PRESERVED IN CAPTAIN WRAGGE'S DISPATCH-BOX.

I.

Chronicle for October, 1846.

I HAVE retired into the bosom of my family. We are residing in the secluded village of Ruswarp, on the banks of the Esk, about two miles inland from Whitby. Our lodgings are comfortable, and we possess the additional blessing of a tidy landlady. Mrs. Wragge and Miss Vanstone preceded me here, in accordance with the plan I laid down for effecting our retreat from York. On the next day I followed them alone, with the luggage. On leaving the terminus, I had the satisfaction of seeing the lawyer's clerk in close confabulation with the detective officer whose advent I had prophesied. I left him in peaceable possession of the city of York, and the whole surrounding neighborhood. He has returned the compliment, and has left us in peaceable possession of the valley of the Esk, thirty miles away from him.

Remarkable results have followed my first efforts at the cultivation of Miss Vanstone's dramatic abilities.

I have discovered that she possesses extraordinary talent as a mimic. She has the flexible face, the manageable voice, and the dramatic knack which fit a woman for character-parts and disguises on the stage. All she now wants is teaching and practice, to make her sure of her own resources. The experience of her, thus gained, has revived an idea in my mind which originally occurred to me at one of the "At Homes" of the late inimitable Charles Mathews, comedian. I was in the Wine Trade at the time, I remember. We imitated the Vintage-processes of Nature in a back-kitchen at Brompton, and produced a dinner-sherry, pale and curious, tonic in character, round in the mouth, a favorite with the Court of Spain, at nineteen-and-sixpence a dozen, bottles included--Vide Prospectus of the period. The profits of myself and partners were small; we were in advance of the tastes of the age, and in debt to the bottle merchant. Being at my wits' end for want of money, and seeing what audiences Mathews drew, the idea occurred to me of starting an imitation of the great Imitator himself, in the

shape of an "At Home," given by a woman. The one trifling obstacle in the way was the difficulty of finding the woman. From that time to this, I have hitherto failed to overcome it. I have conquered it at last; I have found the woman now. Miss Vanstone possesses youth and beauty as well as talent. Train her in the art of dramatic disguise; provide her with appropriate dresses for different characters; develop her accomplishments in singing and playing; give her plenty of smart talk addressed to the audience; advertise her as a Young Lady at Home; astonish the public by a dramatic entertainment which depends from first to last on that young lady's own sole exertions; commit the entire management of the thing to my care--and what follows as a necessary consequence? Fame for my fair relative, and a fortune for myself.

I put these considerations, as frankly as usual, to Miss Vanstone; offering to write the Entertainment, to manage all the business, and to share the profits. I did not forget to strengthen my case by informing her of the jealousies she would encounter, and the obstacles she would meet, if she went on the stage. And I wound up by a neat reference to the private inquiries which she is interested in making, and to the personal independence which she is desirous of securing before she acts on her information. "If you go on the stage," I said, "your services will be bought by a manager, and he may insist on his claims just at the time when you want to get free from him. If, on the contrary, you adopt my views, you will be your own mistress and your own manager, and you can settle your course just as you like." This last consideration appeared to strike her. She took a day to consider it; and, when the day was over, gave her consent.

I had the whole transaction down in black and white immediately. Our arrangement is eminently satisfactory, except in one particular. She shows a morbid distrust of writing her name at the bottom of any document which I present to her, and roundly declares she will sign nothing. As long as it is her interest to provide herself with pecuniary resources for the future, she verbally engages to go on. When it ceases to be her interest, she plainly threatens to leave off at a week's notice. A difficult girl to deal with; she has found out her own value to me already. One comfort is, I have the cooking of the accounts; and my fair relative shall not fill her pockets too suddenly if I can help it.

My exertions in training Miss Vanstone for the coming experiment have been varied by the writing of two anonymous letters in that young lady's interests. Finding her too fidgety about arranging matters with her friends to pay proper attention to my instructions, I wrote anonymously to the lawyer who is conducting the inquiry after her, recommending him, in a friendly way, to

give it up. The letter was inclosed to a friend of mine in London, with instructions to post it at Charing Cross. A week later I sent a second letter, through the same channel, requesting the lawyer to inform me, in writing, whether he and his clients had or had not decided on taking my advice. I directed him, with jocose reference to the collision of interests between us, to address his letter: "Tit for Tat, Post-office, West Strand."

In a few days the answer arrived--privately forwarded, of course, to Post-office, Whitby, by arrangement with my friend in London.

The lawyer's reply was short and surly: "SIR--If my advice had been followed, you and your anonymous letter would both be treated with the contempt which they deserve. But the wishes of Miss Magdalen Vanstone's eldest sister have claims on my consideration which I cannot dispute; and at her entreaty I inform you that all further proceedings on my part are withdrawn--on the express understanding that this concession is to open facilities for written communication, at least, between the two sisters. A letter from the elder Miss Vanstone is inclosed in this. If I don't hear in a week's time that it has been received, I shall place the matter once more in the hands of the police.--WILLIAM PENDRIL." A sour man, this William Pendril. I can only say of him what an eminent nobleman once said of his sulky servant--"I wouldn't have such a temper as that fellow has got for any earthly consideration that could be offered me!"

As a matter of course, I looked into the letter which the lawyer inclosed, before delivering it. Miss Vanstone, the elder, described herself as distracted at not hearing from her sister; as suited with a governess's situation in a private family; as going into the situation in a week's time; and as longing for a letter to comfort her, before she faced the trial of undertaking her new duties. After closing the envelope again, I accompanied the delivery of the letter to Miss Vanstone, the younger, by a word of caution. "Are you more sure of your own courage now," I said, "than you were when I met you?" She was ready with her answer. "Captain Wragge, when you met me on the Walls of York I had not gone too far to go back. I have gone too far now."

If she really feels this--and I think she does--her corresponding with her sister can do no harm. She wrote at great length the same day; cried profusely over her own epistolary composition; and was remarkably ill-tempered and snappish toward me, when we met in the evening. She wants experience, poor girl--she sadly wants experience of the world. How consoling to know that I am just the man to give it her!

II.

Chronicle for November.

We are established at Derby. The Entertainment is written; and the rehearsals are in steady progress. All difficulties are provided for, but the one eternal difficulty of money. Miss Vanstone's resources stretch easily enough to the limits of our personal wants; including piano-forte hire for practice, and the purchase and making of the necessary dresses. But the expenses of starting the Entertainment are beyond the reach of any means we possess. A theatrical friend of mine here, whom I had hoped to interest in our undertaking, proves, unhappily, to be at a crisis in his career. The field of human sympathy, out of which I might have raised the needful pecuniary crop, is closed to me from want of time to cultivate it. I see no other resource left--if we are to be ready by Christmas--than to try one of the local music-sellers in this town, who is said to be a speculating man. A private rehearsal at these lodgings, and a bargain which will fill the pockets of a grasping stranger--such are the sacrifices which dire necessity imposes on me at starting. Well! there is only one consolation: I'll cheat the music-seller.

III.

Chronicle for December. First Fortnight.

The music-seller extorts my unwilling respect. He is one of the very few human beings I have met with in the course of my life who is not to be cheated. He has taken a masterly advantage of our helplessness; and has imposed terms on us, for performances at Derby and Nottingham, with such a business-like disregard of all interests but his own that--fond as I am of putting things down in black and white--I really cannot prevail upon myself to record the bargain. It is needless to say, I have yielded with my best grace; sharing with my fair relative the wretched pecuniary prospects offered to us. Our turn will come. In the meantime, I cordially regret not having known the local music-seller in early life.

Personally speaking, I have no cause to complain of Miss Vanstone. We have arranged that she shall regularly forward her address (at the post-office) to her friends, as we move about from place to place. Besides communicating in this way with her sister, she also reports herself to a certain Mr. Clare, residing in Somersetshire, who is to forward all letters exchanged between herself and his son. Careful inquiry has informed me that this latter individual is now in China. Having suspected from the first that there was a gentleman in the background, it is highly satisfactory to know that he recedes into the remote perspective of Asia. Long may he remain there!

The trifling responsibility of finding a name for our talented Magdalen to perform under has been cast on my shoulders. She feels no interest whatever in this part of the subject. "Give me any name you like," she said; "I have as much right to one as to another. Make it yourself." I have readily consented to gratify her wishes. The resources of my commercial library include a list of useful names to assume; and we can choose one at five minutes' notice, when the admirable man of business who now oppresses us is ready to issue his advertisements. On this point my mind is easy enough: all my anxieties center in the fair performer. I have not the least doubt she will do wonders if she is only left to herself on the first night. But if the day's post is mischievous enough to upset her by a letter from her sister, I tremble for the consequences.

IV.

Chronicle for December. Second Fortnight.

My gifted relative has made her first appearance in public, and has laid the foundation of our future fortunes.

On the first night the attendance was larger than I had ventured to hope. The novelty of an evening's entertainment, conducted from beginning to end by the unaided exertions of a young lady (see advertisement), roused the public curiosity, and the seats were moderately well filled. As good luck would have it, no letter addressed to Miss Vanstone came that day. She was in full possession of herself until she got the first dress on and heard the bell ring for the music. At that critical moment she suddenly broke down. I found her alone in the waiting-room, sobbing, and talking like a child. "Oh, poor papa! poor papa! Oh, my God, if he saw me now!" My experience in such matters at once informed me that it was a case of sal-volatile, accompanied by sound advice. We strung her up in no time to concert pitch; set her eyes in a blaze; and made her out-blush her own rouge. The curtain rose when we had got her at a red heat. She dashed at it exactly as she dashed at it in the back drawing-room at Rosemary Lane. Her personal appearance settled the question of her reception before she opened her lips. She rushed full gallop through her changes of character, her songs, and her dialogue; making mistakes by the dozen, and never stopping to set them right; carrying the people along with her in a perfect whirlwind, and never waiting for the applause. The whole thing was over twenty minutes sooner than the time we had calculated on. She carried it through to the end, and fainted on the waiting-room sofa a minute after the curtain was down. The music-seller having taken leave of his senses from sheer astonishment, and I having no evening costume to appear in, we sent the doctor to make the necessary apology to the public, who were calling for her till the place rang again. I prompted our medical orator with a neat speech from behind the curtain; and I never heard such applause, from such a comparatively small audience, before in my life. I felt the tribute--I felt it deeply. Fourteen years ago I scraped together the wretched means of existence in this very town by reading the newspaper (with explanatory comments) to the company at a public-house. And now here I am at the top of the tree.

It is needless to say that my first proceeding was to bowl out the music-seller on the spot. He called the next morning, no doubt with a liberal proposal for extending the engagement beyond Derby and Nottingham. My

niece was described as not well enough to see him; and, when he asked for me, he was told I was not up. I happened to be at that moment engaged in putting the case pathetically to our gifted Magdalen. Her answer was in the highest degree satisfactory. She would permanently engage herself to nobody--least of all to a man who had taken sordid advantage of her position and mine. She would be her own mistress, and share the profits with me, while she wanted money, and while it suited her to go on. So far so good. But the reason she added next, for her flattering preference of myself, was less to my taste. "The music-seller is not the man whom I employ to make my inquiries," she said. "You are the man." I don't like her steadily remembering those inquiries, in the first bewilderment of her success. It looks ill for the future; it looks infernally ill for the future.

V.

Chronicle for January, 1847.

She has shown the cloven foot already. I begin to be a little afraid of her.

On the conclusion of the Nottingham engagement (the results of which more than equaled the results at Derby), I proposed taking the entertainment next--now we had got it into our own hands--to Newark. Miss Vanstone raised no objection until we came to the question of time, when she amazed me by stipulating for a week's delay before we appeared in public again.

"For what possible purpose?" I asked.

"For the purpose of making the inquiries which I mentioned to you at York," she answered.

I instantly enlarged on the danger of delay, putting all the considerations before her in every imaginable form. She remained perfectly immovable. I tried to shake her on the question of expenses. She answered by handing me over her share of the proceeds at Derby and Nottingham--and there were my expenses paid, at the rate of nearly two guineas a day. I wonder who first picked out a mule as the type of obstinacy? How little knowledge that man must have had of women!

There was no help for it. I took down my instructions in black and white, as usual. My first exertions were to be directed to the discovery of Mr. Michael Vanstone's address: I was also expected to find out how long he was likely to live there, and whether he had sold Combe-Raven or not. My next inquiries were to inform me of his ordinary habits of life; of what he did with his money; of who his intimate friends were; and of the sort of terms on which his son, Mr. Noel Vanstone, was now living with him. Lastly, the investigations were to end in discovering whether there was any female relative, or any woman exercising domestic authority in the house, who was known to have an influence over either father or son.

If my long practice in cultivating the field of human sympathy had not accustomed me to private investigations into the affairs of other people, I might have found some of these queries rather difficult to deal with in the course of a week. As it was, I gave myself all the benefit of my own experience, and brought the answers back to Nottingham in a day less than

the given time. Here they are, in regular order, for convenience of future reference:

(1.) Mr. Michael Vanstone is now residing at German Place, Brighton, and likely to remain there, as he finds the air suits him. He reached London from Switzerland in September last; and sold the Combe-Raven property immediately on his arrival.

(2.) His ordinary habits of life are secret and retired; he seldom visits, or receives company. Part of his money is supposed to be in the Funds, and part laid out in railway investments, which have survived the panic of eighteen hundred and forty-six, and are rapidly rising in value. He is said to be a bold speculator. Since his arrival in England he has invested, with great judgment, in house property. He has some houses in remote parts of London, and some houses in certain watering-places on the east coast, which are shown to be advancing in public repute. In all these cases he is reported to have made remarkably good bargains.

(3.) It is not easy to discover who his intimate friends are. Two names only have been ascertained. The first is Admiral Bartram; supposed to have been under friendly obligations, in past years, to Mr. Michael Vanstone. The second is Mr. George Bartram, nephew of the Admiral, and now staying on a short visit in the house at German Place. Mr. George Bartram is the son of the late Mr. Andrew Vanstone's sister, also deceased. He is therefore a cousin of Mr. Noel Vanstone's. This last--viz., Mr. Noel Vanstone--is in delicate health, and is living on excellent terms with his father in German Place.

(4.) There is no female relative in Mr. Michael Vanstone's family circle. But there is a housekeeper who has lived in his service ever since his wife's death, and who has acquired a strong influence over both father and son. She is a native of Switzerland, elderly, and a widow. Her name is Mrs. Lecount.

On placing these particulars in Miss Vanstone's hands, she made no remark, except to thank me. I endeavored to invite her confidence. No results; nothing but a renewal of civility, and a sudden shifting to the subject of the Entertainment. Very good. If she won't give me the information I want, the conclusion is obvious--I must help myself.

Business considerations claim the remainder of this page. Let me return to business.

-----Financial Statement |
Third Week in January -----Place
Visited, | Perform ances, Newark. | Two -----
-----Net Receipts, | Net Receipts, In black
and white. | Actually Realized. 25 pounds | 32 pounds 10s.
-----Apparent Div. of Profits, |
Actual Div. of Profits, | Miss V.....12 10 | Miss
V.....12 10 Self.....12 10 | Self.....20 00 -----
-----Private Surplus on the Week, Or
say, Self-presented Testimonial. 7 pounds 10s. -----
-----Audited, | Passed correct, |
H. WRAGGE. | H. WRAGGE -----

The next stronghold of British sympathy which we take by storm is
Sheffield. We open the first week in February.

VI.

Chronicle for February.

Practice has now given my fair relative the confidence which I predicted would come with time. Her knack of disguising her own identity in the impersonation of different characters so completely staggers her audiences that the same people come twice over to find out how she does it. It is the amiable defect of the English public never to know when they have had enough of a good thing. They actually try to encore one of her characters--an old north-country lady; modeled on that honored preceptress in the late Mr. Vanstone's family to whom I presented myself at Combe-Raven. This particular performance fairly amazes the people. I don't wonder at it. Such an extraordinary assumption of age by a girl of nineteen has never been seen in public before, in the whole course of my theatrical experience.

I find myself writing in a lower tone than usual; I miss my own dash of humor. The fact is, I am depressed about the future. In the very height of our prosperity my perverse pupil sticks to her trumpery family quarrel. I feel myself at the mercy of the first whim in the Vanstone direction which may come into her head--I, the architect of her fortunes. Too bad; upon my soul, too bad.

She has acted already on the inquiries which she forced me to make for her. She has written two letters to Mr. Michael Vanstone.

To the first letter no answer came. To the second a reply was received. Her infernal cleverness put an obstacle I had not expected in the way of my intercepting it. Later in the day, after she had herself opened and read the answer, I laid another trap for her. It just succeeded, and no more. I had half a minute to look into the envelope in her absence. It contained nothing but her own letter returned. She is not the girl to put up quietly with such an insult as this. Mischief will come of it--Mischief to Michael Vanstone--which is of no earthly consequence: mischief to Me--which is a truly serious matter.

VII.

Chronicle for March.

After performing at Sheffield and Manchester, we have moved to Liverpool, Preston, and Lancaster. Another change in this weathercock of a girl. She has written no more letters to Michael Vanstone; and she has become as anxious to make money as I am myself. We are realizing large profits, and we are worked to death. I don't like this change in her: she has a purpose to answer, or she would not show such extraordinary eagerness to fill her purse. Nothing I can do--no cooking of accounts; no self-presented testimonials--can keep that purse empty. The success of the Entertainment, and her own sharpness in looking after her interests, literally force me into a course of comparative honesty. She puts into her pocket more than a third of the profits, in defiance of my most arduous exertions to prevent her. And this at my age! this after my long and successful career as a moral agriculturist! Marks of admiration are very little things; but they express my feelings, and I put them in freely.

VIII.

Chronicle for April and May.

We have visited seven more large towns, and are now at Birmingham. Consulting my books, I find that Miss Vanstone has realized by the Entertainment, up to this time, the enormous sum of nearly four hundred pounds. It is quite possible that my own profits may reach one or two miserable hundred more. But I was the architect of her fortunes--the publisher, so to speak, of her book--and, if anything, I am underpaid.

I made the above discovery on the twenty-ninth of the month--anniversary of the Restoration of my royal predecessor in the field of human sympathies, Charles the Second. I had barely finished locking up my dispatch-box, when the ungrateful girl, whose reputation I have made, came into the room and told me in so many words that the business connection between us was for the present at an end.

I attempt no description of my own sensations: I merely record facts. She informed me, with an appearance of perfect composure, that she needed rest, and that she had "new objects in view." She might possibly want me to assist those objects; and she might possibly return to the Entertainment. In either case it would be enough if we exchanged addresses, at which we could write to each other in case of need. Having no desire to leave me too abruptly, she would remain the next day (which was Sunday); and would take her departure on Monday morning. Such was her explanation, in so many words.

Remonstrance, as I knew by experience, would be thrown away. Authority I had none to exert. My one sensible course to take in this emergency was to find out which way my own interests pointed, and to go that way without a moment's unnecessary hesitation.

A very little reflection has since convinced me that she has a deep-laid scheme against Michael Vanstone in view. She is young, handsome, clever, and unscrupulous; she has made money to live on, and has time at her disposal to find out the weak side of an old man; and she is going to attack Mr. Michael Vanstone unawares with the legitimate weapons of her sex. Is she likely to want me for such a purpose as this? Doubtful. Is she merely anxious to get rid of me on easy terms? Probable. Am I the sort of man to be treated in this way by my own pupil? Decidedly not: I am the man to see my

way through a neat succession of alternatives; and here they are:

First alternative: To announce my compliance with her proposal; to exchange addresses with her; and then to keep my eye privately on all her future movements. Second alternative: to express fond anxiety in a paternal capacity; and to threaten giving the alarm to her sister and the lawyer, if she persists in her design. Third alternative: to turn the information I already possess to the best account, by making it a marketable commodity between Mr. Michael Vanstone and myself. At present I incline toward the last of these three courses. But my decision is far too important to be hurried. To-day is only the twenty-ninth. I will suspend my Chronicle of Events until Monday.

May 31st.--My alternatives and her plans are both overthrown together.

The newspaper came in, as usual, after breakfast. I looked it over, and discovered this memorable entry among the obituary announcements of the day:

"On the 29th inst., at Brighton, Michael Vanstone, Esq., formerly of Zurich, aged 77."

Miss Vanstone was present in the room when I read those two startling lines. Her bonnet was on; her boxes were packed; she was waiting impatiently until it was time to go to the train. I handed the paper to her, without a word on my side. Without a word on hers, she looked where I pointed, and read the news of Michael Vanstone's death.

The paper dropped out of her hand, and she suddenly pulled down her veil. I caught one glance at her face before she hid it from me. The effect on my mind was startling in the extreme. To put it with my customary dash of humor--her face informed me that the most sensible action which Michael Vanstone, Esq., formerly of Zurich, had ever achieved in his life was the action he performed at Brighton on the 29th instant.

Finding the dead silence in the room singularly unpleasant under existing circumstances, I thought I would make a remark. My regard for my own interests supplied me with a subject. I mentioned the Entertainment.

"After what has happened," I said, "I presume we go on with our performances as usual?"

"No," she answered, behind the veil. "We go on with my inquiries."

"Inquiries after a dead man?"

"Inquiries after the dead man's son."

"Mr. Noel Vanstone?"

"Yes; Mr. Noel Vanstone."

Not having a veil to put down over my own face, I stooped and picked up the newspaper. Her devilish determination quite upset me for the moment. I actually had to steady myself before I could speak to her again.

"Are the new inquiries as harmless as the old ones?" I asked.

"Quite as harmless."

"What am I expected to find out?"

"I wish to know whether Mr. Noel Vanstone remains at Brighton after the funeral."

"And if not?"

"If not, I shall want to know his new address wherever it may be."

"Yes. And what next?"

"I wish you to find out next if all the father's money goes to the son."

I began to see her drift. The word money relieved me; I felt quite on my own ground again.

"Anything more?" I asked.

"Only one thing more," she answered. "Make sure, if you please, whether Mrs. Lecount, the housekeeper, remains or not in Mr. Noel Vanstone's service."

Her voice altered a little as she mentioned Mrs. Lecount's name; she is evidently sharp enough to distrust the housekeeper already.

"My expenses are to be paid as usual?" I said.

"As usual."

"When am I expected to leave for Brighton?"

"As soon as you can."

She rose, and left the room. After a momentary doubt, I decided on executing the new commission. The more private inquiries I conduct for my fair relative the harder she will find it to get rid of hers truly, Horatio Wragge.

There is nothing to prevent my starting for Brighton to-morrow. So to-morrow I go. If Mr. Noel Vanstone succeeds to his father's property, he is the only human being possessed of pecuniary blessings who fails to inspire me with a feeling of unmitigated envy.

IX.

Chronicle for June.

9th.--I returned yesterday with my information. Here it is, privately noted down for convenience of future reference:

Mr. Noel Vanstone has left Brighton, and has removed, for the purpose of transacting business in London, to one of his late father's empty houses in Vauxhall Walk, Lambeth. This singularly mean selection of a place of residence on the part of a gentleman of fortune looks as if Mr. N. V. and his money were not easily parted.

Mr. Noel Vanstone has stepped into his father's shoes under the following circumstances: Mr. Michael Vanstone appears to have died, curiously enough, as Mr. Andrew Vanstone died--intestate. With this difference, however, in the two cases, that the younger brother left an informal will, and the elder brother left no will at all. The hardest men have their weaknesses; and Mr. Michael Vanstone's weakness seems to have been an insurmountable horror of contemplating the event of his own death. His son, his housekeeper, and his lawyer, had all three tried over and over again to get him to make a will; and had never shaken his obstinate resolution to put off performing the only business duty he was ever known to neglect. Two doctors attended him in his last illness; warned him that he was too old a man to hope to get over it; and warned him in vain. He announced his own positive determination not to die. His last words in this world (as I succeeded in discovering from the nurse who assisted Mrs. Lecount) were: "I'm getting better every minute; send for the fly directly and take me out for a drive." The same night Death proved to be the more obstinate of the two; and left his son (and only child) to take the property in due course of law. Nobody doubts that the result would have been the same if a will had been made. The father and son had every confidence in each other, and were known to have always lived together on the most friendly terms.

Mrs. Lecount remains with Mr. Noel Vanstone, in the same housekeeping capacity which she filled with his father, and has accompanied him to the new residence in Vauxhall Walk. She is acknowledged on all hands to have been a sufferer by the turn events have taken. If Mr. Michael Vanstone had made his will, there is no doubt she would have received a handsome legacy. She is now left dependent on Mr. Noel Vanstone's sense of gratitude; and she is not at all likely, I should imagine, to let that sense fall asleep for want

of a little timely jogging. Whether my fair relative's future intentions in this quarter point toward Mischief or Money, is more than I can yet say. In either case, I venture to predict that she will find an awkward obstacle in Mrs. Lecount.

So much for my information to the present date. The manner in which it was received by Miss Vanstone showed the most ungrateful distrust of me. She confided nothing to my private ear but the expression of her best thanks. A sharp girl--a devilish sharp girl. But there is such a thing as bowling a man out once too often; especially when the name of that man happens to be Wragge.

Not a word more about the Entertainment; not a word more about moving from our present quarters. Very good. My right hand lays my left hand a wager. Ten to one, on her opening communications with the son as she opened them with the father. Ten to one, on her writing to Noel Vanstone before the month is out.

21st.--She has written by to-day's post. A long letter, apparently--for she put two stamps on the envelope. (Private memorandum, addressed to myself. Wait for the answer.)

22d, 23d, 24th.--(Private memorandum continued. Wait for the answer.)

25th.--The answer has come. As an ex-military man, I have naturally employed stratagem to get at it. The success which rewards all genuine perseverance has rewarded me--and I have got at it accordingly.

The letter is written, not by Mr. Noel Vanstone, but by Mrs. Lecount. She takes the highest moral ground, in a tone of spiteful politeness. Mr. Noel Vanstone's delicate health and recent bereavement prevent him from writing himself. Any more letters from Miss Vanstone will be returned unopened. Any personal application will produce an immediate appeal to the protection of the law. Mr. Noel Vanstone, having been expressly cautioned against Miss Magdalen Vanstone by his late lamented father, has not yet forgotten his father's advice. Considers it a reflection cast on the memory of the best of men, to suppose that his course of action toward the Misses Vanstone can be other than the course of action which his father pursued. This is what he has himself instructed Mrs. Lecount to say. She has endeavored to express herself in the most conciliatory language she could select; she had tried to avoid giving unnecessary pain, by addressing Miss Vanstone (as a matter of courtesy) by the family name; and she trusts these concessions, which speak for themselves, will not be thrown away.--Such is the substance of the

letter, and so it ends.

I draw two conclusions from this little document. First--that it will lead to serious results. Secondly--that Mrs. Lecount, with all her politeness, is a dangerous woman to deal with. I wish I saw my way safe before me. I don't see it yet.

29th.--Miss Vanstone has abandoned my protection; and the whole lucrative future of the dramatic entertainment has abandoned me with her. I am swindled--I, the last man under heaven who could possibly have expected to write in those disgraceful terms of myself--I AM SWINDLED!

Let me chronicle the events. They exhibit me, for the time being, in a sadly helpless point of view. But the nature of the man prevails: I must have the events down in black and white.

The announcement of her approaching departure was intimated to me yesterday. After another civil speech about the information I had procured at Brighton, she hinted that there was a necessity for pushing our inquiries a little further. I immediately offered to undertake them, as before. "No," she said; "they are not in your way this time. They are inquiries relating to a woman; and I mean to make them myself!" Feeling privately convinced that this new resolution pointed straight at Mrs. Lecount, I tried a few innocent questions on the subject. She quietly declined to answer them. I asked next when she proposed to leave. She would leave on the twenty-eighth. For what destination? London. For long? Probably not. By herself? No. With me? No. With whom then? With Mrs. Wragge, if I had no objection. Good heavens! for what possible purpose? For the purpose of getting a respectable lodging, which she could hardly expect to accomplish unless she was accompanied by an elderly female friend. And was I, in the capacity of elderly male friend, to be left out of the business altogether? Impossible to say at present. Was I not even to forward any letters which might come for her at our present address? No: she would make the arrangement herself at the post-office; and she would ask me, at the same time, for an address, at which I could receive a letter from her, in case of necessity for future communication. Further inquiries, after this last answer, could lead to nothing but waste of time. I saved time by putting no more questions.

It was clear to me that our present position toward each other was what our position had been previously to the event of Michael Vanstone's death. I returned, as before, to my choice of alternatives. Which way did my private interests point? Toward trusting the chance of her wanting me again? Toward threatening her with the interference of her relatives and friends? Or

toward making the information which I possessed a marketable commodity between the wealthy branch of the family and myself? The last of the three was the alternative I had chosen in the case of the father. I chose it once more in the case of the son.

The train started for London nearly four hours since, and took her away in it, accompanied by Mrs. Wragge.

My wife is too great a fool, poor soul, to be actively valuable in the present emergency; but she will be passively useful in keeping up Miss Vanstone's connection with me--and, in consideration of that circumstance, I consent to brush my own trousers, shave my own chin, and submit to the other inconveniences of waiting on myself for a limited period. Any faint glimmerings of sense which Mrs. Wragge may have formerly possessed appear to have now finally taken their leave of her. On receiving permission to go to London, she favored us immediately with two inquiries. Might she do some shopping? and might she leave the cookery-book behind her? Miss Vanstone said Yes to one question, and I said Yes to the other--and from that moment, Mrs. Wragge has existed in a state of perpetual laughter. I am still hoarse with vainly repeated applications of vocal stimulant; and I left her in the railway carriage, to my inexpressible disgust, with both shoes down at heel.

Under ordinary circumstances these absurd particulars would not have dwelt on my memory. But, as matters actually stand, my unfortunate wife's imbecility may, in her present position, lead to consequences which we none of us foresee. She is nothing more or less than a grown-up child; and I can plainly detect that Miss Vanstone trusts her, as she would not have trusted a sharper woman, on that very account. I know children, little and big, rather better than my fair relative does; and I say--beware of all forms of human innocence, when it happens to be your interest to keep a secret to yourself.

Let me return to business. Here I am, at two o'clock on a fine summer's afternoon, left entirely alone, to consider the safest means of approaching Mr. Noel Vanstone on my own account. My private suspicions of his miserly character produce no discouraging effect on me. I have extracted cheering pecuniary results in my time from people quite as fond of their money as he can be. The real difficulty to contend with is the obstacle of Mrs. Lecount. If I am not mistaken, this lady merits a little serious consideration on my part. I will close my chronicle for to-day, and give Mrs. Lecount her due.

Three o'clock.--I open these pages again to record a discovery which has

taken me entirely by surprise.

After completing the last entry, a circumstance revived in my memory which I had noticed on escorting the ladies this morning to the railway. I then remarked that Miss Vanstone had only taken one of her three boxes with her--and it now occurred to me that a private investigation of the luggage she had left behind might possibly be attended with beneficial results. Having, at certain periods of my life been in the habit of cultivating friendly terms with strange locks, I found no difficulty in establishing myself on a familiar footing with Miss Vanstone's boxes. One of the two presented nothing to interest me. The other--devoted to the preservation of the costumes, articles of toilet, and other properties used in the dramatic Entertainment--proved to be better worth examining: for it led me straight to the discovery of one of its owner's secrets.

I found all the dresses in the box complete--with one remarkable exception. That exception was the dress of the old north-country lady; the character which I have already mentioned as the best of all my pupil's disguises, and as modeled in voice and manner on her old governess, Miss Garth. The wig; the eyebrows; the bonnet and veil; the cloak, padded inside to disfigure her back and shoulders; the paints and cosmetics used to age her face and alter her complexion--were all gone. Nothing but the gown remained; a gaudily-flowered silk, useful enough for dramatic purposes, but too extravagant in color and pattern to bear inspection by daylight. The other parts of the dress are sufficiently quiet to pass muster; the bonnet and veil are only old-fashioned, and the cloak is of a sober gray color. But one plain inference can be drawn from such a discovery as this. As certainly as I sit here, she is going to open the campaign against Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount in a character which neither of those two persons can have any possible reason for suspecting at the outset--the character of Miss Garth.

What course am I to take under these circumstances? Having got her secret, what am I to do with it? These are awkward considerations; I am rather puzzled how to deal with them.

It is something more than the mere fact of her choosing to disguise herself to forward her own private ends that causes my present perplexity. Hundreds of girls take fancies for disguising themselves; and hundreds of instances of it are related year after year in the public journals. But my ex-pupil is not to be confounded for one moment with the average adventuress of the newspapers. She is capable of going a long way beyond the limit of dressing herself like a man, and imitating a man's voice and manner. She has a natural gift for assuming characters which I have never seen equaled by a

woman; and she has performed in public until she has felt her own power, and trained her talent for disguising herself to the highest pitch. A girl who takes the sharpest people unawares by using such a capacity as this to help her own objects in private life, and who sharpens that capacity by a determination to fight her way to her own purpose, which has beaten down everything before it, up to this time--is a girl who tries an experiment in deception, new enough and dangerous enough to lead, one way or the other, to very serious results. This is my conviction, founded on a large experience in the art of imposing on my fellow-creatures. I say of my fair relative's enterprise what I never said or thought of it till I introduced myself to the inside of her box. The chances for and against her winning the fight for her lost fortune are now so evenly balanced that I cannot for the life of me see on which side the scale inclines. All I can discern is, that it will, to a dead certainty, turn one way or the other on the day when she passes Noel Vanstone's doors in disguise.

Which way do my interests point now? Upon my honor, I don't know.

Five o'clock.--I have effected a masterly compromise; I have decided on turning myself into a Jack-o n-both-sides.

By to-day's post I have dispatched to London an anonymous letter for Mr. Noel Vanstone. It will be forwarded to its destination by the same means which I successfully adopted to mystify Mr. Pendril; and it will reach Vauxhall Walk, Lambeth, by the afternoon of to-morrow at the latest.

The letter is short, and to the purpose. It warns Mr. Noel Vanstone, in the most alarming language, that he is destined to become the victim of a conspiracy; and that the prime mover of it is a young lady who has already held written communication with his father and himself. It offers him the information necessary to secure his own safety, on condition that he makes it worth the writer's while to run the serious personal risk which such a disclosure will entail on him. And it ends by stipulating that the answer shall be advertised in the Times; shall be addressed to "An Unknown Friend"; and shall state plainly what remuneration Mr. Noel Vanstone offers for the priceless service which it is proposed to render him.

Unless some unexpected complication occurs, this letter places me exactly in the position which it is my present interest to occupy. If the advertisement appears, and if the remuneration offered is large enough to justify me in going over to the camp of the enemy, over I go. If no advertisement appears, or if Mr. Noel Vanstone rates my invaluable assistance at too low a figure, here I remain, biding my time till my fair

relative wants me, or till I make her want me, which comes to the same thing. If the anonymous letter falls by any accident into her hands, she will find disparaging allusions in it to myself, purposely introduced to suggest that the writer must be one of the persons whom I addressed while conducting her inquiries. If Mrs. Lecount takes the business in hand and lays a trap for me--I decline her tempting invitation by becoming totally ignorant of the whole affair the instant any second person appears in it. Let the end come as it may, here I am ready to profit by it: here I am, facing both ways, with perfect ease and security--a moral agriculturist, with his eye on two crops at once, and his swindler's sickle ready for any emergency.

For the next week to come, the newspaper will be more interesting to me than ever. I wonder which side I shall eventually belong to?