THE THIRD SCENE - VAUXHALL WALK, LAMBETH.

CHAPTER I.

THE old Archiepiscopal Palace of Lambeth, on the southern bank of the Thames--with its Bishop's Walk and Garden, and its terrace fronting the river--is an architectural relic of the London of former times, precious to all lovers of the picturesque, in the utilitarian London of the present day. Southward of this venerable structure lies the street labyrinth of Lambeth; and nearly midway, in that part of the maze of houses which is placed nearest to the river, runs the dingy double row of buildings now, as in former days, known by the name of Vauxhall Walk.

The network of dismal streets stretching over the surrounding neighborhood contains a population for the most part of the poorer order. In the thoroughfares where shops abound, the sordid struggle with poverty shows itself unreservedly on the filthy pavement; gathers its forces through the week; and, strengthening to a tumult on Saturday night, sees the Sunday morning dawn in murky gaslight. Miserable women, whose faces never smile, haunt the butchers' shops in such London localities as these, with relics of the men's wages saved from the public-house clutched fast in their hands, with eyes that devour the meat they dare not buy, with eager fingers that touch it covetously, as the fingers of their richer sisters touch a precious stone. In this district, as in other districts remote from the wealthy quarters of the metropolis, the hideous London vagabond--with the filth of the street outmatched in his speech, with the mud of the street outdirtied in his clothes--lounges, lowering and brutal, at the street corner and the gin-shop door; the public disgrace of his country, the unheeded warning of social troubles that are yet to come. Here, the loud self-assertion of Modern Progress--which has reformed so much in manners, and altered so little in men--meets the flat contradiction that scatters its pretensions to the winds. Here, while the national prosperity feasts, like another Belshazzar, on the spectacle of its own magnificence, is the Writing on the Wall, which warns the monarch, Money, that his glory is weighed in the balance, and his power found wanting.

Situated in such a neighborhood as this, Vauxhall Walk gains by

comparison, and establishes claims to respectability which no impartial observation can fail to recognize. A large proportion of the Walk is still composed of private houses. In the scattered situations where shops appear, those shops are not besieged by the crowds of more populous thoroughfares. Commerce is not turbulent, nor is the public consumer besieged by loud invitations to "buy." Bird-fanciers have sought the congenial tranquillity of the scene; and pigeons coo, and canaries twitter, in Vauxhall Walk. Second-hand carts and cabs, bedsteads of a certain age, detached carriage-wheels for those who may want one to make up a set, are all to be found here in the same repository. One tributary stream, in the great flood of gas which illuminates London, tracks its parent source to Works established in this locality. Here the followers of John Wesley have set up a temple, built before the period of Methodist conversion to the principles of architectural religion. And here--most striking object of all--on the site where thousands of lights once sparkled; where sweet sounds of music made night tuneful till morning dawned; where the beauty and fashion of London feasted and danced through the summer seasons of a century--spreads, at this day, an awful wilderness of mud and rubbish; the deserted dead body of Vauxhall Gardens mouldering in the open air.

On the same day when Captain Wragge completed the last entry in his Chronicle of Events, a woman appeared at the window of one of the houses in Vauxhall Walk, and removed from the glass a printed paper which had been wafered to it announcing that Apartments were to be let. The apartments consisted of two rooms on the first floor. They had just been taken for a week certain by two ladies who had paid in advance--those two ladies being Magdalen and Mrs. Wragge.

As soon as the mistress of the house had left the room, Magdalen walked to the window, and cautiously looked out from it at the row of buildings opposite. They were of superior pretensions in size and appearance to the other houses in the Walk: the date at which they had been erected was inscribed on one of them, and was stated to be the year 1759. They stood back from the pavement, separated from it by little strips of garden-ground. This peculiarity of position, added to the breadth of the roadway interposing between them and the smaller houses opposite, made it impossible for Magdalen to see the numbers on the doors, or to observe more of any one who might come to the windows than the bare general outline of dress and figure. Nevertheless, there she stood, anxiously fixing her eyes on one house in the row, nearly opposite to her--the house she had looked for before entering the lodgings; the house inhabited at that moment by Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount.

After keeping watch at the window in silence for ten minutes or more, she suddenly looked back into the room, to observe the effect which her behavior might have produced on her traveling companion.

Not the slightest cause appeared for any apprehension in that quarter. Mrs. Wragge was seated at the table absorbed in the arrangement of a series of smart circulars and tempting price-lists, issued by advertising trades-people, and flung in at the cab-windows as they left the London terminus. "I've often heard tell of light reading," said Mrs. Wragge, restlessly shifting the positions of the circulars as a child restlessly shifts the position of a new set of toys. "Here's light reading, printed in pretty colors. Here's all the Things I'm going to buy when I'm out shopping to-morrow. Lend us a pencil, please--you won't be angry, will you? I do so want to mark 'em off." She looked up at Magdalen, chuckled joyfully over her own altered circumstances, and beat her great hands on the table in irrepressible delight. "No cookery-book!" cried Mrs. Wragge. "No Buzzing in my head! no captain to shave to-morrow! I'm all down at heel; my cap's on one side; and nobody bawls at me. My heart alive, here is a holiday and no mistake!" Her hands began to drum on the table louder than ever, until Magdalen quieted them by presenting her with a pencil. Mrs. Wragge instantly recovered her dignity, squared her elbows on the table, and plunged into imaginary shopping for the rest of the evening.

Magdalen returned to the window. She took a chair, seated herself behind the curtain, and steadily fixed her eyes once more on the house opposite.

The blinds were down over the windows of the first floor and the second. The window of the room on the ground-floor was uncovered and partly open, but no living creature came near it. Doors opened, and people came and went, in the houses on either side; children by the dozen poured out on the pavement to play, and invaded the little strips of garden-ground to recover lost balls and shuttlecocks; streams of people passed backward and forward perpetually; heavy wagons piled high with goods lumbered along the road on their way to, or their way from, the railway station near; all the daily life of the district stirred with its ceaseless activity in every direction but one. The hours passed--and there was the house opposite still shut up, still void of any signs of human existence inside or out. The one object which had decided Magdalen on personally venturing herself in Vauxhall Walk--the object of studying the looks, manners and habits of Mrs. Lecount and her master from a post of observation known only to herself--was thus far utterly defeated. After three hours' watching at the window, she had not even discovered enough to show her that the house was inhabited at all.

Shortly after six o'clock, the landlady disturbed Mrs. Wragge's studies by spreading the cloth for dinner. Magdalen placed herself at the table in a position which still enabled her to command the view from the window. Nothing happened. The dinner came to an end; Mrs. Wragge (lulled by the narcotic influence of annotating circulars, and eating and drinking with an appetite sharpened by the captain's absence) withdrew to an arm-chair, and fell asleep in an attitude which would have caused her husband the acutest mental suffering; seven o'clock struck; the shadows of the summer evening lengthened stealthily on the gray pavement and the brown house-walls--and still the closed door opposite remained shut; still the one window open showed nothing but the black blank of the room inside, lifeless and changeless as if that room had been a tomb.

Mrs. Wragge's meek snoring deepened in tone; the evening wore on drearily; it was close on eight o'clock--when an event happened at last. The street door opposite opened for the first time, and a woman appeared on the threshold.

Was the woman Mrs. Lecount? No. As she came nearer, her dress showed her to be a servant. She had a large door-key in her hand, and was evidently going out to perform an errand. Roused partly by curiosity, partly by the impulse of the moment, which urged her impetuous nature into action after the passive endurance of many hours past, Magdalen snatched up her bonnet, and determined to follow the servant to her destination, wherever it might be.

The woman led her to the great thoroughfare of shops close at hand, called Lambeth Walk. After proceeding some little distance, and looking about her with the hesitation of a person not well acquainted with the neighborhood, the servant crossed the road and entered a stationer's shop. Magdalen crossed the road after her and followed her in.

The inevitable delay in entering the shop under these circumstances made Magdalen too late to hear what the woman asked for. The first words spoken, however, by the man behind the counter reached her ears, and informed her that the servant's object was to buy a railway guide.

"Do you mean a Guide for this month or a Guide for July?" asked the shopman, addressing his customer.

"Master didn't tell me which," answered the woman. "All I know is, he's going into the country the day after to-morrow."

"The day after to-morrow is the first of July," said the shopman. "The Guide your master wants is the Guide for the new month. It won't be published till to-morrow."

Engaging to call again on the next day, the servant left the shop, and took the way that led back to Vauxhall Walk.

Magdalen purchased the first trifle she saw on the counter, and hastily returned in the same direction. The discovery she had just made was of very serious importance to her; and she felt the necessity of acting on it with as little delay as possible.

On entering the front room at the lodgings she found Mrs. Wragge just awake, lost in drowsy bewilderment, with her cap fallen off on her shoulders, and with one of her shoes missing altogether. Magdalen endeavored to persuade her that she was tired after her journey, and that her wisest proceeding would be to go to bed. Mrs. Wragge was perfectly willing to profit by this suggestion, provided she could find her shoe first. In looking for the shoe, she unfortunately discovered the circulars, put by on a side-table, and forthwith recovered her recollection of the earlier proceedings of the evening.

"Give us the pencil," said Mrs. Wragge, shuffling the circulars in a violent hurry. "I can't go to bed yet--I haven't half done marking down the things I want. Let's see; where did I leave off? Try Finch's feeding-bottle for Infants. No! there's a cross against that: the cross means I don't want it. Comfort in the Field. Buckler's Indestructible Hunting-breeches. Oh dear, dear! I've lost the place. No, I haven't. Here it is; here's my mark against it. Elegant Cashmere Robes; strictly Oriental, very grand; reduced to one pound nineteen-and-sixpence. Be in time. Only three left. Only three! Oh, do lend us the money, and let's go and get one!"

"Not to-night," said Magdalen. "Suppose you go to bed now, and finish the circulars tomorrow? I will put them by the bedside for you, and you can go on with them as soon as you wake the first thing in the morning."

This suggestion met with Mrs. Wragge's immediate approval. Magdalen took her into the next room and put her to bed like a child--with her toys by her side. The room was so narrow, and the bed was so small; and Mrs. Wragge, arrayed in the white apparel proper for the occasion, with her moon-face framed round by a spacious halo of night-cap, looked so hugely and disproportionately large, that Magdalen, anxious as she was, could not repress a smile on taking leave of her traveling companion for the night.

"Aha!" cried Mrs. Wragge, cheerfully; "we'll have that Cashmere Robe to-morrow. Come here! I want to whisper something to you. Just you look at me--I'm going to sleep crooked, and the captain's not here to bawl at me!"

The front room at the lodgings contained a sofa-bedstead which the landlady arranged betimes for the night. This done, and the candles brought in, Magdalen was left alone to shape the future course as her own thoughts counseled her.

The questions and answers which had passed in her presence that evening at the stationer's shop led plainly to the conclusion that one day more would bring Noel Vanstone's present term of residence in Vauxhall Walk to an end. Her first cautious resolution to pass many days together in unsuspected observation of the house opposite before she ventured herself inside was entirely frustrated by the turn events had taken. She was placed in the dilemma of running all risks headlong on the next day, or of pausing for a future opportunity which might never occur. There was no middle course open to her. Until she had seen Noel Vanstone with her own eyes, and had discovered the worst there was to fear from Mrs. Lecount--until she had achieved t his double object, with the needful precaution of keeping her own identity carefully in the dark--not a step could she advance toward the accomplishment of the purpose which had brought her to London.

One after another the minutes of the night passed away; one after another the thronging thoughts followed each other over her mind--and still she reached no conclusion; still she faltered and doubted, with a hesitation new to her in her experience of herself. At last she crossed the room impatiently to seek the trivial relief of unlocking her trunk and taking from it the few things that she wanted for the night. Captain Wragge's suspicions had not misled him. There, hidden between two dresses, were the articles of costume which he had missed from her box at Birmingham. She turned them over one by one, to satisfy herself that nothing she wanted had been forgotten, and returned once more to her post of observation by the window.

The house opposite was dark down to the parlor. There the blind, previously raised, was now drawn over the window: the light burning behind it showed her for the first time that the room was inhabited. Her eyes brightened, and her color rose as she looked at it.

"There he is!" she said to herself, in a low, angry whisper. "There he lives on our money, in the house that his father's warning has closed against me!" She dropped the blind which she had raised to look out, returned to her

trunk, and took from it the gray wig which was part of her dramatic costume in the character of the North-country lady. The wig had been crumpled in packing; she put it on and went to the toilet-table to comb it out. "His father has warned him against Magdalen Vanstone," she said, repeating the passage in Mrs. Lecount's letter, and laughing bitterly, as she looked at herself in the glass. "I wonder whether his father has warned him against Miss Garth? To-morrow is sooner than I bargained for. No matter: to-morrow shall show."

CHAPTER II.

THE early morning, when Magdalen rose and looked out, was cloudy and overcast. But as time advanced to the breakfast hour the threatening of rain passed away; and she was free to provide, without hinderance from the weather, for the first necessity of the day--the necessity of securing the absence of her traveling companion from the house.

Mrs. Wragge was dressed, armed at all points with her collection of circulars, and eager to be away by ten o'clock. At an earlier hour Magdalen had provided for her being properly taken care of by the landlady's eldest daughter--a quiet, well-conducted girl, whose interest in the shopping expedition was readily secured by a little present of money for the purchase, on her own account, of a parasol and a muslin dress. Shortly after ten o'clock Magdalen dismissed Mrs. Wragge and her attendant in a cab. She then joined the landlady--who was occupied in setting the rooms in order upstairs--with the object of ascertaining, by a little well-timed gossip, what the daily habits might be of the inmates of the house.

She discovered that there were no other lodgers but Mrs. Wragge and herself. The landlady's husband was away all day, employed at a railway station. Her second daughter was charged with the care of the kitchen in the elder sister's absence. The younger children were at school, and would be back at one o'clock to dinner. The landlady herself "got up fine linen for ladies," and expected to be occupied over her work all that morning in a little room built out at the back of the premises. Thus there was every facility for Magdalen's leaving the house in disguise, and leaving it unobserved, provided she went out before the children came back to dinner at one o'clock.

By eleven o'clock the apartments were set in order, and the landlady had retired to pursue her own employments. Magdalen softly locked the door of her room, drew the blind over the window, and entered at once on her preparations for the perilous experiment of the day.

The same quick perception of dangers to be avoided and difficulties to be overcome which had warned her to leave the extravagant part of her character costume in the box at Birmingham now kept her mind fully alive to the vast difference between a disguise worn by gas-light for the amusement of an audience and a disguise assumed by daylight to deceive the searching eyes of two strangers. The first article of dress which she put

on was an old gown of her own (made of the material called "alpaca"), of a dark-brown color, with a neat pattern of little star-shaped spots in white. A double flounce running round the bottom of this dress was the only milliner's ornament which it presented--an ornament not at all out of character with the costume appropriated to an elderly lady. The disguise of her head and face was the next object of her attention. She fitted and arranged the gray wig with the dexterity which constant practice had given her; fixed the false eyebrows (made rather large, and of hair darker than the wig) carefully in their position with the gum she had with her for the purpose, and stained her face with the customary stage materials, so as to change the transparent fairness of her complexion to the dull, faintly opaque color of a woman in ill health. The lines and markings of age followed next; and here the first obstacles presented themselves. The art which succeeded by gas-light failed by day: the difficulty of hiding the plainly artificial nature of the marks was almost insuperable. She turned to her trunk; took from it two veils; and putting on her old-fashioned bonnet, tried the effect of them in succession. One of the veils (of black lace) was too thick to be worn over the face at that summer season without exciting remark. The other, of plain net, allowed her features to be seen through it, just indistinctly enough to permit the safe introduction of certain lines (many fewer than she was accustomed to use in performing the character) on the forehead and at the sides of the mouth. But the obstacle thus set aside only opened the way to a new difficulty--the difficulty of keeping her veil down while she was speaking to other persons, without any obvious reason for doing so. An instant's consideration, and a chance look at her little china palette of stage colors, suggested to her ready invention the production of a visible excuse for wearing her veil. She deliberately disfigured herself by artificially reddening the insides of her eyelids so as to produce an appearance of inflammation which no human creature but a doctor--and that doctor at close quarters--could have detected as false. She sprang to her feet and looked triumphantly at the hideous transformation of herself reflected in the glass. Who could think it strange now if she wore her veil down, and if she begged Mrs. Lecount's permission to sit with her back to the light?

Her last proceeding was to put on the quiet gray cloak which she had brought from Birmingham, and which had been padded inside by Captain Wragge's own experienced hands, so as to hide the youthful grace and beauty of her back and shoulders. Her costume being now complete, she practiced the walk which had been originally taught her as appropriate to the character--a walk with a slight limp--and, returning to the glass after a minute's trial, exercised herself next in the disguise of her voice and manner. This was the only part of the character in which it had been possible, with her physical peculiarities, to produce an imitation of Miss

Garth; and here the resemblance was perfect. The harsh voice, the blunt manner, the habit of accompanying certain phrases by an emphatic nod of the head, the Northumbrian burr expressing itself in every word which contained the letter "r"--all these personal peculiarities of the old North-country governess were reproduced to the life. The personal transformation thus completed was literally what Captain Wragge had described it to be--a triumph in the art of self-disguise. Excepting the one case of seeing her face close, with a strong light on it, nobody who now looked at Magdalen could have suspected for an instant that she was other than an ailing, ill-made, unattractive woman of fifty years old at least.

Before unlocking the door, she looked about her carefully, to make sure that none of her stage materials were exposed to view in case the landlady entered the room in her absence. The only forgotten object belonging to her that she discovered was a little packet of Norah's letters which she had been reading overnight, and which had been accidentally pushed under the looking-glass while she was engaged in dressing herself. As she took up the letters to put them away, the thought struck her for the first time, "Would Norah know me now if we met each other in the street?" She looked in the glass, and smiled sadly. "No," she said, "not even Norah."

She unlocked the door, after first looking at her watch. It was close on twelve o'clock. There was barely an hour left to try her desperate experiment, and to return to the lodging before the landlady's children came back from school.

An instant's listening on the landing assured her that all was quiet in the passage below. She noiselessly descended the stairs and gained the street without having met any living creature on her way out of the house. In another minute she had crossed the road, and had knocked at Noel Vanstone's door.

The door was opened by the same woman-servant whom she had followed on the previous evening to the stationer's shop. With a momentary tremor, which recalled the memorable first night of her appearance in public, Magdalen inquired (in Miss Garth's voice, and with Miss Garth's manner) for Mrs. Lecount.

"Mrs. Lecount has gone out, ma'am," said the servant.

"Is Mr. Vanstone at home?" asked Magdalen, her resolution asserting itself at once against the first obstacle that opposed it.

"My master is not up yet, ma'am."

Another check! A weaker nature would have accepted the warning. Magdalen's nature rose in revolt against it.

"What time will Mrs. Lecount be back?" she asked.

"About one o'clock, ma'am."

"Say, if you please, that I will call again as soon after one o'clock as possible. I particularly wish to see Mrs. Lecount. My name is Miss Garth."

She turned and left the house. Going back to her own room was out of the question. The servant (as Magdalen knew by not hearing the door close) was looking after her; and, moreover, she would expose herself, if she went indoors, to the risk of going out again exactly at the time when the landlady's children were sure to be about the house. She turned mechanically to the right, walked on until she recalled Vauxhall Bridge, and waited there, looking out over the river.

The interval of unemployed time now before her was nearly an hour. How should she occupy it?

As she asked herself the question, the thought which had struck her when she put away the packet of Norah's letters rose in her mind once more. A sudden impulse to test the miserable completeness of her disguise mixed with the higher and purer feeling at her heart, and strengthened her natural longing to see her sister's face again, though she dare not discover herself and speak. Norah's later letters had described, in the fullest details, her life as a governess--her hours for teaching, her hours of leisure, her hours for walking out with her pupils. There was just time, if she could find a vehicle at once, for Magdalen to drive to the house of Norah's employer, with the chance of getting there a few minutes before the hour when her sister would be going out. "One look at her will tell me more than a hundred letters!" With that thought in her heart, with the one object of following Norah on her daily walk, under protection of the disguise, Magdalen hastened over the bridge, and made for the northern bank of the river.

So, at the turning-point of her life--so, in the interval before she took the irrevocable step, and passed the threshold of Noel Vanstone's door--the forces of Good triumphing in the strife for her over the forces of Evil, turned her back on the scene of her meditated deception, and hurried her mercifully further and further away from the fatal house.

She stopped the first empty cab that passed her; told the driver to go to New Street, Spring Gardens; and promised to double his fare if he reached his destination by a given time. The man earned the money--more than earned it, as the event proved. Magdalen had not taken ten steps in advance along New Street, walking toward St. James's Park, before the door of a house beyond her opened, and a lady in mourning came out, accompanied by two little girls. The lady also took the direction of the Park, without turning her head toward Magdalen as she descended the house step. It mattered little; Magdalen's heart looked through her eyes, and told her that she saw Norah.

She followed them into St. James's Park, and thence (along the Mall) into the Green Park, venturing closer and closer as they reached the grass and ascended the rising ground in the direction of Hyde Park Corner. Her eager eyes devoured every detail in Norah's dress, and detected the slightest change that had taken place in her figure and her bearing. She had become thinner since the autumn--her head drooped a little; she walked wearily. Her mourning dress, worn with the modest grace and neatness which no misfortune could take from her, was suited to her altered station; her black gown was made of stuff; her black shawl and bonnet were of the plainest and cheapest kind. The two little girls, walking on either side of her, were dressed in silk. Magdalen instinctively hated them.

She made a wide circuit on the grass, so as to turn gradually and meet her sister without exciting suspicion that the meeting was contrived. Her heart beat fast; a burning heat glowed in her as she thought of her false hair, her false color, her false dress, and saw the dear familiar face coming nearer and nearer. They passed each other close. Norah's dark gentle eyes looked up, with a deeper light in them, with a sadder beauty than of old--rested, all unconscious of the truth, on her sister's face--and looked away from it again as from the face of a stranger. That glance of an instant struck Magdalen to the heart. She stood rooted to the ground after Norah had passed by. A horror of the vile disguise that concealed her; a yearning to burst its trammels and hide her shameful painted face on Norah's bosom, took possession of her, body and soul. She turned and looked back.

Norah and the two children had reached the higher ground, and were close to one of the gates in the iron railing which fenced the Park from the street. Drawn by an irresistible fascination, Magdalen followed them again, gained on them as they reached the gate, and heard the voices of the two children raised in angry dispute which way they wanted to walk next. She saw Norah take them through the gate, and then stoop and speak to them, while

waiting for an opportunity to cross the road. They only grew the louder and the angrier for what she said. The youngest--a girl of eight or nine years old--flew into a child's vehement passion, cried, screamed, and even kicked at the governess. The people in the street stopped and laughed; some of them jestingly advised a little wholesome correction; one woman asked Norah if she was the child's mother; another pitied her audibly for being the child's governess. Before Magdalen could push her way through the crowd--before her all-mastering anxiety to help her sister had blinded her to every other consideration, and had brought her, self-betrayed, to Norah's side--an open carriage passed the pavement slowly, hindered in its progress by the press of vehicles before it. An old lady seated inside heard the child's cries, recognized Norah, and called to her immediately. The footman parted the crowd, and the children were put into the carriage. "It's lucky I happened to pass this way," said the old lady, beckoning contemptuously to Norah to take her place on the front seat; "you never could manage my daughter's children, and you never will." The footman put up the steps, the carriage drove on with the children and the governess, the crowd dispersed, and Magdalen was alone again.

"So be it!" she thought, bitterly. "I should only have distressed her. We should only have had the misery of parting to suffer again."

She mechanically retraced her steps; she returned, as in a dream, to the open space of the Park. Arming itself treacherously with the strength of her love for her sister, with the vehemence of the indignation that she felt for her sister's sake, the terrible temptation of her life fastened its hold on her more firmly than ever. Through all the paint and disfigurement of the disguise, the fierce despair of that strong and passionate nature lowered, haggard and horrible. Norah made an object of public curiosity and amusement; Norah reprimanded in the open street; Norah, the hired victim of an old woman's insolence and a child's ill-temper, and the same man to thank for it who had sent Frank to China!--and that man's son to thank after him! The thought of her sister, which had turned her from the scene of her meditated deception, which had made the consciousness of her own disguise hateful to her, was now the thought which sanctioned that means, or any means, to compass her end; the thought which set wings to her feet, and hurried her back nearer and nearer to the fatal house.

She left the Park again, and found herself in the streets without knowing where. Once more she hailed the first cab that passed her, and told the man to drive to Vauxhall Walk.

The change from walking to riding quieted her. She felt her attention

returning to herself and her dress. The necessity of making sure that no accident had happened to her disguise in the interval since she had left her own room impressed itself immediately on her mind. She stopped the driver at the first pastry-cook's shop which he passed, and there obtained the means of consulting a looking-glass before she ventured back to Vauxhall Walk.

Her gray head-dress was disordered, and the old-fashioned bonnet was a little on one side. Nothing else had suffered. She set right the few defects in her costume, and returned to the cab. It was half-past one when she approached the house and knocked, for the second time, at Noel Vanstone's door. The woman-servant opened it as before.

"Has Mrs. Lecount come back?"

"Yes, ma'am. Step this way, if you please."

The servant preceded Magdalen along an empty passage, and, leading her past an uncarpeted staircase, opened the door of a room at the back of the house. The room was lighted by one window looking out on a yard; the walls were bare; the boarded floor was uncovered. Two bedroom chairs stood against the wall, and a kitchen-table was placed under the window. On the table stood a glass tank filled with water, and ornamented in the middle by a miniature pyramid of rock-work interlaced with weeds. Snails clung to the sides of the tank; tadpoles and tiny fish swam swiftly in the green water, slippery efts and slimy frogs twined their noiseless way in and out of the weedy rock-work; and on top of the pyramid there sat solitary, cold as the stone, brown as the stone, motionless as the stone, a little bright-eyed toad. The art of keeping fish and reptiles as domestic pets had not at that time been popularized in England; and Magdalen, on entering the room, started back, in irrepressible astonishment and disgust, from the first specimen of an Aquarium that she had ever seen.

"Don't be alarmed," said a woman's voice behind her. "My pets hurt nobody."

Magdalen turned, and confronted Mrs. Lecount. She had expected--founding her anticipations on the letter which the housekeeper had written to her--to see a hard, wily, ill-favored, insolent old woman. She found herself in the presence of a lady of mild, ingratiating manners, whose dress was the perfection of neatness, taste, and matronly simplicity, whose personal appearance was little less than a triumph of physical resistance to the deteriorating influence of time. If Mrs. Lecount had struck some fifteen or sixteen years off her real age, and had asserted herself to be eight-and-

thirty, there would not have been one man in a thousand, or one woman in a hundred, who would have hesitated to believe her. Her dark hair was just turning to gray, and no more. It was plainly parted under a spotless lace cap, sparingly ornamented with mourning ribbons. Not a wrinkle appeared on her smooth white forehead, or her plump white cheeks. Her double chin was dimpled, and her teeth were marvels of whiteness and regularity. Her lips might have been critically considered as too thin, if they had not been accustomed to make the best of their defects by means of a pleading and persuasive smile. Her large black eyes might have looked fierce if they had been set in the face of another woman, they were mild and melting in the face of Mrs. Lecount; they were tenderly interested in everything she looked at--in Magdalen, in the toad on the rock-work, in the back-yard view from the window; in her own plump fair hands,--which she rubbed softly one over the other while she spoke; in her own pretty cambric chemisette, which she had a habit of looking at complacently while she listened to others. The elegant black gown in which she mourned the memory of Michael Vanstone was not a mere dress--it was a well-made compliment paid to Death. Her innocent white muslin apron was a little domestic poem in itself. Her jet earrings were so modest in their pretensions that a Quaker might have looked at them and committed no sin. The comely plumpness of her face was matched by the comely plumpness of her figure; it glided smoothly over the ground; it flowed in sedate undulations when she walked. There are not many men who could have observed Mrs. Lecount entirely from the Platonic point of view--lads in their teens would have found her irresistible--women only could have hardened their hearts against her, and mercilessly forced their way inward through that fair and smiling surface. Magdalen's first glance at this Venus of the autumn period of female life more than satisfied her that she had done well to feel her ground in disguise before she ventured on matching herself against Mrs. Lecount.

"Have I the pleasure of addressing the lady who called this morning?" inquired the housekeeper. "Am I speaking to Miss Garth?"

Something in the expression of her eyes, as she asked that question, warned Magdalen to turn her face further inward from the window than she had turned it yet. The bare doubt whether the housekeeper might not have seen her already under too strong a light shook her self-possession for the moment. She gave herself time to recover it, and merely answered by a bow.

"Accept my excuses, ma'am, for the place in which I am compelled to receive you," proceeded Mrs. Lecount in fluent English, spoken with a foreign accent. "Mr. Vanstone is only here for a temporary purpose. We leave for the sea-side to-morrow afternoon, and it has not been thought worth while to

set the house in proper order. Will you take a seat, and oblige me by mentioning the object of your visit?"

She glided imperceptibly a step or two nearer to Magdalen, and placed a chair for her exactly opposite the light from the window. "Pray sit down," said Mrs. Lecount, looking with the tenderest interest at the visitor's inflamed eyes through the visitor's net veil.

"I am suffering, as you see, from a complaint in the eyes," replied Magdalen, steadily keeping her profile toward the window, and carefully pitching her voice to the tone of Miss Garth's. "I must beg your permission to wear my veil down, and to sit away from the light." She said those words, feeling mistress of herself again. With perfect composure she drew the chair back into the corner of the room beyond the window and seated herself, keeping the shadow of her bonnet well over her face. Mrs. Lecount's persuasive lips murmured a polite expression of sympathy; Mrs. Lecount's amiable black eyes looked more interested in the strange lady than ever. She placed a chair for herself exactly on a line with Magdalen's, and sat so close to the wall as to force her visitor either to turn her head a little further round toward the window, or to fail in politeness by not looking at the person whom she addressed. "Yes," said Mrs. Lecount, with a confidential little c ough. "And to what circumstances am I indebted for the honor of this visit?"

"May I inquire, first, if my name happens to be familiar to you?" said Magdalen, turning toward her as a matter of necessity, but coolly holding up her handkerchief at the same time between her face and the light.

"No," answered Mrs. Lecount, with another little cough, rather harsher than the first. "The name of Miss Garth is not familiar to me."

"In that case," pursued Magdalen, "I shall best explain the object that causes me to intrude on you by mentioning who I am. I lived for many years as governess in the family of the late Mr. Andrew Vanstone, of Combe-Raven, and I come here in the interest of his orphan daughters."

Mrs. Lecount's hands, which had been smoothly sliding one over the other up to this time, suddenly stopped; and Mrs. Lecount's lips, self-forgetfully shutting up, owned they were too thin at the very outset of the interview.

"I am surprised you can bear the light out-of-doors without a green shade," she quietly remarked; leaving the false Miss Garth's announcement of herself as completely unnoticed as it she had not spoken at all.

"I find a shade over my eyes keeps them too hot at this time of the year," rejoined Magdalen, steadily matching the housekeeper's composure. "May I ask whether you heard what I said just now on the subject of my errand in this house?"

"May I inquire on my side, ma'am, in what way that errand can possibly concern me?" retorted Mrs. Lecount.

"Certainly," said Magdalen. "I come to you because Mr. Noel Vanstone's intentions toward the two young ladies were made known to them in the form of a letter from yourself."

That plain answer had its effect. It warned Mrs. Lecount that the strange lady was better informed than she had at first suspected, and that it might hardly be wise, under the circumstances, to dismiss her unheard.

"Pray pardon me," said the housekeeper, "I scarcely understood before; I perfectly understand now. You are mistaken, ma'am, in supposing that I am of any importance, or that I exercise any influence in this painful matter. I am the mouth-piece of Mr. Noel Vanstone; the pen he holds, if you will excuse the expression--nothing more. He is an invalid, and like other invalids, he has his bad days and his good. It was his bad day when that answer was written to the young person--shall I call her Miss Vanstone? I will, with pleasure, poor girl; for who am I to make distinctions, and what is it to me whether her parents were married or not? As I was saying, it was one of Mr. Noel Vanstone's bad days when that answer was sent, and therefore I had to write it; simply as his secretary, for want of a better. If you wish to speak on the subject of these young ladies--shall I call them young ladies, as you did just now? no, poor things, I will call them the Misses Vanstone.--If you wish to speak on the subject of these Misses Vanstone, I will mention your name, and your object in favoring me with this call, to Mr. Noel Vanstone. He is alone in the parlor, and this is one of his good days. I have the influence of an old servant over him, and I will use that influence with pleasure in your behalf. Shall I go at once?" asked Mrs. Lecount, rising, with the friendliest anxiety to make herself useful.

"If you please," replied Magdalen; "and if I am not taking any undue advantage of your kindness."

"On the contrary," rejoined Mrs. Lecount, "you are laying me under an obligation--you are permitting me, in my very limited way, to assist the performance of a benevolent action." She bowed, smiled, and glided out of the room.

Left by herself, Magdalen allowed the anger which she had suppressed in Mrs. Lecount's presence to break free from her. For want of a nobler object to attack, it took the direction of the toad. The sight of the hideous little reptile sitting placid on his rock throne, with his bright eyes staring impenetrably into vacancy, irritated every nerve in her body. She looked at the creature with a shrinking intensity of hatred; she whispered at it maliciously through her set teeth. "I wonder whose blood runs coldest," she said, "yours, you little monster, or Mrs. Lecount's? I wonder which is the slimiest, her heart or your back? You hateful wretch, do you know what your mistress is? Your mistress is a devil!"

The speckled skin under the toad's mouth mysteriously wrinkled itself, then slowly expanded again, as if he had swallowed the words just addressed to him. Magdalen started back in disgust from the first perceptible movement in the creature's body, trifling as it was, and returned to her chair. She had not seated herself again a moment too soon. The door opened noiselessly, and Mrs. Lecount appeared once more.

"Mr. Vanstone will see you," she said, "if you will kindly wait a few minutes. He will ring the parlor bell when his present occupation is at an end, and he is ready to receive you. Be careful, ma'am, not to depress his spirits, nor to agitate him in any way. His heart has been a cause of serious anxiety to those about him, from his earliest years. There is no positive disease; there is only a chronic feebleness--a fatty degeneration--a want of vital power in the organ itself. His heart will go on well enough if you don't give his heart too much to do--that is the advice of all the medical men who have seen him. You will not forget it, and you will keep a guard over your conversation accordingly. Talking of medical men, have you ever tried the Golden Ointment for that sad affliction in your eyes? It has been described to me as an excellent remedy."

"It has not succeeded in my case," replied Magdalen, sharply. "Before I see Mr. Noel Vanstone," she continued, "may I inquire--"

"I beg your pardon," interposed Mrs. Lecount. "Does your question refer in any way to those two poor girls?"

"It refers to the Misses Vanstone."

"Then I can't enter into it. Excuse me, I really can't discuss these poor girls (I am so glad to hear you call them the Misses Vanstone!) except in my master's presence, and by my master's express permission. Let us talk of

something else while we are waiting here. Will you notice my glass Tank? I have every reason to believe that it is a perfect novelty in England."

"I looked at the tank while you were out of the room," said Magdalen.

"Did you? You take no interest in the subject, I dare say? Quite natural. I took no interest either until I was married. My dear husband--dead many years since--formed my tastes and elevated me to himself. You have heard of the late Professor Lecomte, the eminent Swiss naturalist? I am his widow. The English circle at Zurich (where I lived in my late master's service) Anglicized my name to Lecount. Your generous country people will have nothing foreign about them--not even a name, if they can help it. But I was speaking of my husband--my dear husband, who permitted me to assist him in his pursuits. I have had only one interest since his death--an interest in science. Eminent in many things, the professor was great at reptiles. He left me his Subjects and his Tank. I had no other legacy. There is the Tank. All the Subjects died but this quiet little fellow--this nice little toad. Are you surprised at my liking him? There is nothing to be surprised at. The professor lived long enough to elevate me above the common prejudice against the reptile creation. Properly understood, the reptile creation is beautiful. Properly dissected, the reptile creation is instructive in the last degree." She stretched out her little finger, and gently stroked the toad's back with the tip of it. "So refreshing to the touch," said Mrs. Lecount--"so nice and cool this summer weather!"

The bell from the parlor rang. Mrs. Lecount rose, bent fondly over the Aquarium, and chirruped to the toad at parting as if it had been a bird. "Mr. Vanstone is ready to receive you. Follow me, if you please, Miss Garth." With these words she opened the door, and led the way out of the room.

CHAPTER III.

"MISS GARTH, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, opening the parlor door, and announcing the visitor's appearance with the tone and manner of a well-bred servant.

Magdalen found herself in a long, narrow room, consisting of a back parlor and a front parlor, which had been thrown into one by opening the folding-doors between them. Seated not far from the front window, with his back to the light, she saw a frail, flaxen-haired, self-satisfied little man, clothed in a fair white dressing-gown many sizes too large for him, with a nosegay of violets drawn neatly through the button-hole over his breast. He looked from thirty to five-and-thirty years old. His complexion was as delicate as a young girl's, his eyes were of the lightest blue, his upper lip was adorned by a weak little white mustache, waxed and twisted at either end into a thin spiral curl. When any object specially attracted his attention he half closed his eyelids to look at it. When he smiled, the skin at his temples crumpled itself up into a nest of wicked little wrinkles. He had a plate of strawberries on his lap, with a napkin under them to preserve the purity of his white dressing-gown. At his right hand stood a large round table, covered with a collection of foreign curiosities, which seemed to have been brought together from the four quarters of the globe. Stuffed birds from Africa, porcelain monsters from China, silver ornaments and utensils from India and Peru, mosaic work from Italy, and bronzes from France, were all heaped together pell-mell with the coarse deal boxes and dingy leather cases which served to pack them for traveling. The little man apologized, with a cheerful and simpering conceit, for his litter of curiosities, his dressing-gown, and his delicate health; and, waving his hand toward a chair, placed his attention, with pragmatical politeness, at the visitor's disposal. Magdalen looked at him with a momentary doubt whether Mrs. Lecount had not deceived her. Was this the man who mercilessly followed the path on which his merciless father had walked before him? She could hardly believe it. "Take a seat, Miss Garth," he repeated, observing her hesitation, and announcing his own name in a high, thin, fretfully-consequential voice: "I am Mr. Noel Vanstone. You wished to see me--here I am!"

"May I be permitted to retire, sir?" inquired Mrs. Lecount.

"Certainly not!" replied her master. "Stay here, Lecount, and keep us company. Mrs. Lecount has my fullest confidence," he continued, addressing Magdalen. "Whatever you say to me, ma'am, you say to her. She

is a domestic treasure. There is not another house in England has such a treasure as Mrs. Lecount."

The housekeeper listened to the praise of her domestic virtues with eyes immovably fixed on her elegant chemisette. But Magdalen's quick penetration had previously detected a look that passed between Mrs. Lecount and her master, which suggested that Noel Vanstone had been instructed beforehand what to say and do in his visitor's presence. The suspicion of this, and the obstacles which the room presented to arranging her position in it so as to keep her face from the light, warned Magdalen to be on her guard.

She had taken her chair at first nearly midway in the room. An instant's after-reflection induced her to move her seat toward the left hand, so as to place herself just inside, and close against, the left post of the folding-door. In this position she dexterously barred the only passage by which Mrs. Lecount could have skirted round the large table and contrived to front Magdalen by taking a chair at her master's side. On the right hand of the table the empty space was well occupied by the fireplace and fender, by some traveling-trunks, and a large packing-case. There was no alternative left for Mrs. Lecount but to place herself on a line with Magdalen against the opposite post of the folding-door, or to push rudely past the visitor with the obvious intention of getting in front of her. With an expressive little cough, and with one steady look at her master, the housekeeper conceded the point, and took her seat against the right-hand door-post. "Wait a little," thought Mrs. Lecount; "my turn next!"

"Mind what you are about, ma'am!" cried Noel Vanstone, as Magdalen accidentally approached the table in moving her chair. "Mind the sleeve of your cloak! Excuse me, you nearly knocked down that silver candlestick. Pray don't suppose it's a common candlestick. It's nothing of the sort--it's a Peruvian candlestick. There are only three of that pattern in the world. One is in the possession of the President of Peru; one is locked up in the Vatican; and one is on My table. It cost ten pounds; it's worth fifty. One of my father's bargains, ma'am. All these things are my father's bargains. There is not another house in England which has such curiosities as these. Sit down, Lecount; I beg you will make yourself comfortable. Mrs. Lecount is like the curiosities, Miss Garth--she is one of my father's bargains. You are one of my father's bargains, are you not, Lecount? My father was a remarkable man, ma'am. You will be reminded of him here at every turn. I have got his dressing-gown on at this moment. No such linen as this is made now--you can't get it for love or money. Would you like to feel the texture? Perhaps you're no judge of texture? Perhaps you would prefer talking to me about

these two pupils of yours? They are two, are they not? Are they fine girls? Plump, fresh, full-blown English beauties?"

"Excuse me, sir," interposed Mrs. Lecount, sorrowfully. "I must really beg permission to retire if you speak of the poor things in that way. I can't sit by, sir, and hear them turned into ridicule. Consider their position; consider Miss Garth."

"You good creature!" said Noel Vanstone, surveying the housekeeper through his half-closed eyelids. "You excellent Lecount! I assure you, ma'am, Mrs. Lecount is a worthy creature. You will observe that she pities the two girls. I don't go so far as that myself, but I can make allowances for them. I am a large-minded man. I can make allowances for them and for you." He smiled with the most cordial politeness, and helped himself to a strawberry from the dish on his lap.

"You shock Miss Garth; indeed, sir, without meaning it, you shock Miss Garth," remonstrated Mrs. Lecount. "She is not accustomed to you as I am. Consider Miss Garth, sir. As a favor to me, consider Miss Garth."

Thus far Magdalen had resolutely kept silence. The burning anger, which would have betrayed her in an instant if she had let it flash its way to the surface, throbbed fast and fiercely at her heart, and warned her, while Noel Vanstone was speaking, to close her lips. She would have allowed him to talk on uninterruptedly for some minutes more if Mrs. Lecount had not interfered for the second time. The refined insolence of the housekeeper's pity was a woman's insolence; and it stung her into instantly controlling herself. She had never more admirably imitated Miss Garth's voice and manner than when she spoke her next words.

"You are very good," she said to Mrs. Lecount. "I make no claim to be treated with any extraordinary consideration. I am a governess, and I don't expect it. I have only one favor to ask. I beg Mr. Noel Vanstone, for his own sake, to hear what I have to say to him."

"You understand, sir?" observed Mrs. Lecount. "It appears that Miss Garth has some serious warning to give you. She says you are to hear her, for your own sake."

Mr. Noel Vanstone's fair complexion suddenly turned white. He put away the plate of strawberries among his father's bargains. His hand shook and his little figure twisted itself uneasily in the chair. Magdalen observed him attentively. "One discovery already," she thought; "he is a coward!"

"What do you mean, ma'am?" asked Noel Vanstone, with visible trepidation of look and manner. "What do you mean by telling me I must listen to you for my own sake? If you come her to intimidate me, you come to the wrong man. My strength of character was universally noticed in our circle at Zurich--wasn't it, Lecount?"

"Universally, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "But let us hear Miss Garth. Perhaps I have misinterpreted her meaning."

"On the contrary," replied Magdalen, "you have exactly expressed my meaning. My object in coming here is to warn Mr. Noel Vanstone against the course which he is now taking."

"Don't!" pleaded Mrs. Lecount. "Oh, if you want to help these poor girls, don't talk in that way! Soften his resolution, ma'am, by entreaties; don't strengthen it by threats!" She a little overstrained the tone of humility in which she spoke those words--a little overacted the look of apprehension which accompanied them. If Magdalen had not seen plainly enough already that it was Mrs. Lecount's habitual practice to decide everything for her master in the first instance, and then to persuade him that he was not acting under his housekeeper's resolution but under his own, she would have seen it now.

"You hear what Lecount has just said?" remarked Noel Vanstone. "You hear the unsolicited testimony of a person who has known me from childhood? Take care, Miss Garth--take care!" He complacently arranged the tails of his white dressing-gown over his knees and took the plate of strawberries back on his lap.

"I have no wish to offend you," said Magdalen. "I am only anxious to open your eyes to the truth. You are not acquainted with the characters of the two sisters whose fortunes have fallen into your possession. I have known them from childhood; and I come to give you the benefit of my experience in their interests and in yours. You have nothing to dread from the elder of the two; she patiently accepts the hard lot which you, and your father before you, have forced on her. The younger sister's conduct is the very opposite of this. She has already declined to submit to your father's decision, and she now refuses to be silenced by Mrs. Lecount's letter. Take my word for it, she is capable of giving you serious trouble if you persist in making an enemy of her."

Noel Vanstone changed color once more, and began to fidget again in his

chair. "Serious trouble," he repeated, with a blank look. "If you mean writing letters, ma'am, she has given trouble enough already. She has written once to me, and twice to my father. One of the letters to my father was a threatening letter--wasn't it, Lecount?"

"She expressed her feelings, poor child," said Mrs. Lecount. "I thought it hard to send her back her letter, but your dear father knew best. What I said at the time was, Why not let her express her feelings? What are a few threatening words, after all? In her position, poor creature, they are words, and nothing more."

"I advise you not to be too sure of that," said Magdalen. "I know her better than you do."

She paused at those words--paused in a momentary terror. The sting of Mrs. Lecount's pity had nearly irritated her into forgetting her assumed character, and speaking in her own voice.

"You have referred to the letters written by my pupil," she resumed, addressing Noel Vanstone as soon as she felt sure of herself again. "We will say nothing about what she has written to your father; we will only speak of what she has written to you. Is there anything unbecoming in her letter, anything said in it that is false? Is it not true that these two sisters have been cruelly deprived of the provision which their father made for them? His will to this day speaks for him and for them; and it only speaks to no purpose, because he was not aware that his marriage obliged him to make it again, and because he died before he could remedy the error. Can you deny that?"

Noel Vanstone smiled, and helped himself to a strawberry. "I don't attempt to deny it," he said. "Go on, Miss Garth."

"Is it not true," persisted Magdalen, "that the law which has taken the money from these sisters, whose father made no second will, has now given that very money to you, whose father made no will at all? Surely, explain it how you may, this is hard on those orphan girls?"

"Very hard," replied Noel Vanstone. "It strikes you in that light, too--doesn't it, Lecount?"

Mrs. Lecount shook her head, and closed her handsome black eyes. "Harrowing," she said; "I can characterize it, Miss Garth, by no other word--harrowing. How the young person--no! how Miss Vanstone, the younger--

discovered that my late respected master made no will I am at a loss to understand. Perhaps it was put in the papers? But I am interrupting you, Miss Garth. Do have something more to say about your pupil's letter?" She noiselessly drew her chair forward, as she said these words, a few inches beyond the line of the visitor's chair. The attempt was neatly made, but it proved useless. Magdalen only kept her head more to the left, and the packing-case on the floor prevented Mrs. Lecount from advancing any further.

"I have only one more question to put," said Magdalen. "My pupil's letter addressed a proposal to Mr. Noel Vanstone. I beg him to inform me why he has refused to consider it."

"My good lady!" cried Noel Vanstone, arching his white eyebrows in satirical astonishment. "Are you really in earnest? Do you know what the proposal is? Have you seen the letter?"

"I am quite in earnest," said Magdalen, "and I have seen the letter. It entreats you to remember how Mr. Andrew Vanstone's fortune has come into your hands; it informs you that one-half of that fortune, divided between his daughters, was what his will intended them to have; and it asks of your sense of justice to do for his children what he would have done for them himself if he had lived. In plainer words still, it asks you to give one-half of the money to the daughters, and it leaves you free to keep the other half yourself. That is the proposal. Why have you refused to consider it?"

"For the simplest possible reason, Miss Garth," said Noel Vanstone, in high good-humor. "Allow me to remind you of a well-known proverb: A fool and his money are soon parted. Whatever else I may be, ma'am, I'm not a fool."

"Don't put it in that way, sir!" remonstrated Mrs. Lecount. "Be serious--pray be serious!"

"Quite impossible, Lecount," rejoined her master. "I can't be serious. My poor father, Miss Garth, took a high moral point of view in this matter. Lecount, there, takes a high moral point of view--don't you, Lecount? I do nothing of the sort. I have lived too long in the Continental atmosphere to trouble myself about moral points of view. My course in this business is as plain as two and two make four. I have got the money, and I should be a born idiot if I parted with it. There is my point of view! Simple enough, isn't it? I don't stand on my dignity; I don't meet you with the law, which is all on my side; I don't blame your coming here, as a total stranger, to try and alter my resolution; I don't blame the two girls for wanting to dip their fingers into

my purse. All I say is, I am not fool enough to open it. Pas si bete, as we used to say in the English circle at Zurich. You understand French, Miss Garth? Pas si bete!" He set aside his plate of strawberries once more, and daintily dried his fingers on his fine white napkin.

Magdalen kept her temper. If she could have struck him dead by lifting her hand at that moment, it is probable she would have lifted it. But she kept her temper.

"Am I to understand," she asked, "that the last words you have to say in this matter are the words said for you in Mrs. Lecount's letter!"

"Precisely so," replied Noel Vanstone.

"You have inherited your own father's fortune, as well as the fortune of Mr. Andrew Vanstone, and yet you feel no obligation to act from motives of justice or generosity toward these two sisters? All you think it necessary to say to them is, you have got the money, and you refuse to part with a single farthing of it?"

"Most accurately stated! Miss Garth, you are a woman of business. Lecount, Miss Garth is a woman of business."

"Don't appeal to me, sir," cried Mrs. Lecount, gracefully wringing her plump white hands. "I can't bear it! I must interfere! Let me suggest--oh, what do you call it in English?--a compromise. Dear Mr. Noel, you are perversely refusing to do yourself justice; you have better reasons than the reason you have given to Miss Garth. You follow your honored father's example; you feel it due to his memory to act in this matter as he acted before you. That is his reason, Miss Garth---- I implore you on my knees to take that as his reason. He will do what his dear father did; no more, no less. His dear father made a proposal, and he himself will now make that proposal over again. Yes, Mr. Noel, you will remember what this poor girl says in her letter to you. Her sister has been obliged to go out as a governess; and she herself, in losing her fortune, has lost the hope of her marriage for years and years to come. You will remember this--and you will give the hundred pounds to one, and the hundred pounds to the other, which your admirable father offered in the past time? If he does this, Miss Garth, will he do enough? If he gives a hundred pounds each to these unfortunate sisters--?"

"He will repent the insult to the last hour of his life," said Magdalen.

The instant that answer passed her lips she would have given worlds to

recall it. Mrs. Lecount had planted her sting in the right place at last. Those rash words of Magdalen's had burst from her passionately, in her own voice.

Nothing but the habit of public performance saved her from making the serious error that she had committed more palpable still, by attempting to set it right. Here her past practice in the Entertainment came to her rescue, and urged her to go on instantly in Miss Garth's voice as if nothing had happened.

"You mean well, Mrs. Lecount," she continued, "but you are doing harm instead of good. My pupils will accept no such compromise as you propose. I am sorry to have spoken violently just now; I beg you will excuse me." She looked hard for information in the housekeeper's face while she spoke those conciliatory words. Mrs. Lecount baffled the look by putting her handkerchief to her eyes. Had she, or had she not, noticed the momentary change in Magdalen's voice from the tones that were assumed to the tones that were natural? Impossible to say.

"What more can I do!" murmured Mrs. Lecount behind her handkerchief. "Give me time to think--give me time to recover myself. May I retire, sir, for a moment? My nerves are shaken by this sad scene. I must have a glass of water, or I think I shall faint. Don't go yet, Miss Garth. I beg you will give us time to set this sad matter right, if we can--I beg you will remain until I come back."

There were two doors of entrance to the room. One, the door into the front parlor, close at Magdalen's left hand. The other, the door into the back parlor, situated behind her. Mrs. Lecount politely retired--through the open folding-doors--by this latter means of exit, so as not to disturb the visitor by passing in front of her. Magdalen waited until she heard the door open and close again behind her, and then resolved to make the most of the opportunity which left her alone with Noel Vanstone. The utter hopelessness of rousing a generous impulse in that base nature had now been proved by her own experience. The last chance left was to treat him like the craven creature he was, and to influence him through his fears.

Before she could speak, Noel Vanstone himself broke the silence. Cunningly as he strove to hide it, he was half angry, half alarmed at his housekeeper's desertion of him. He looked doubtingly at his visitor; he showed a nervous anxiety to conciliate her until Mrs. Lecount's return.

"Pray remember, ma'am, I never denied that this case was a hard one," he began. "You said just now you had no wish to offend me--and I'm sure I

don't want to offend you. May I offer you some strawberries? Would you like to look at my father's bargains? I assure you, ma'am, I am naturally a gallant man; and I feel for both these sisters--especially the younger one. Touch me on the subject of the tender passion, and you touch me on a weak place. Nothing would please me more than to hear that Miss Vanstone's lover (I'm sure I always call her Miss Vanstone, and so does Lecount)--I say, ma'am, nothing would please me more than to hear that Miss Vanstone's lover had come back and married her. If a loan of money would be likely to bring him back, and if the security offered was good, and if my lawyer thought me justified--"

"Stop, Mr. Vanstone," said Magdalen. "You are entirely mistaken in your estimate of the person you have to deal with. You are seriously wrong in supposing that the marriage of the younger sister--if she could be married in a week's time--would make any difference in the convictions which induced her to write to your father and to you. I don't deny that she may act from a mixture of motives. I don't deny that she clings to the hope of hastening her marriage, and to the hope of rescuing her sister from a life of dependence. But if both those objects were accomplished by other means, nothing would induce her to leave you in possession of the inheritance which her father meant his children to have. I know her, Mr. Vanstone! She is a nameless, homeless, friendless wretch. The law which takes care of you, the law which takes care of all legitimate children, casts her like carrion to the winds. It is your law--not hers. She only knows it as the instrument of a vile oppression, an insufferable wrong. The sense of that wrong haunts her like a possession of the devil. The resolution to right that wrong burns in her like fire. If that miserable girl was married and rich, with millions tomorrow, do you think she would move an inch from her purpose? I tell you she would resist, to the last breath in her body, the vile injustice which has struck at the helpless children, through the calamity of their father's death! I tell you she would shrink from no means which a desperate woman can employ to force that closed hand of yours open, or die in the attempt!"

She stopped abruptly. Once more her own indomitable earnestness had betrayed her. Once more the inborn nobility of that perverted nature had risen superior to the deception which it had stooped to practice. The scheme of the moment vanished from her mind's view; and the resolution of her life burst its way outward in her own words, in her own tones, pouring hotly and more hotly from her heart. She saw the abject manikin before her cowering, silent, in his chair. Had his fears left him sense enough to perceive the change in her voice? No: his face spoke the truth--his fears had bewildered him. This time the chance of the moment had befriended her. The door behind her chair had not opened again yet. "No ears but his have

heard me," she thought, with a sense of unutterable relief. "I have escaped Mrs. Lecount."

She had done nothing of the kind. Mrs. Lecount had never left the room.

After opening the door and closing it again, without going out, the housekeeper had noiselessly knelt down behind Magdalen's chair. Steadying herself against the post of the folding-door, she took a pair of scissors from her pocket, waited until Noel Vanstone (from whose view she was entirely hidden) had attracted Magdalen's attention by speaking to her, and then bent forward, with the scissors ready in her hand. The skirt of the false Miss Garth's gown--the brown alpaca dress, with the white spots on it--touched the floor, within the housekeeper's reach. Mrs. Lecount lifted the outer of the two flounces which ran round the bottom of the dress one over the other, softly cut away a little irregular fragment of stuff from the inner flounce, and neatly smoothed the outer one over it again, so as to hide the gap. By the time she had put the scissors back in her pocket, and had risen to her feet (sheltering herself behind the post of the folding-door), Magdalen had spoken her last words. Mrs. Lecount quietly repeated the ceremony of opening and shutting the back parlor door; and returned to her place.

"What has happened, sir, in my absence?" she inquired, addressing her master with a look of alarm. "You are pale; you are agitated! Oh, Miss Garth, have you forgotten the caution I gave you in the other room?"

"Miss Garth has forgotten everything," cried Noel Vanstone, recovering his lost composure on the re-appearance of Mrs. Lecount. "Miss Garth has threatened me in the most outrageous manner. I forbid you to pity either of those two girls any more, Lecount--especially the younger one. She is the most desperate wretch I ever heard of! If she can't get my money by fair means, she threatens to have it by foul. Miss Garth has told me that to my face. To my face!" he repeated, folding his arms, and looking mortally insulted.

"Compose yourself, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "Pray compose yourself, and leave me to speak to Miss Garth. I regret to hear, ma'am, that you have forgotten what I said to you in the next room. You have agitated Mr. Noel; you have compromised the interests you came here to plead; and you have only repeated what we knew before. The language you have allowed yourself to use in my absence is the same language which your pupil was foolish enough to employ when she wrote for the second time to my late master. How can a lady of your years and experience seriously repeat such nonsense? This girl boasts and threatens. She will do this; she will do that.

You have her confidence, ma'am. Tell me, if you please, in plain words, what can she do?"

Sharply as the taunt was pointed, it glanced off harmless. Mrs. Lecount had planted her sting once too often. Magdalen rose in complete possession of her assumed character and composedly terminated the interview. Ignorant as she was of what had happened behind her chair, she saw a change in Mrs. Lecount's look and manner which warned her to run no more risks, and to trust herself no longer in the house.

"I am not in my pupil's confidence," she said. "Her own acts will answer your question when the time comes. I can only tell you, from my own knowledge of her, that she is no boaster. What she wrote to Mr. Michael Vanstone was what she was prepared to do---what, I have reason to think, she was actually on the point of doing, when her plans were overthrown by his death. Mr. Michael Vanstone's son has only to persist in following his father's course to find, before long, that I am not mistaken in my pupil, and that I have not come here to intimidate him by empty threats. My errand is done. I leave Mr. Noel Vanstone with two alternatives to choose from. I leave him to share Mr. Andrew Vanstone's fortune with Mr. Andrew Vanstone's daughters--or to persist in his present refusal and face the consequences." She bowed, and walked to the door.

Noel Vanstone started to his feet, with anger and alarm struggling which should express itself first in his blank white face. Before he could open his lips, Mrs. Lecount's plump hands descended on his shoulders, put him softly back in his chair, and restored the plate of strawberries to its former position on his lap.

"Refresh yourself, Mr. Noel, with a few more strawberries," she said, "and leave Miss Garth to me."

She followed Magdalen into the passage, and closed the door of the room after her.

"Are you residing in London, ma'am?" asked Mrs. Lecount.

"No," replied Magdalen. "I reside in the country."

"If I want to write to you, where can I address my letter?"

"To the post-office, Birmingham," said Magdalen, mentioning the place which she had last left, and at which all letters were still addressed to her.

Mrs. Lecount repeated the direction to fix it in her memory, advanced two steps in the passage, and quietly laid her right hand on Magdalen's arm.

"A word of advice, ma'am," she said; "one word at parting. You are a bold woman and a clever woman. Don't be too bold; don't be too clever. You are risking more than you think for." She suddenly raised herself on tiptoe and whispered the next words in Magdalen's ear. "I hold you in the hollow of my hand!" said Mrs. Lecount, with a fierce hissing emphasis on every syllable. Her left hand clinched itself stealthily as she spoke. It was the hand in which she had concealed the fragment of stuff from Magdalen's gown--the hand which held it fast at that moment.

"What do you mean?" asked Magdalen, pushing her back.

Mrs. Lecount glided away politely to open the house door.

"I mean nothing now," she said; "wait a little, and time may show. One last question, ma'am, before I bid you good-by. When your pupil was a little innocent child, did she ever amuse herself by building a house of cards?"

Magdalen impatiently answered by a gesture in the affirmative.

"Did you ever see her build up the house higher and higher," proceeded Mrs. Lecount, "till it was quite a pagoda of cards? Did you ever see her open her little child's eyes wide and look at it, and feel so proud of what she had done already that she wanted to do more? Did you ever see her steady her pretty little hand, and hold her innocent breath, and put one other card on the top, and lay the whole house, the instant afterward, a heap of ruins on the table? Ah, you have seen that. Give her, if you please, a friendly message from me. I venture to say she has built the house high enough already; and I recommend her to be careful before she puts on that other card."

"She shall have your message," said Magdalen, with Miss Garth's bluntness, and Miss Garth's emphatic nod of the head. "But I doubt her minding it. Her hand is rather steadier than you suppose, and I think she will put on the other card."

"And bring the house down," said Mrs. Lecount.

"And build it up again," rejoined Magdalen. "I wish you good-morning."

"Good-morning," said Mrs. Lecount, opening the door. "One last word, Miss

Garth. Do think of what I said in the back room! Do try the Golden Ointment for that sad affliction in your eyes!"

As Magdalen crossed the threshold of the door she was met by the postman ascending the house steps with a letter picked out from the bundle in his hand. "Noel Vanstone, Esquire?" she heard the man say, interrogatively, as she made her way down the front garden to the street.

She passed through the garden gates little thinking from what new difficulty and new danger her timely departure had saved her. The letter which the postman had just delivered into the housekeeper's hands was no other than the anonymous letter addressed to Noel Vanstone by Captain Wragge.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. LECOUNT returned to the parlor, with the fragment of Magdalen's dress in one hand, and with Captain Wragge's letter in the other.

"Have you got rid of her?" asked Noel Vanstone. "Have you shut the door at last on Miss Garth?"

"Don't call her Miss Garth, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, smiling contemptuously. "She is as much Miss Garth as you are. We have been favored by the performance of a clever masquerade; and if we had taken the disguise off our visitor, I think we should have found under it Miss Vanstone herself.--Here is a letter for you, sir, which the postman has just left."

She put the letter on the table within her master's reach. Noel Vanstone's amazement at the discovery just communicated to him kept his whole attention concentrated on the housekeeper's face. He never so much as looked at the letter when she placed it before him.

"Take my word for it, sir," proceeded Mrs. Lecount, composedly taking a chair. "When our visitor gets home she will put her gray hair away in a box, and will cure that sad affliction in her eyes with warm water and a sponge. If she had painted the marks on her face, as well as she painted the inflammation in her eyes, the light would have shown me nothing, and I should certainly have been deceived. But I saw the marks; I saw a young woman's skin under that dirty complexion of hers; I heard in this room a true voice in a passion, as well as a false voice talking with an accent, and I don't believe in one morsel of that lady's personal appearance from top to toe. The girl herself, in my opinion, Mr. Noel--and a bold girl too."

"Why didn't you lock the door and send for the police?" asked Mr. Noel. "My father would have sent for the police. You know, as well as I do, Lecount, my father would have sent for the police."

"Pardon me, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, "I think your father would have waited until he had got something more for the police to do than we have got for them yet. We shall see this lady again, sir. Perhaps she will come here next time with her own face and her own voice. I am curious to see what her own face is like. I am curious to know whether what I have heard of her voice in a passion is enough to make me recognize her voice when she is calm. I possess a little memorial of her visit of which she is not aware, and she will

not escape me so easily as she thinks. If it turns out a useful memorial, you shall know what it is. If not, I will abstain from troubling you on so trifling a subject.--Allow me to remind you, sir, of the letter under your hand. You have not looked at it yet."

Noel Vanstone opened the letter. He started as his eye fell on the first lines--hesitated--and then hurriedly read it through. The paper dropped from his hand, and he sank back in his chair. Mrs. Lecount sprang to her feet with the alacrity of a young woman and picked up the letter.

"What has happened, sir?" she asked. Her face altered as she put the question, and her large black eyes hardened fiercely, in genuine astonishment and alarm.

"Send for the police," exclaimed her master. "Lecount, I insist on being protected. Send for the police!"

"May I read the letter, sir?"

He feebly waved his hand. Mrs. Lecount read the letter attentively, and put it aside on the table, without a word, when she had done.

"Have you nothing to say to me?" asked Noel Vanstone, staring at his housekeeper in blank dismay. "Lecount, I'm to be robbed! The scoundrel who wrote that letter knows all about it, and won't tell me anything unless I pay him. I'm to be robbed! Here's property on this table worth thousands of pounds--property that can never be replaced--property that all the crowned heads in Europe could not produce if they tried. Lock me in, Lecount, and send for the police!"

Instead of sending for the police, Mrs. Lecount took a large green paper fan from the chimney-piece, and seated herself opposite her master.

"You are agitated, Mr. Noel," she said, "you are heated. Let me cool you."

With her face as hard as ever--with less tenderness of look and manner than most women would have shown if they had been rescuing a half-drowned fly from a milk-jug--she silently and patiently fanned him for five minutes or more. No practiced eye observing the peculiar bluish pallor of his complexion, and the marked difficulty with which he drew his breath, could have failed to perceive that the great organ of life was in this man, what the housekeeper had stated it to be, too weak for the function which it was called on to perform. The heart labored over its work as if it had been the

heart of a worn-out old man.

"Are you relieved, sir?" asked Mrs. Lecount. "Can you think a little? Can you exercise your better judgment?"

She rose and put her hand over his heart with as much mechanical attention and as little genuine interest as if she had been feeling the plates at dinner to ascertain if they had been properly warmed. "Yes," she went on, seating herself again, and resuming the exercise of the fan; "you are getting better already, Mr. Noel.--Don't ask me about this anonymous letter until you have thought for yourself, and have given your own opinion first." She went on with the fanning, and looked him hard in the face all the time. "Think," she said; "think, sir, without troubling yourself to express your thoughts. Trust to my intimate sympathy with you to read them. Yes, Mr. Noel, this letter is a paltry attempt to frighten you. What does it say? It says you are the object of a conspiracy directed by Miss Vanstone. We know that already--the lady of the inflamed eyes has told us. We snap our fingers at the conspiracy. What does the letter say next? It says the writer has valuable information to give you if you will pay for it. What did you call this person yourself just now, sir?"

"I called him a scoundrel," said Noel Vanstone, recovering his self-importance, and raising himself gradually in his chair.

"I agree with you in that, sir, as I agree in everything else," proceeded Mrs. Lecount. "He is a scoundrel who really has this information and who means what he says, or he is a mouthpiece of Miss Vanstone's, and she has caused this letter to be written for the purpose of puzzling us by another form of disguise. Whether the letter is true, or whether the letter is false--am I not reading your own wiser thoughts now, Mr. Noel?--you know better than to put your enemies on their guard by employing the police in this matter too soon. I quite agree with you--no police just yet. You will allow this anonymous man, or anonymous woman, to suppose you are easily frightened; you will lay a trap for the information in return for the trap laid for your money; you will answer the letter, and see what comes of the answer; and you will only pay the expense of employing the police when you know the expense is necessary. I agree with you again--no expense, if we can help it. In every particular, Mr. Noel, my mind and your mind in this matter are one."

"It strikes you in that light, Lecount--does it?" said Noel Vanstone. "I think so myself; I certainly think so. I won't pay the police a farthing if I can possibly help it." He took up the letter again, and became fretfully perplexed

over a second reading of it. "But the man wants money!" he broke out, impatiently. "You seem to forget, Lecount, that the man wants money."

"Money which you offer him, sir," rejoined Mrs. Lecount; "but--as your thoughts have already anticipated--money which you don't give him. No! no! you say to this man: 'Hold out your hand, sir;' and when he has held it, you give him a smack for his pains, and put your own hand back in your pocket.--I am so glad to see you laughing, Mr. Noel! so glad to see you getting back your good spirits. We will answer the letter by advertisement, as the writer directs--advertisement is so cheap! Your poor hand is trembling a little--shall I hold the pen for you? I am not fit to do more; but I can always promise to hold the pen."

Without waiting for his reply she went into the back parlor, and returned with pen, ink, and paper. Arranging a blotting-book on her knees, and looking a model of cheerful submission, she placed herself once more in front of her master's chair.

"Shall I write from your dictation, sir?" she inquired. "Or shall I make a little sketch, and will you correct it afterward? I will make a little sketch. Let me see the letter. We are to advertise in the Times, and we are to address 'An Unknown Friend.' What shall I say, Mr. Noel? Stay; I will write it, and then you can see for yourself: 'An Unknown Friend is requested to mention (by advertisement) an address at which a letter can reach him. The receipt of the information which he offers will be acknowledged by a reward of--' What sum of money do you wish me to set down, sir?"

"Set down nothing," said Noel Vanstone, with a sudden outbreak of impatience. "Money matters are my business--I say money matters are my business, Lecount. Leave it to me."

"Certainly, sir," replied Mrs. Lecount, handing her master the blotting-book. "You will not forget to be liberal in offering money when you know beforehand you don't mean to part with it?"

"Don't dictate, Lecount! I won't submit to dictation!" said Noel Vanstone, asserting his own independence more and more impatiently. "I mean to conduct this business for myself. I am master, Lecount!"

"You are master, sir."

"My father was master before me. And I am my father's son. I tell you, Lecount, I am my father's son!"

Mrs. Lecount bowed submissively.

"I mean to set down any sum of money I think right," pursued Noel Vanstone, nodding his little flaxen head vehemently. "I mean to send this advertisement myself. The servant shall take it to the stationer's to be put into the Times. When I ring the bell twice, send the servant. You understand, Lecount? Send the servant."

Mrs. Lecount bowed again and walked slowly to the door. She knew to a nicety when to lead her master and when to let him go alone. Experience had taught her to govern him in all essential points by giving way to him afterward on all points of minor detail. It was a characteristic of his weak nature--as it is of all weak natures--to assert itself obstinately on trifles. The filling in of the blank in the advertisement was the trifle in this case; and Mrs. Lecount quieted her master's suspicions that she was leading him by instantly conceding it. "My mule has kicked," she thought to herself, in her own language, as she opened the door. "I can do no more with him to-day."

"Lecount!" cried her master, as she stepped into the passage. "Come back."

Mrs. Lecount came back.

"You're not offended with me, are you?" asked Noel Vanstone, uneasily.

"Certainly not, sir," replied Mrs. Lecount. "As you said just now--you are master."

"Good creature! Give me your hand." He kissed her hand, and smiled in high approval of his own affectionate proceeding. "Lecount, you are a worthy creature!"

"Thank you, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. She courtesied and went out. "If he had any brains in that monkey head of his," she said to herself in the passage, "what a rascal he would be!"

Left by himself, Noel Vanstone became absorbed in anxious reflection over the blank space in the advertisement. Mrs. Lecount's apparently superfluous hint to him to be liberal in offering money when he knew he had no intention of parting with it, had been founded on an intimate knowledge of his character. He had inherited his father's sordid love of money, without inheriting his father's hard-headed capacity for seeing the uses to which money can be put. His one idea in connection with his wealth was the idea

of keeping it. He was such an inborn miser that the bare prospect of being liberal in theory only daunted him. He took up the pen; laid it down again; and read the anonymous letter for the third time, shaking his head over it suspiciously. "If I offer this man a large sum of money," he thought, on a sudden, "how do I know he may not find a means of actually making me pay it? Women are always in a hurry. Lecount is always in a hurry. I have got the afternoon before me--I'll take the afternoon to consider it."

He fretfully put away the blotting-book and the sketch of the advertisement on the chair which Mrs. Lecount had just left. As he returned to his own seat, he shook his little head solemnly, and arranged his white dressing-gown over his knees with the air of a man absorbed in anxious thought. Minute after minute passed away; the quarters and the half-hours succeeded each other on the dial of Mrs. Lecount's watch, and still Noel Vanstone remained lost in doubt; still no summons for the servants disturbed the tranquillity of the parlor bell.

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Meanwhile, after parting with Mrs. Lecount, Magdalen had cautiously abstained from crossing the road to her lodgings, and had only ventured to return after making a circuit in the neighborhood. When she found herself once more in Vauxhall Walk, the first object which attracted her attention was a cab drawn up before the door of the lodgings. A few steps more in advance showed her the landlady's daughter standing at the cab door engaged in a dispute with the driver on the subject of his fare. Noticing that the girl's back was turned toward her, Magdalen instantly profited by that circumstance and slipped unobserved into the house.

She glided along the passage, ascended the stairs, and found herself, on the first landing, face to face with her traveling companion! There stood Mrs. Wragge, with a pile of small parcels hugged up in her arms, anxiously waiting the issue of the dispute with the cabman in the street. To return was impossible--the sound of the angry voices below was advancing into the passage. To hesitate was worse than useless. But one choice was left--the choice of going on--and Magdalen desperately took it. She pushed by Mrs. Wragge without a word, ran into her own room, tore off her cloak, bonnet and wig, and threw them down out of sight in the blank space between the sofa-bedstead and the wall.

For the first few moments, astonishment bereft Mrs. Wragge of the power of speech, and rooted her to the spot where she stood. Two out of the collection of parcels in her arms fell from them on the stairs. The sight of that

catastrophe roused her. "Thieves!" cried Mrs. Wragge, suddenly struck by an idea. "Thieves!"

Magdalen heard her through the room door, which she had not had time to close completely. "Is that you, Mrs. Wragge?" she called out in her own voice. "What is the matter?" She snatched up a towel while she spoke, dipped it in water, and passed it rapidly over the lower part of her face. At the sound of the familiar voice Mrs. Wragge turned round--dropped a third parcel--and, forgetting it in her astonishment, ascended the second flight of stairs. Magdalen stepped out on the first-floor landing, with the towel held over her forehead as if she was suffering from headache. Her false eyebrows required time for their removal, and a headache assumed for the occasion suggested the most convenient pretext she could devise for hiding them as they were hidden now.

"What are you disturbing the house for?" she asked. "Pray be quiet; I am half blind with the headache."

"Anything wrong, ma'am?" inquired the landlady from the passage.

"Nothing whatever," replied Magdalen. "My friend is timid; and the dispute with the cabman has frightened her. Pay the man what he wants, and let him go."

"Where is She?" asked Mrs. Wragge, in a tremulous whisper. "Where's the woman who scuttled by me into your room?"

"Pooh!" said Magdalen. "No woman scuttled by you--as you call it. Look in and see for yourself."

She threw open the door. Mrs. Wragge walked into the room--looked all over it--saw nobody--and indicated her astonishment at the result by dropping a fourth parcel, and trembling helplessly from head to foot.

"I saw her go in here," said Mrs. Wragge, in awestruck accents. "A woman in a gray cloak and a poke bonnet. A rude woman. She scuttled by me on the stairs--she did. Here's the room, and no woman in it. Give us a Prayer-book!" cried Mrs. Wragge, turning deadly pale, and letting her whole remaining collection of parcels fall about her in a little cascade of commodities. "I want to read something Good. I want to think of my latter end. I've seen a Ghost!"

"Nonsense!" said Magdalen. "You're dreaming; the shopping has been too

much for you. Go into your own room and take your bonnet off."

"I've heard tell of ghosts in night-gowns, ghosts in sheets, and ghosts in chains," proceeded Mrs. Wragge, standing petrified in her own magic circle of linen-drapers' parcels. "Here's a worse ghost than any of 'em--a ghost in a gray cloak and a poke bonnet. I know what it is," continued Mrs. Wragge, melting into penitent tears. "It's a judgment on me for being so happy away from the captain. It's a judgment on me for having been down at heel in half the shops in London, first with one shoe and then with the other, all the time I've been out. I'm a sinful creature. Don't let go of me--whatever you do, my dear, don't let go of me!" She caught Magdalen fast by the arm and fell into another trembling fit at the bare idea of being left by herself.

The one remaining chance in such an emergency as this was to submit to circumstances. Magdalen took Mrs. Wragge to a chair; having first placed it in such a position as might enable her to turn her back on her traveling-companion, while she removed the false eyebrows by the help of a little water. "Wait a minute there," she said, "and try if you can compose yourself while I bathe my head."

"Compose myself?" repeated Mrs. Wragge. "How am I to compose myself when my head feels off my shoulders? The worst Buzzing I ever had with the Cookery-book was nothing to the Buzzing I've got now with the Ghost. Here's a miserable end to a holiday! You may take me back again, my dear, whenever you like--I've had enough of it already!"

Having at last succeeded in removing the eyebrows, Magdalen was free to combat the unfortunate impression produced on her companion's mind by every weapon of persuasion which her ingenuity could employ.

The attempt proved useless. Mrs. Wragge persisted--on evidence which, it may be remarked in parenthesis, would have satisfied many wiser ghost-seers than herself--in believing that she had been supernaturally favored by a visitor from the world of spirits. All that Magdalen could do was to ascertain, by cautious investigation, that Mrs. Wragge had not been quick enough to identify the supposed ghost with the character of the old North-country lady in the Entertainment. Having satisfied herself on this point, she had no resource but to leave the rest to the natural incapability of retaining impressions--unless those impressions were perpetually renewed--which was one of the characteristic infirmities of her companion's weak mind. After fortifying Mrs. Wragge by reiterated assurances that one appearance (according to all the laws and regulations of ghosts) meant nothing unless it was immediately followed by two more--after patiently

leading back her attention to the parcels dropped on the floor and on the stairs--and after promising to keep the door of communication ajar between the two rooms if Mrs. Wragge would engage on her side to retire to her own chamber, and to say no more on the terrible subject of the ghost--Magdalen at last secured the privilege of reflecting uninterruptedly on the events of that memorable day.

Two serious consequences had followed her first step forward. Mrs. Lecount had entrapped her into speaking in her own voice, and accident had confronted her with Mrs. Wragge in disguise.

What advantage had she gained to set against these disasters? The advantage of knowing more of Noel Vanstone and of Mrs. Lecount than she might have discovered in months if she had trusted to inquiries made for her by others. One uncertainty which had hitherto perplexed her was set at rest already. The scheme she had privately devised against Michael Vanstone--which Captain Wragge's sharp insight had partially penetrated when she first warned him that their partnership must be dissolved--was a scheme which she could now plainly see must be abandoned as hopeless, in the case of Michael Vanstone's son. The father's habits of speculation had been the pivot on which the whole machinery of her meditated conspiracy had been constructed to turn. No such vantage-ground was discoverable in the doubly sordid character of the son. Noel Vanstone was invulnerable on the very point which had presented itself in his father as open to attack.

Having reached this conclusion, how was she to shape her future course? What new means could she discover which would lead her secretly to her end, in defiance of Mrs. Lecount's malicious vigilance and Noel Vanstone's miserly distrust?

She was seated before the looking-glass, mechanically combing out her hair, while that all-important consideration occupied her mind. The agitation of the moment had raised a feverish color in her cheeks, and had brightened the light in her large gray eyes. She was conscious of looking her best; conscious how her beauty gained by contrast, after the removal of the disguise. Her lovely light brown hair looked thicker and softer than ever, now that it had escaped from its imprisonment under the gray wig. She twisted it this way and that, with quick, dexterous fingers; she laid it in masses on her shoulders; she threw it back from them in a heap and turned sidewise to see how it fell--to see her back and shoulders freed from the artificial deformities of the padded cloak. After a moment she faced the looking-glass once more; plunged both hands deep in her hair; and, resting her elbows on the table, looked closer and closer at the reflection of herself,

until her breath began to dim the glass. "I can twist any man alive round my finger," she thought, with a smile of superb triumph, "as long as I keep my looks! If that contemptible wretch saw me now--" She shrank from following that thought to its end, with a sudden horror of herself: she drew back from the glass, shuddering, and put her hands over her face. "Oh, Frank!" she murmured, "but for you, what a wretch I might be!" Her eager fingers snatched the little white silk bag from its hiding-place in her bosom; her lips devoured it with silent kisses. "My darling! my angel! Oh, Frank, how I love you!" The tears gushed into her eyes. She passionately dried them, restored the bag to its place, and turned her back on the looking-glass. "No more of myself," she thought; "no more of my mad, miserable self for to-day!"

Shrinking from all further contemplation of her next step in advance--shrinking from the fast-darkening future, with which Noel Vanstone was now associated in her inmost thoughts--she looked impatiently about the room for some homely occupation which might take her out of herself. The disguise which she had flung down between the wall and the bed recurred to her memory. It was impossible to leave it there. Mrs. Wragge (now occupied in sorting her parcels) might weary of her employment, might come in again at a moment's notice, might pass near the bed, and see the gray cloak. What was to be done?

Her first thought was to put the disguise back in her trunk. But after what had happened, there was danger in trusting it so near to herself while she and Mrs. Wragge were together under the same roof. She resolved to be rid of it that evening, and boldly determined on sending it back to Birmingham. Her bonnet-box fitted into her trunk. She took the box out, thrust in the wig and cloak, and remorselessly flattened down the bonnet at the top. The gown (which she had not yet taken off) was her own; Mrs. Wragge had been accustomed to see her in it--there was no need to send the gown back. Before closing the box, she hastily traced these lines on a sheet of paper: "I took the inclosed things away by mistake. Please keep them for me, with the rest of my luggage in your possession, until you hear from me again." Putting the paper on the top of the bonnet, she directed the box to Captain Wragge at Birmingham, took it downstairs immediately, and sent the landlady's daughter away with it to the nearest Receiving-house. "That difficulty is disposed of," she thought, as she went back to her own room again.

Mrs. Wragge was still occupied in sorting her parcels on her narrow little bed. She turned round with a faint scream when Magdalen looked in at her. "I thought it was the ghost again," said Mrs. Wragge. "I'm trying to take warning, my dear, by what's happened to me. I've put all my parcels

straight, just as the captain would like to see 'em. I'm up at heel with both shoes. If I close my eyes to-night--which I don't think I shall--I'll go to sleep as straight as my legs will let me. And I'll never have another holiday as long as I live. I hope I shall be forgiven," said Mrs. Wragge, mournfully shaking her head. "I humbly hope I shall be forgiven."

"Forgiven!" repeated Magdalen. "If other women wanted as little forgiving as you do--Well! well! Suppose you open some of these parcels. Come! I want to see what you have been buying to-day."

Mrs. Wragge hesitated, sighed penitently, considered a little, stretched out her hand timidly toward one of the parcels, thought of the supernatural warning, and shrank back from her own purchases with a desperate exertion of self-control.

"Open this one." said Magdalen, to encourage her: "what is it?"

Mrs. Wragge's faded blue eyes began to brighten dimly, in spite of her remorse; but she self-denyingly shook her head. The master-passion of shopping might claim his own again--but the ghost was not laid yet.

"Did you get it at a bargain?" asked Magdalen, confidentially.

"Dirt cheap!" cried poor Mrs. Wragge, falling headlong into the snare, and darting at the parcel as eagerly as if nothing had happened.

Magdalen kept her gossiping over her purchases for an hour or more, and then wisely determined to distract her attention from all ghostly recollections in another way by taking her out for a walk.

As they left the lodgings, the door of Noel Vanstone's house opened, and the woman-servant appeared, bent on another errand. She was apparently charged with a letter on this occasion which she carried carefully in her hand. Conscious of having formed no plan yet either for attack or defense, Magdalen wondered, with a momentary dread, whether Mrs. Lecount had decided already on opening fresh communications, and whether the letter was directed to "Miss Garth."

The let ter bore no such address. Noel Vanstone had solved his pecuniary problem at last. The blank space in the advertisement was filled up, and Mrs. Lecount's acknowledgment of the captain's anonymous warning was now on its way to insertion in the Times.

THE END OF THE THIRD SCENE.