

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

I.

Extract from the Advertising Columns of "The Times."

"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 Five Pounds."

II.

From Captain Wragge to Magdalen.

"Birmingham, July 2d, 1847.

"MY DEAR GIRL--The box containing the articles of costumes which you took away by mistake has come safely to hand. Consider it under my special protection until I hear from you again.

"I embrace this opportunity to assure you once more of my unalterable fidelity to your interests. Without attempting to intrude myself into your confidence, may I inquire whether Mr. Noel Vanstone has consented to do you justice? I greatly fear he has declined--in which case I can lay my hand on my heart, and solemnly declare that his meanness revolts me. Why do I feel a foreboding that you have appealed to him in vain? Why do I find myself viewing this fellow in the light of a noxious insect? We are total strangers to each other; I have no sort of knowledge of him, except the knowledge I picked up in making your inquiries. Has my intense sympathy with your interests made my perceptions prophetic? or, to put it fancifully, is there really such a thing as a former state of existence? and has Mr. Noel Vanstone mortally insulted me--say, in some other planet?

"I write, my dear Magdalen, as you see, with my customary dash of humor. But I am serious in placing my services at your disposal. Don't let the question of terms cause you an instant's hesitation. I accept beforehand any terms you like to mention. If your present plans point that way, I am ready to squeeze Mr. Noel Vanstone, in your interests, till the gold oozes out of him at every pore. Pardon the coarseness of this metaphor. My anxiety to be of service to you rushes into words; lays my meaning, in the rough, at your feet; and leaves your taste to polish it with the choicest ornaments of the English language.

"How is my unfortunate wife? I am afraid you find it quite impossible to keep her up at heel, or to mold her personal appearance into harmony with the eternal laws of symmetry and order. Does she attempt to be too familiar with you? I have always been accustomed to check her, in this respect. She has never been permitted to call me anything but Captain; and on the rare occasions since our union, when circumstances may have obliged her to address me by letter, her opening form of salutation has been rigidly restricted to 'Dear Sir.' Accept these trifling domestic particulars as

suggesting hints which may be useful to you in managing Mrs. Wragge; and believe me, in anxious expectation of hearing from you again,

"Devotedly yours,

"HORATIO WRAGGE."

III.

From Norah to Magdalen.

[Forwarded, with the Two Letters that follow it, from the Post-office, Birmingham.]

"Westmoreland House, Kensington, July 1st.

"MY DEAREST MAGDALEN--When you write next (and pray write soon!) address your letter to me at Miss Garth's. I have left my situation; and some little time may elapse before I find another.

"Now it is all over I may acknowledge to you, my darling, that I was not happy. I tried hard to win the affection of the two little girls I had to teach; but they seemed, I am sure I can't tell why, to dislike me from the first. Their mother I have no reason to complain of. But their grandmother, who was really the ruling power in the house, made my life very hard to me. My inexperience in teaching was a constant subject of remark with her; and my difficulties with the children were always visited on me as if they had been entirely of my own making. I tell you this, so that you may not suppose I regret having left my situation. Far from it, my love--I am glad to be out of the house.

"I have saved a little money, Magdalen; and I should so like to spend it in staying a few days with you. My heart aches for a sight of my sister; my ears are weary for the sound of her voice. A word from you telling me where we can meet, is all I want. Think of it--pray think of it.

"Don't suppose I am discouraged by this first check. There are many kind people in the world; and some of them may employ me next time. The way to happiness is often very hard to find; harder, I almost think, for women than for men. But if we only try patiently, and try long enough, we reach it at last--in heaven, if not on earth. I think my way now is the way which leads to seeing you again. Don't forget that, my love, the next time you think of

"NORAH."

IV.

From Miss Garth to Magdalen.

"Westmoreland House, July 1st.

"MY DEAR MAGDALEN--You have no useless remonstrances to apprehend at the sight of my handwriting. My only object in this letter is to tell you something which I know your sister will not tell you of her own accord. She is entirely ignorant that I am writing to you. Keep her in ignorance, if you wish to spare her unnecessary anxiety, and me unnecessary distress.

"Norah's letter, no doubt, tells you that she has left her situation. I feel it my painful duty to add that she has left it on your account.

"The matter occurred in this manner. Messrs. Wyatt, Pendril, and Gwilt are the solicitors of the gentleman in whose family Norah was employed. The life which you have chosen for yourself was known as long ago as December last to all the partners. You were discovered performing in public at Derby by the person who had been employed to trace you at York; and that discovery was communicated by Mr. Wyatt to Norah's employer a few days since, in reply to direct inquiries about you on that gentleman's part. His wife and his mother (who lives with him) had expressly desired that he would make those inquiries; their doubts having been aroused by Norah's evasive answers when they questioned her about her sister. You know Norah too well to blame her for this. Evasion was the only escape your present life had left her, from telling a downright falsehood.

"That same day, the two ladies of the family, the elder and the younger, sent for your sister, and told her they had discovered that you were a public performer, roaming from place to place in the country under an assumed name. They were just enough not to blame Norah for this; they were just enough to acknowledge that her conduct had been as irreproachable as I had guaranteed it should be when I got her the situation. But, at the same time, they made it a positive condition of her continuing in their employment that she should never permit you to visit her at their house, or to meet her and walk out with her when she was in attendance on the children. Your sister--who has patiently borne all hardships that fell on herself--instantly resented the slur cast on you. She gave her employers warning on the spot. High words followed, and she left the house that evening.

"I have no wish to distress you by representing the loss of this situation in the light of a disaster. Norah was not so happy in it as I had hoped and believed she would be. It was impossible for me to know beforehand that the children were sullen and intractable, or that the husband's mother was accustomed to make her domineering disposition felt by every one in the house. I will readily admit that Norah is well out of this situation. But the harm does not stop here. For all you and I know to the contrary, the harm may go on. What has happened in this situation may happen in another. Your way of life, however pure your conduct may be--and I will do you the justice to believe it pure--is a suspicious way of life to all respectable people. I have lived long enough in this world to know that the sense of Propriety, in nine Englishwomen out of ten, makes no allowances and feels no pity. Norah's next employers may discover you; and Norah may throw up a situation next time which we may never be able to find for her again.

"I leave you to consider this. My child, don't think I am hard on you. I am jealous for your sister's tranquillity. If you will forget the past, Magdalen, and come back, trust to your old governess to forget it too, and to give you the home which your father and mother once gave her. Your friend, my dear, always,

"HARRIET GARTH."

V.

From Francis Clare, Jun., to Magdalen.

"Shanghai, China, April 23d, 1847.

"MY DEAR MAGDALEN--I have deferred answering your letter, in consequence of the distracted state of my mind, which made me unfit to write to you. I am still unfit, but I feel I ought to delay no longer. My sense of honor fortifies me, and I undergo the pain of writing this letter.

"My prospects in China are all at an end. The Firm to which I was brutally consigned, as if I was a bale of merchandise, has worn out my patience by a series of petty insults; and I have felt compelled, from motives of self-respect, to withdraw my services, which were undervalued from the first. My returning to England under these circumstances is out of the question. I have been too cruelly used in my own country to wish to go back to it, even if I could. I propose embarking on board a private trading-vessel in these seas in a mercantile capacity, to make my way, if I can, for myself. How it will end, or what will happen to me next, is more than I can say. It matters little what becomes of me. I am a wanderer and an exile, entirely through the fault of others. The unfeeling desire at home to get rid of me has accomplished its object. I am got rid of for good.

"There is only one more sacrifice left for me to make--the sacrifice of my heart's dearest feelings. With no prospects before me, with no chance of coming home, what hope can I feel of performing my engagement to yourself? None! A more selfish man than I am might hold you to that engagement; a less considerate man than I am might keep you waiting for years--and to no purpose after all. Cruelly as they have been trampled on, my feelings are too sensitive to allow me to do this. I write it with the tears in my eyes--you shall not link your fate to an outcast. Accept these heart-broken lines as releasing you from your promise. Our engagement is at an end.

"The one consolation which supports me in bidding you farewell is, that neither of us is to blame. You may have acted weakly, under my father's influence, but I am sure you acted for the best. Nobody knew what the fatal consequences of driving me out of England would be but myself--and I was not listened to. I yielded to my father, I yielded to you; and this is the end of it!

"I am suffering too acutely to write more. May you never know what my withdrawal from our engagement has cost me! I beg you will not blame yourself. It is not your fault that I have had all my energies misdirected by others--it is not your fault that I have never had a fair chance of getting on in life. Forget the deserted wretch who breathes his heartfelt prayers for your happiness, and who will ever remain your friend and well-wisher.

"FRANCIS CLARE, Jun."

VI.

From Francis Clare, Sen., to Magdalen.

[Inclosing the preceding Letter.]

"I always told your poor father my son was a Fool, but I never knew he was a Scoundrel until the mail came in from China. I have every reason to believe that he has left his employers under the most disgraceful circumstances. Forget him from this time forth, as I do. When you and I last set eyes on each other, you behaved well to me in this business. All I can now say in return, I do say. My girl, I am sorry for you,

"F. C."

VII.

From Mrs. Wragge to her Husband.

"Dear sir for mercy's sake come here and help us She had a dreadful letter I don't know what yesterday but she read it in bed and when I went in with her breakfast I found her dead and if the doctor had not been two doors off nobody else could have brought her to life again and she sits and looks dreadful and won't speak a word her eyes frighten me so I shake from head to foot oh please do come I keep things as tidy as I can and I do like her so and she used to be so kind to me and the landlord says he's afraid she'll destroy herself I wish I could write straight but I do shake so your dutiful wife matilda wragge excuse faults and beg you on my knees come and help us the Doctor good man will put some of his own writing into this for fear you can't make out mine and remain once more your dutiful wife matilda wragge."

Added by the Doctor.

"SIR--I beg to inform you that I was yesterday called into a neighbor's in Vauxhall Walk to attend a young lady who had been suddenly taken ill. I recovered her with great difficulty from one of the most obstinate fainting-fits I ever remember to have met with. Since that time she has had no relapse, but there is apparently some heavy distress weighing on her mind which it has hitherto been found impossible to remove. She sits, as I am informed, perfectly silent, and perfectly unconscious of what goes on about her, for hours together, with a letter in her hand which she will allow nobody to take from her. If this state of depression continues, very distressing mental consequences may follow; and I only do my duty in suggesting that some relative or friend should interfere who has influence enough to rouse her. Your obedient servant,

"RICHARD JARVIS, M.R.C.S."

VIII.

From Norah to Magdalen.

"July 5th.

"For God's sake, write me one line to say if you are still at Birmingham, and where I can find you there! I have just heard from old Mr. Clare. Oh, Magdalen, if you have no pity on yourself, have some pity on me! The thought of you alone among strangers, the thought of you heart-broken under this dreadful blow, never leaves me for an instant. No words can tell how I feel for you! My own love, remember the better days at home before that cowardly villain stole his way into your heart; remember the happy time at Combe-Raven when we were always together. Oh, don't, don't treat me like a stranger! We are alone in the world now--let me come and comfort you, let me be more than a sister to you, if I can. One line--only one line to tell me where I can find you!"

IX.

From Magdalen to Norah.

"July 7th.

"MY DEAREST NORAH--All that your love for me can wish your letter has done. You, and you alone, have found your way to my heart. I could think again, I could feel again, after reading what you have written to me. Let this assurance quiet your anxieties. My mind lives and breathes once more--it was dead until I got your letter.

"The shock I have suffered has left a strange quietness in me. I feel as if I had parted from my former self--as if the hopes once so dear to me had all gone back to some past time from which I am now far removed. I can look at the wreck of my life more calmly, Norah, than you could look at it if we were both together again. I can trust myself already to write to Frank.

"My darling, I think no woman ever knows how utterly she has given herself up to the man she loves--until that man has ill-treated her. Can you pity my weakness if I confess to having felt a pang at my heart when I read that part of your letter which calls Frank a coward and a villain? Nobody can despise me for this as I despise myself. I am like a dog who crawls back and licks the master's hand that has beaten him. But it is so--I would confess it to nobody but you--indeed, indeed it is so. He has deceived and deserted me; he has written me a cruel farewell --but don't call him a villain! If he repented and came back to me, I would die rather than marry him now--but it grates on me to see that word coward written against him in your hand! If he is weak of purpose, who tried his weakness beyond what it could bear? Do you think this would have happened if Michael Vanstone had not robbed us of our own, and forced Frank away from me to China? In a week from to-day the year of waiting would have come to an end, and I should have been Frank's wife, if my marriage portion had not been taken from me.

"You will say, after what has hap pened, it is well that I have escaped. My love! there is something perverse in my heart which answers, No! Better have been Frank's wretched wife than the free woman I am now.

"I have not written to him. He sends me no address at which I could write, even if I would. But I have not the wish. I will wait before I send him my farewell. If a day ever comes when I have the fortune which my father once

promised I should bring to him, do you know what I would do with it? I would send it all to Frank, as my revenge on him for his letter; as the last farewell word on my side to the man who has deserted me. Let me live for that day! Let me live, Norah, in the hope of better times for you, which is all the hope I have left. When I think of your hard life, I can almost feel the tears once more in my weary eyes. I can almost think I have come back again to my former self.

"You will not think me hard-hearted and ungrateful if I say that we must wait a little yet before we meet. I want to be more fit to see you than I am now. I want to put Frank further away from me, and to bring you nearer still. Are these good reasons? I don't know--don't ask me for reasons. Take the kiss I have put for you here, where the little circle is drawn on the paper; and let that bring us together for the present till I write again. Good-by, my love. My heart is true to you, Norah, but I dare not see you yet.

"MAGDALEN."

X.

From Magdalen to Miss Garth.

"MY DEAR MISS GARTH--I have been long in answering your letter; but you know what has happened, and you will forgive me.

"All that I have to say may be said in a few words. You may depend on my never making the general Sense of Propriety my enemy again: I am getting knowledge enough of the world to make it my accomplice next time. Norah will never leave another situation on my account--my life as a public performer is at an end. It was harmless enough, God knows--I may live, and so may you, to mourn the day when I parted from it--but I shall never return to it again. It has left me, as Frank has left me, as all my better thoughts have left me except my thoughts of Norah.

"Enough of myself! Shall I tell you some news to brighten this dull letter? Mr. Michael Vanstone is dead, and Mr. Noel Vanstone has succeeded to the possession of my fortune and Norah's. He is quite worthy of his inheritance. In his father's place, he would have ruined us as his father did.

"I have no more to say that you would care to know. Don't be distressed about me. I am trying to recover my spirits--I am trying to forget the poor deluded girl who was foolish enough to be fond of Frank in the old days at Combe-Raven. Sometimes a pang comes which tells me the girl won't be forgotten--but not often.

"It was very kind of you, when you wrote to such a lost creature as I am, to sign yourself--always my friend. 'Always' is a bold word, my dear old governess! I wonder whether you will ever want to recall it? It will make no difference if you do, in the gratitude I shall always feel for the trouble you took with me when I was a little girl. I have ill repaid that trouble--ill repaid your kindness to me in after life. I ask your pardon and your pity. The best thing you can do for both of us is to forget me. Affectionately yours,

"MAGDALEN."

"P.S.--I open the envelope to add one line. For God's sake, don't show this letter to Norah!"

XI.

From Magdalen to Captain Wragge.

"Vauxhall Walk, July 17th.

"If I am not mistaken, it was arranged that I should write to you at Birmingham as soon as I felt myself composed enough to think of the future. My mind is settled at last, and I am now able to accept the services which you have so unreservedly offered to me.

"I beg you will forgive the manner in which I received you on your arrival in this house, after hearing the news of my sudden illness. I was quite incapable of controlling myself--I was suffering an agony of mind which for the time deprived me of my senses. It is only your due that I should now thank you for treating me with great forbearance at a time when forbearance was mercy.

"I will mention what I wish you to do as plainly and briefly as I can.

"In the first place, I request you to dispose (as privately as possible) of every article of costume used in the dramatic Entertainment. I have done with our performances forever; and I wish to be set free from everything which might accidentally connect me with them in the future. The key of my box is inclosed in this letter.

"The other box, which contains my own dresses, you will be kind enough to forward to this house. I do not ask you to bring it yourself, because I have a far more important commission to intrust to you.

"Referring to the note which you left for me at your departure, I conclude that you have by this time traced Mr. Noel Vanstone from Vauxhall Walk to the residence which he is now occupying. If you have made the discovery--and if you are quite sure of not having drawn the attention either of Mrs. Lecount or her master to yourself--I wish you to arrange immediately for my residing (with you and Mrs. Wragge) in the same town or village in which Mr. Noel Vanstone has taken up his abode. I write this, it is hardly necessary to say, under the impression that, wherever he may now be living, he is settled in the place for some little time.

"If you can find a small furnished house for me on these conditions which is

to be let by the month, take it for a month certain to begin with. Say that it is for your wife, your niece, and yourself, and use any assumed name you please, as long as it is a name that can be trusted to defeat the most suspicious inquiries. I leave this to your experience in such matters. The secret of who we really are must be kept as strictly as if it was a secret on which our lives depend.

"Any expenses to which you may be put in carrying out my wishes I will immediately repay. If you easily find the sort of house I want, there is no need for your returning to London to fetch us. We can join you as soon as we know where to go. The house must be perfectly respectable, and must be reasonably near to Mr. Noel Vanstone's present residence, wherever that is.

"You must allow me to be silent in this letter as to the object which I have now in view. I am unwilling to risk an explanation in writing. When all our preparations are made, you shall hear what I propose to do from my own lips; and I shall expect you to tell me plainly, in return, whether you will or will not give me the help I want on the best terms which I am able to offer you.

"One word more before I seal up this letter.

"If any opportunity falls in your way after you have taken the house, and before we join you, of exchanging a few civil words either with Mr. Noel Vanstone or Mrs. Lecount, take advantage of it. It is very important to my present object that we should become acquainted with each other--as the purely accidental result of our being near neighbors. I want you to smooth the way toward this end if you can, before Mrs. Wragge and I come to you. Pray throw away no chance of observing Mrs. Lecount, in particular, very carefully. Whatever help you can give me at the outset in blindfolding that woman's sharp eyes will be the most precious help I have ever received at your hands.

"There is no need to answer this letter immediately--unless I have written it under a mistaken impression of what you have accomplished since leaving London. I have taken our lodgings on for another week; and I can wait to hear from you until you are able to send me such news as I wish to receive. You may be quite sure of my patience for the future, under all possible circumstances. My caprices are at an end, and my violent temper has tried your forbearance for the last time.

"MAGDALEN."

XII.

From Captain Wragge to Magdalen.

"North Shingles Villa, Aldborough, Suffolk, July 22d.

"MY DEAR GIRL--Your letter has charmed and touched me. Your excuses have gone straight to my heart; and your confidence in my humble abilities has followed in the same direction. The pulse of the old militia-man throbs with pride as he thinks of the trust you have placed in him, and vows to deserve it. Don't be surprised at this genial outburst. All enthusiastic natures must explode occasionally; and my form of explosion is--Words.

"Everything you wanted me to do is done. The house is taken; the name is found; and I am personally acquainted with Mrs. Lecount. After reading this general statement, you will naturally be interested in possessing your mind next of the accompanying details. Here they are, at your service:

"The day after leaving you in London, I traced Mr. Noel Vanstone to this curious little seaside snuggerly. One of his father's innumerable bargains was a house at Aldborough--a rising watering-place, or Mr. Michael Vanstone would not have invested a farthing in it. In this house the despicable little miser, who lived rent free in London, now lives, rent free again, on the coast of Suffolk. He is settled in his present abode for the summer and autumn; and you and Mrs. Wragge have only to join me here, to be established five doors away from him in this elegant villa. I have got the whole house for three guineas a week, with the option of remaining through the autumn at the same price. In a fashionable watering-place, such a residence would have been cheap at double the money.

"Our new name has been chosen with a wary eye to your suggestions. My books--I hope you have not forgotten my Books?--contain, under the heading of Skins To Jump Into, a list of individuals retired from this mortal scene, with whose names, families, and circumstances I am well acquainted. Into some of those Skins I have been compelled to Jump, in the exercise of my profession, at former periods of my career. Others are still in the condition of new dresses and remain to be tried on. The Skin which will exactly fit us originally clothed the bodies of a family named Bygrave. I am in Mr. Bygrave's skin at this moment--and it fits without a wrinkle. If you will oblige me by slipping into Miss Bygrave (Christian name, Susan); and if you

will afterward push Mrs. Wragge--anyhow; head foremost if you like--into Mrs. Bygrave (Christian name, Julia), the transformation will be complete. Permit me to inform you that I am your paternal uncle. My worthy brother was established twenty years ago in the mahogany and logwood trade at Belize, Honduras. He died in that place; and is buried on the south-west side of the local cemetery, with a neat monument of native wood carved by a self-taught negro artist. Nineteen months afterward his widow died of apoplexy at a boarding-house in Cheltenham. She was supposed to be the most corpulent woman in England, and was accommodated on the ground-floor of the house in consequence of the difficulty of getting her up and down stairs. You are her only child; you have been under my care since the sad event at Cheltenham; you are twenty-one years old on the second of August next; and, corpulence excepted, you are the living image of your mother. I trouble you with these specimens of my intimate knowledge of our new family Skin, to quiet your mind on the subject of future inquiries. Trust to me and my books to satisfy any amount of inquiry. In the meantime write down our new name and address, and see how they strike you: 'Mr. Bygrave, Mrs. Bygrave, Miss Bygrave; North Shingles Villa, Aldborough.' Upon my life, it reads remarkably well!

"The last detail I have to communicate refers to my acquaintance with Mrs. Lecount.

"We met yesterday, in the grocer's shop here. Keeping my ears open, I found that Mrs. Lecount wanted a particular kind of tea which the man had not got, and which he believed could not be procured any nearer than Ipswich. I instantly saw my way to beginning an acquaintance, at the trifling expense of a journey to that flourishing city. 'I have business to-day in Ipswich,' I said, 'and I propose returning to Aldborough (if I can get back in time) this evening. Pray allow me to take your order for the tea, and to bring it back with my own parcels.' Mrs. Lecount politely declined giving me the trouble--I politely insisted on taking it. We fell into conversation. There is no need to trouble you with our talk. The result of it on my mind is--that Mrs. Lecount's one weak point, if she has such a thing at all, is a taste for science, implanted by her deceased husband, the professor. I think I see a chance here of working my way into her good graces, and casting a little needful dust into those handsome black eyes of hers. Acting on this idea when I purchased the lady's tea at Ipswich, I also bought on my own account that far-famed pocket-manual of knowledge, 'Joyce's Scientific Dialogues.' Possessing, as I do, a quick memory and boundless confidence in myself, I propose privately inflating my new skin with as much ready-made science as it will hold, and presenting Mr. Bygrave to Mrs. Lecount's notice in the character of the most highly informed man she has met with

since the professor's death. The necessity of blindfolding that woman (to use your own admirable expression) is as clear to me as to you. If it is to be done in the way I propose, make your mind easy--Wragge, inflated by Joyce, is the man to do it.

"You now have my whole budget of news. Am I, or am I not, worthy of your confidence in me? I say nothing of my devouring anxiety to know what your objects really are--that anxiety will be satisfied when we meet. Never yet, my dear girl, did I long to administer a productive pecuniary Squeeze to any human creature, as I long to administer it to Mr. Noel Vanstone. I say no more. Verbum sap. Pardon the pedantry of a Latin quotation, and believe me,

"Entirely yours,

"HORATIO WRAGGE.

"P.S.--I await my instructions, as you requested. You have only to say whether I shall return to London for the purpose of escorting you to this place, or whether I shall wait here to receive you. The house is in perfect order, the weather is charming, and the sea is as smooth as Mrs. Lecount's apron. She has just passed the window, and we have exchanged bows. A sharp woman, my dear Magdalen; but Joyce and I together may prove a trifle too much for her."

XIII.

Extract from the "East Suffolk Argus."

"ALDBOROUGH.--We notice with pleasure the arrival of visitors to this healthful and far-famed watering-place earlier in the season than usual during the present year. Esto Perpetua is all we have to say.

"VISITORS' LIST.--Arrivals since our last. North Shingles Villa--Mrs. Bygrave; Miss Bygrave."