THE FOURTH SCENE - ALDBOROUGH, SUFFOLK.

CHAPTER I.

THE most striking spectacle presented to a stranger by the shores of Suffolk is the extraordinary defenselessness of the land against the encroachments of the sea.

At Aldborough, as elsewhere on this coast, local traditions are, for the most part, traditions which have been literally drowned. The site of the old town, once a populous and thriving port, has almost entirely disappeared in the sea. The German Ocean has swallowed up streets, market-places, jetties, and public walks; and the merciless waters, consummating their work of devastation, closed, no longer than eighty years since, over the salt-master's cottage at Aldborough, now famous in memory only as the birthplace of the poet CRABBE.

Thrust back year after year by the advancing waves, the inhabitants have receded, in the present century, to the last morsel of land which is firm enough to be built on--a strip of ground hemmed in between a marsh on one side and the sea on the other. Here, trusting for their future security to certain sand-hills which the capricious waves have thrown up to encourage them, the people of Aldborough have boldly established their quaint little watering-place. The first fragment of their earthly possessions is a low natural dike of shingle, surmounted by a public path which runs parallel with the sea. Bordering this path, in a broken, uneven line, are the villa residences of modern Aldborough--fanciful little houses, standing mostly in their own gardens, and possessing here and there, as horticultural ornaments, staring figure-heads of ships doing duty for statues among the flowers. Viewed from the low level on which th ese villas stand, the sea, in certain conditions of the atmosphere, appears to be higher than the land: coasting-vessels gliding by assume gigantic proportions, and look alarmingly near the windows. Intermixed with the houses of the better sort are buildings of other forms and periods. In one direction the tiny Gothic town-hall of old Aldborough--once the center of the vanished port and borough--now stands, fronting the modern villas close on the margin of the sea. At another point, a wooden tower of observation, crowned by the figure-head of a wrecked Russian vessel, rises high above the neighboring houses, and discloses through its scuttle-window grave men in dark clothing seated on

the topmost story, perpetually on the watch--the pilots of Aldborough looking out from their tower for ships in want of help. Behind the row of buildings thus curiously intermingled runs the one straggling street of the town, with its sturdy pilots' cottages, its mouldering marine store-houses, and its composite shops. Toward the northern end this street is bounded by the one eminence visible over all the marshy flat--a low wooded hill, on which the church is built. At its opposite extremity the street leads to a deserted martello tower, and to the forlorn outlying suburb of Slaughden, between the river Alde and the sea. Such are the main characteristics of this curious little outpost on the shores of England as it appears at the present time.

On a hot and cloudy July afternoon, and on the second day which had elapsed since he had written to Magdalen, Captain Wragge sauntered through the gate of North Shingles Villa to meet the arrival of the coach, which then connected Aldborough with the Eastern Counties Railway. He reached the principal inn as the coach drove up, and was ready at the door to receive Magdalen and Mrs. Wragge, on their leaving the vehicle.

The captain's reception of his wife was not characterized by an instant's unnecessary waste of time. He looked distrustfully at her shoes--raised himself on tiptoe--set her bonnet straight for her with a sharp tug---said, in a loud whisper, "hold your tongue"--and left her, for the time being, without further notice. His welcome to Magdalen, beginning with the usual flow of words, stopped suddenly in the middle of the first sentence. Captain Wragge's eye was a sharp one, and it instantly showed him something in the look and manner of his old pupil which denoted a serious change.

There was a settled composure on her face which, except when she spoke, made it look as still and cold as marble. Her voice was softer and more equable, her eyes were steadier, her step was slower than of old. When she smiled, the smile came and went suddenly, and showed a little nervous contraction on one side of her mouth never visible there before. She was perfectly patient with Mrs. Wragge; she treated the captain with a courtesy and consideration entirely new in his experience of her--but she was interested in nothing. The curious little shops in the back street; the high impending sea; the old town-hall on the beach; the pilots, the fishermen, the passing ships--she noticed all these objects as indifferently as if Aldborough had been familiar to her from her infancy. Even when the captain drew up at the garden-gate of North Shingles, and introduced her triumphantly to the new house, she hardly looked at it. The first question she asked related not to her own residence, but to Noel Vanstone's.

"How near to us does he live?" she inquired, with the only betrayal of emotion which had escaped her yet.

Captain Wragge answered by pointing to the fifth villa from North Shingles, on the Slaughden side of Aldborough. Magdalen suddenly drew back from the garden-gate as he indicated the situation, and walked away by herself to obtain a nearer view of the house. Captain Wragge looked after her, and shook his head, discontentedly.

"May I speak now?" inquired a meek voice behind him, articulating respectfully ten inches above the top of his straw hat.

The captain turned round, and confronted his wife. The more than ordinary bewilderment visible in her face at once suggested to him that Magdalen had failed to carry out the directions in his letter; and that Mrs. Wragge had arrived at Aldborough without being properly aware of the total transformation to be accomplished in her identity and her name. The necessity of setting this doubt at rest was too serious to be trifled with; and Captain Wragge instituted the necessary inquiries without a moment's delay.

"Stand straight, and listen to me," he began. "I have a question to ask you. Do you know whose Skin you are in at this moment? Do you know that you are dead and buried in London; and that you have risen like a phoenix from the ashes of Mrs. Wragge? No! you evidently don't know it. This is perfectly disgraceful. What is your name?"

"Matilda," answered Mrs. Wragge, in a state of the densest bewilderment.

"Nothing of the sort!" cried the captain, fiercely. "How dare you tell me your name's Matilda? Your name is Julia. Who am I?--Hold that basket of sandwiches straight, or I'll pitch it into the sea!--Who am I?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Wragge, meekly taking refuge in the negative side of the question this time.

"Sit down!" said her husband, pointing to the low garden wall of North Shingles Villa. "More to the right! More still! That will do. You don't know?" repeated the captain, sternly confronting his wife as soon as he had contrived, by seating her, to place her face on a level with his own. "Don't let me hear you say that a second time. Don't let me have a woman who doesn't know who I am to operate on my beard to-morrow morning. Look at me! More to the left--more still--that will do. Who am I? I'm Mr. Bygrave--

Christian name, Thomas. Who are you? You're Mrs. Bygrave--Christian name, Julia. Who is that young lady who traveled with you from London? That young lady is Miss Bygrave--Christian name, Susan. I'm her clever uncle Tom; and you're her addle-headed aunt Julia. Say it all over to me instantly, like the Catechism! What is your name?"

"Spare my poor head!" pleaded Mrs. Wragge. "Oh, please spare my poor head till I've got the stage-coach out of it!"

"Don't distress her," said Magdalen, joining them at that moment. "She will learn it in time. Come into the house."

Captain Wragge shook his wary head once more. "We are beginning badly," he said, with less politeness than usual. "My wife's stupidity stands in our way already."

They went into the house. Magdalen was perfectly satisfied with all the captain's arrangements; she accepted the room which he had set apart for her; approved of the woman servant whom he had engaged; presented herself at tea-time the moment she was summoned but still showed no interest whatever in the new scene around her. Soon after the table was cleared, although the daylight had not yet faded out, Mrs. Wragge's customary drowsiness after fatigue of any kind overcame her, and she received her husband s orders to leave the room (taking care that she left it "up at heel"), and to betake herself (strictly in the character of Mrs. Bygrave) to bed. As soon as they were left alone, the captain looked hard at Magdalen, and waited to be spoken to. She said nothing. He ventured next on opening the conversation by a polite inquiry after the state of her health. "You look fatigued," he remarked, in his most insinuating manner. "I am afraid the journey has been too much for you."

"No," she said, looking out listlessly through the window; "I am not more tired than usual. I am always weary now; weary at going to bed, weary at getting up. If you would like to hear what I have to say to you to-night, I am willing and ready to say it. Can't we go out? It is very hot here; and the droning of those men's voices is beyond all endurance." She pointed through the window to a group of boatmen idling, as only nautical men can idle, against the garden wall. "Is there no quiet walk in this wretched place?" she asked, impatiently. "Can't we breathe a little fresh air, and escape being annoyed by strangers?"

"There is perfect solitude within half an hour's walk of the house," replied the ready captain.

"Very well. Come out, then."

With a weary sigh she took up her straw bonnet and her light muslin scarf from the side-table upon which she had thrown them on coming in, and carelessly led the way to the door. Captain Wragge followed her to the garden gate, then stopped, struck by a new idea.

"Excuse me," he whispered, confidentially. "In my wife's existing state of ignorance as to who she is, we had better not trust her alone in the house with a new servant. I'll privately turn the key on her, in case she wakes before we come back. Safe bind, safe find--you know the proverb!--I will be with you again in a moment."

He hastened back to the house, and Magdalen seated herself on the garden wall to await his return.

She had hardly settled herself in that position when two gentlemen walking together, whose approach along the public path she had not previously noticed, passed close by her.

The dress of one of the two strangers showed him to be a clergyman. His companion's station in life was less easily discernible to ordinary observation. Practiced eyes would probably have seen enough in his look, his manner, and his walk to show that he was a sailor. He was a man in the prime of life; tall, spare, and muscular; his face sun-burned to a deep brown; his black hair just turning gray; his eyes dark, deep and firm--the eyes of a man with an iron resolution and a habit of command. He was the nearest of the two to Magdalen, as he and his friend passed the place where she was sitting; and he looked at her with a sudden surprise at her beauty, with an open, hearty, undisguised admiration, which was too evidently sincere, too evidently beyond his own control, to be justly resented as insolent; and yet, in her humor at that moment, Magdalen did resent it. She felt the man's resolute black eyes strike through her with an electric suddenness; and frowning at him impatiently, she turned away her head and looked back at the house.

The next moment she glanced round again to see if he had gone on. He had advanced a few yards--had then evidently stopped--and was now in the very act of turning to look at her once more. His companion, the clergyman, noticing that Magdalen appeared to be annoyed, took him familiarly by the arm, and, half in jest, half in earnest, forced him to walk on. The two disappeared round the corner of the next house. As they turned it, the sun-

burned sailor twice stopped his companion again, and twice looked back.

"A friend of yours?" inquired Captain Wragge, joining Magdalen at that moment.

"Certainly not," she replied; "a perfect stranger. He stared at me in the most impertinent manner. Does he belong to this place?"

"I'll find out in a moment," said the compliant captain, joining the group of boatmen, and putting his questions right and left, with the easy familiarity which distinguished him. He returned in a few minutes with a complete budget of information. The clergyman was well known as the rector of a place situated some few miles inland. The dark man with him was his wife's brother, commander of a ship in the merchant-service. He was supposed to be staying with his relatives, as their guest for a short time only, preparatory to sailing on another voyage. The clergyman's name was Strickland, and the merchant-captain's name was Kirke; and that was all the boatmen knew about either of them.

"It is of no consequence who they are," said Magdalen, carelessly. "The man's rudeness merely annoyed me for the moment. Let us have done with him. I have something else to think of, and so have you. Where is the solitary walk you mentioned just now? Which way do we go?"

The captain pointed southward toward Slaughden, and offered his arm.

Magdalen hesitated before she took it. Her eyes wandered away inquiringly to Noel Vanstone's house. He was out in the garden, pacing backward and forward over the little lawn, with his head high in the air, and with Mrs. Lecount demurely in attendance on him, carrying her master's green fan. Seeing this, Magdalen at once took Captain Wragge's right arm, so as to place herself nearest to the garden when they passed it on their walk.

"The eyes of our neighbors are on us; and the least your niece can do is to take your arm," she said, with a bitter laugh. "Come! let us go on."

"They are looking this way," whispered the captain. "Shall I introduce you to Mrs. Lecount?"

"Not to-night," she answered. "Wait, and hear what I have to say to you first."

They passed the garden wall. Captain Wragge took off his hat with a smart

flourish, and received a gracious bow from Mrs. Lecount in return. Magdalen saw the housekeeper survey her face, her figure, and her dress, with that reluctant interest, that distrustful curiosity, which women feel in observing each other. As she walked on beyond the house, the sharp voice of Noel Vanstone reached her through the evening stillness. "A fine girl, Lecount," she heard him say. "You know I am a judge of that sort of thing--a fine girl!"

As those words were spoken, Captain Wragge looked round at his companion in sudden surprise. Her hand was trembling violently on his arm, and her lips were fast closed with an expression of speechless pain.

Slowly and in silence the two walked on until they reached the southern limit of the houses, and entered on a little wilderness of shingle and withered grass--the desolate end of Aldborough, the lonely beginning of Slaughden.

It was a dull, airless evening. Eastward, was the gray majesty of the sea, hushed in breathless calm; the horizon line invisibly melting into the monotonous, misty sky; the idle ships shadowy and still on the idle water. Southward, the high ridge of the sea dike, and the grim, massive circle of a martello tower reared high on its mound of grass, closed the view darkly on all that lay beyond. Westward, a lurid streak of sunset glowed red in the dreary heaven, blackened the fringing trees on the far borders of the great inland marsh, and turned its little gleaming water-pools to pools of blood. Nearer to the eye, the sullen flow of the tidal river Alde ebbed noiselessly from the muddy banks; and nearer still, lonely and unprosperous by the bleak water-side, lay the lost little port of Slaughden, with its forlorn wharfs and warehouses of decaying wood, and its few scattered coasting-vessels deserted on the oozy river-shore. No fall of waves was heard on the beach, no trickling of waters bubbled audibly from the idle stream. Now and then the cry of a sea-bird rose from the region of the marsh; and at intervals, from farmhouses far in the inland waste, the faint winding of horns to call the cattle home traveled mournfully through the evening calm.

Magdalen drew her hand from the captain's arm, and led the way to the mound of the martello tower. "I am weary of walking," she said. "Let us stop and rest here."

She seated herself on the slope, and resting on her elbow, mechanically pulled up and scattered from her into the air the tufts of grass growing under her hand. After silently occupying herself in this way for some minutes, she turned suddenly on Captain Wragge. "Do I surprise you?" she

asked, with a startling abruptness. "Do you find me changed?"

The captain's ready tact warned him that the time had come to be plain with her, and to reserve his flowers of speech for a more appropriate occasion.

"If you ask the question, I must answer it," he replied. "Yes, I do find you changed."

She pulled up another tuft of grass. "I suppose you can guess the reason?" she said.

The captain was wisely silent. He only answered by a bow.

"I have lost all care for myself," she went on, tearing faster and faster at the tufts of grass. "Saying that is not saying much, perhaps, but it may help you to understand me. There are things I would have died sooner than do at one time--things it would have turned me cold to think of. I don't care now whether I do them or not. I am nothing to myself; I am no more interested in myself than I am in these handfuls o f grass. I suppose I have lost something. What is it? Heart? Conscience? I don't know. Do you? W hat nonsense I am talking! Who cares what I have lost? It has gone; and there's an end of it. I suppose my outside is the best side of me--and that's left, at any rate. I have not lost my good looks, have I? There! there! never mind answering; don't trouble yourself to pay me compliments. I have been admired enough to-day. First the sailor, and then Mr. Noel Vanstone--enough for any woman's vanity, surely! Have I any right to call myself a woman? Perhaps not: I am only a girl in my teens. Oh, me, I feel as if I was forty!" She scattered the last fragments of grass to the winds; and turning her back on the captain, let her head droop till her cheek touched the turf bank. "It feels soft and friendly," she said, nestling to it with a hopeless tenderness horrible to see. "It doesn't cast me off. Mother Earth! The only mother I have left!"

Captain Wragge looked at her in silent surprise. Such experience of humanity as he possessed was powerless to sound to its depths the terrible self-abandonment which had burst its way to the surface in her reckless words--which was now fast hurrying her to actions more reckless still. "Devilish odd!" he thought to himself, uneasily. "Has the loss of her lover turned her brain?" He considered for a minute longer and then spoke to her. "Leave it till to-morrow," suggested the captain confidentially. "You are a little tired to-night. No hurry, my dear girl--no hurry."

She raised her head instantly, and looked round at him with the same angry

resolution, with the same desperate defiance of herself, which he had seen in her face on the memorable day at York when she had acted before him for the first time. "I came here to tell you what is in my mind," she said; "and I will tell it!" She seated herself upright on the slope; and clasping her hands round her knees, looked out steadily, straight before her, at the slowly darkening view. In that strange position, she waited until she had composed herself, and then addressed the captain, without turning her head to look round at him, in these words:

"When you and I first met," she began, abruptly, "I tried hard to keep my thoughts to myself. I know enough by this time to know that I failed. When I first told you at York that Michael Vanstone had ruined us, I believe you guessed for yourself that I, for one, was determined not to submit to it. Whether you guessed or not, it is so. I left my friends with that determination in my mind; and I feel it in me now stronger, ten times stronger, than ever."

"Ten times stronger than ever," echoed the captain. "Exactly so--the natural result of firmness of character."

"No--the natural result of having nothing else to think of. I had something else to think of before you found me ill in Vauxhall Walk. I have nothing else to think of now. Remember that, if you find me for the future always harping on the same string. One question first. Did you guess what I meant to do on that morning when you showed me the newspaper, and when I read the account of Michael Vanstone's death?"

"Generally," replied Captain Wragge--"I guessed, generally, that you proposed dipping your hand into his purse and taking from it (most properly) what was your own. I felt deeply hurt at the time by your not permitting me to assist you. Why is she so reserved with me? (I remarked to myself)--why is she so unreasonably reserved?"

"You shall have no reserve to complain of now," pursued Magdalen. "I tell you plainly, if events had not happened as they did, you would have assisted me. If Michael Vanstone had not died, I should have gone to Brighton, and have found my way safely to his acquaintance under an assumed name. I had money enough with me to live on respectably for many months together. I would have employed that time--I would have waited a whole year, if necessary, to destroy Mrs. Lecount's influence over him--and I would have ended by getting that influence, on my own terms, into my own hands. I had the advantage of years, the advantage of novelty, the advantage of downright desperation, all on my side, and I should have succeeded. Before the year

was out--before half the year was out--you should have seen Mrs. Lecount dismissed by her master, and you should have seen me taken into the house in her place, as Michael Vanstone's adopted daughter--as the faithful friend--who had saved him from an adventuress in his old age. Girls no older than I am have tried deceptions as hopeless in appearance as mine, and have carried them through to the end. I had my story ready; I had my plans all considered; I had the weak point in that old man to attack in my way, which Mrs. Lecount had found out before me to attack in hers, and I tell you again I should have succeeded."

"I think you would," said the captain. "And what next?"

"Mr. Michael Vanstone would have changed his man of business next. You would have succeeded to the place; and those clever speculations on which he was so fond of venturing would have cost him the fortunes of which he had robbed my sister and myself. To the last farthing, Captain Wragge, as certainly as you sit there, to the last farthing! A bold conspiracy, a shocking deception--wasn't it? I don't care! Any conspiracy, any deception, is justified to my conscience by the vile law which has left us helpless. You talked of my reserve just now. Have I dropped it at last? Have I spoken out at the eleventh hour?"

The captain laid his hand solemnly on his heart, and launched himself once more on his broadest flow of language.

"You fill me with unavailing regret," he said. "If that old man had lived, what a crop I might have reaped from him! What enormous transactions in moral agriculture it might have been my privilege to carry on! Ars longa," said Captain Wragge, pathetically drifting into Latin--"vita brevis! Let us drop a tear on the lost opportunities of the past, and try what the present can do to console us. One conclusion is clear to my mind--the experiment you proposed to try with Mr. Michael Vanstone is totally hopeless, my dear girl, in the case of his son. His son is impervious to all common forms of pecuniary temptation. You may trust my solemn assurance," continued the captain, speaking with an indignant recollection of the answer to his advertisement in the Times, "when I inform you that Mr. Noel Vanstone is emphatically the meanest of mankind."

"I can trust my own experience as well," said Magdalen. "I have seen him, and spoken to him--I know him better than you do. Another disclosure, Captain Wragge, for your private ear! I sent you back certain articles of costume when they had served the purpose for which I took them to London. That purpose was to find my way to Noel Vanstone in disguise, and

to judge for myself of Mrs. Lecount and her master. I gained my object; and I tell you again, I know the two people in that house yonder whom we have now to deal with better than you do."

Captain Wragge expressed the profound astonishment, and asked the innocent questions appropriate to the mental condition of a person taken completely by surprise.

"Well," he resumed, when Magdalen had briefly answered him, "and what is the result on your own mind? There must be a result, or we should not be here. You see your way? Of course, my dear girl, you see your way?"

"Yes," she said, quickly. "I see my way."

The captain drew a little nearer to her, with eager curiosity expressed in every line of his vagabond face.

"Go on," he said, in an anxious whisper; "pray go on."

She looked out thoughtfully into the gathering darkness, without answering, without appearing to have heard him. Her lips closed, and her clasped hands tightened mechanically round her knees.

"There is no disguising the fact," said Captain Wragge, warily rousing her into speaking to him. "The son is harder to deal with than the father--"

"Not in my way," she interposed, suddenly.

"Indeed!" said the captain. "Well! they say there is a short cut to everything, if we only look long enough to find it. You have looked long enough, I suppose, and the natural result has followed--you have found it."

"I have not troubled myself to look; I have found it without looking."

"The deuce you have!" cried Captain Wragge, in great perplexity. "My dear girl, is my view of your present position leading me altogether astray? As I understand it, here is Mr. Noel Vanstone in possession of your fortune and your sister's, as his father was, and determined to keep it, as his father was?"

"Yes."

"And here are you--quite helpless to get it by persuasion--quite helpless to

get it by law--just as resolute in his ease as you were in his father's, to take it by stratagem in spite of him?"

"Just as resolute. Not for the sake of the fortune--mind that! For the sake of the right."

"Just so. And the means of coming at that right which were hard with the father--who was not a miser--are easy with the son, who is?"

"Perfectly easy."

"Write me down an Ass for the first time in my life!" cried the captain, at the end of his patience. "Hang me if I know what you mean!"

She looked round at him for the first time--looked him straight and steadily in the face.

"I will tell you what I mean," she said. "I mean to marry him."

Captain Wragge started up on his knees, and stopped on them, petrified by astonishment.

"Remember what I told you," said Magdalen, looking away from him again. "I have lost all care for myself. I have only one end in life now, and the sooner I reach it--and die--the better. If--" She stopped, altered her position a little, and pointed with one hand to the fast-ebbing stream beneath her, gleaming dim in the darkening twilight--"if I had been what I once was, I would have thrown myself into that river sooner than do what I am going to do now. As it is, I trouble myself no longer; I weary my mind with no more schemes. The short way and the vile way lies before me. I take it, Captain Wragge, and marry him."

"Keeping him in total ignorance of who you are?" said the captain, slowly rising to his feet, and slowly moving round, so as to see her face. "Marrying him as my niece, Miss Bygrave?"

"As your niece, Miss Bygrave."

"And after the marriage--?" His voice faltered, as he began the question, and he left it unfinished.

"After the marriage," she said, "I shall stand in no further need of your assistance."

The captain stooped as she gave him that answer, looked close at her, and suddenly drew back, without uttering a word. He walked away some paces, and sat down again doggedly on the grass. If Magdalen could have seen his face in the dying light, his face would have startled her. For the first time, probably, since his boyhood, Captain Wragge had changed color. He was deadly pale.

"Have you nothing to say to me?" she asked. "Perhaps you are waiting to hear what terms I have to offer? These are my terms; I pay all our expenses here; and when we part, on the day of the marriage, you take a farewell gift away with you of two hundred pounds. Do you promise me your assistance on those conditions?"

"What am I expected to do?" he asked, with a furtive glance at her, and a sudden distrust in his voice.

"You are expected to preserve my assumed character and your own," she answered, "and you are to prevent any inquiries of Mrs. Lecount's from discovering who I really am. I ask no more. The rest is my responsibility--not yours."

"I have nothing to do with what happens--at any time, or in any place--after the marriage?"

"Nothing whatever."

"I may leave you at the church door if I please?"

"At the church door, with your fee in your pocket."

"Paid from the money in your own possession?"

"Certainly! How else should I pay it?"

Captain Wragge took off his hat, and passed his handkerchief over his face with an air of relief.

"Give me a minute to consider it," he said.

"As many minutes as you like," she rejoined, reclining on the bank in her former position, and returning to her former occupation of tearing up the tufts of grass and flinging them out into the air.

The captain's reflections were not complicated by any unnecessary divergences from the contemplation of his own position to the contemplation of Magdalen's. Utterly incapable of appreciating the injury done her by Frank's infamous treachery to his engagement--an injury which had severed her, at one cruel blow, from the aspiration which, delusion though it was, had been the saving aspiration of her life--Captain Wragge accepted the simple fact of her despair just as he found it, and then looked straight to the consequences of the proposal which she had made to him.

In the prospect before the marriage he saw nothing more serious involved than the practice of a deception, in no important degree different--except in the end to be attained by it--from the deceptions which his vagabond life had long since accustomed him to contemplate and to carry out. In the prospect after the marriage he dimly discerned, through the ominous darkness of the future, the lurking phantoms of Terror and Crime, and the black gulfs behind them of Ruin and Death. A man of boundless audacity and resource, within his own mean limits; beyond those limits, the captain was as deferentially submissive to the majesty of the law as the most harmless man in existence; as cautious in looking after his own personal safety as the veriest coward that ever walked the earth. But one serious question now filled his mind. Could he, on the terms proposed to him, join the conspiracy against Noel Vanstone up to the point of the marriage, and then withdraw from it, without risk of involving himself in the consequences which his experience told him must certainly ensue?

Strange as it may seem, his decision in this emergency was mainly influenced by no less a person than Noel Vanstone himself. The captain might have resisted the money-offer which Magdalen had made to him--for the profits of the Entertainment had filled his pockets with more than three times two hundred pounds. But the prospect of dealing a blow in the dark at the man who had estimated his information and himself at the value of a five pound note proved too much for his caution and his self-control. On the small neutral ground of self-importance, the best men and the worst meet on the same terms. Captain Wragge's indignation, when he saw the answer to his advertisement, stooped to no retrospective estimate of his own conduct; he was as deeply offended, as sincerely angry as if he had made a perfectly honorable proposal, and had been rewarded for it by a personal insult. He had been too full of his own grievance to keep it out of his first letter to Magdalen. He had more or less forgotten himself on every subsequent occasion when Noel Vanstone's name was mentioned. And in now finally deciding the course he should take, it is not too much to say that the motive of money receded, for the first time in his life, into the second

place, and the motive of malice carried the day.

"I accept the terms," said Captain Wragge, getting briskly on his legs again. "Subject, of course, to the conditions agreed on between us. We part on the wedding-day. I don't ask where you go: you don't ask where I go. From that time forth we are strangers to each other."

Magdalen rose slowly from the mound. A hopeless depression, a sullen despair, showed itself in her look and manner. She refused the captain's offered hand; and her tones, when she answered him, were so low that he could hardly hear her.

"We understand each other," she said; "and we can now go back. You may introduce me to Mrs. Lecount to-morrow."

"I must ask a few questions first," said the captain, gravely. "There are more risks to be run in this matter, and more pitfalls in our way, than you seem to suppose. I must know the whole history of your morning call on Mrs. Lecount before I put you and that woman on speaking terms with each other."

"Wait till to-morrow," she broke out impatiently. "Don't madden me by talking about it to-night."

The captain said no more. They turned their faces toward Aldborough, and walked slowly back.

By the time they reached the houses night had overtaken them. Neither moon nor stars were visible. A faint noiseless breeze blowing from the land had come with the darkness. Magdalen paused on the lonely public walk to breathe the air more freely. After a while she turned her face from the breeze and looked out toward the sea. The immeasurable silence of the calm waters, lost in the black void of night, was awful. She stood looking into the darkness, as if its mystery had no secrets for her--she advanced toward it slowly, as if it drew her by some hidden attraction into itself.

"I am going down to the sea," she said to her companion. "Wait here, and I will come back."

He lost sight of her in an instant; it was as if the night had swallowed her up. He listened, and counted her footsteps by the crashing of them on the shingle in the deep stillness. They retreated slowly, further and further away into the night. Suddenly the sound of them ceased. Had she paused on her

course or had she reached one of the strips of sand left bare by the ebbing tide?

He waited, and listened anxiously. The time passed, and no sound reached him. He still listened, with a growing distrust of the darkness. Another moment, and there came a sound from the invisible shore. Far and faint from the beach below, a long cry moaned through the silence. Then all was still once more.

In sudden alarm, he stepped forward to descend to the beach, and to call to her. Before he could cross the path, footsteps rapidly advancing caught his ear. He waited an instant, and the figure of a man passed quickly along the walk between him and the sea. It was too dark to discern anything of the stranger's face; it was only possible to see that he was a tall man--as tall as that officer in the merchant-service whose name was Kirke.

The figure passed on northward, and was instantly lost to view. Captain Wragge crossed the path, and, advancing a few steps down the beach, stopped and listened again. The crash of footsteps on the shingle caught his ear once more. Slowly, as the sound had left him, that sound now came back. He called, to guide her to him. She came on till he could just see her--a shadow ascending the shingly slope, and growing out of the blackness of the night.

"You alarmed me," he whispered, nervously. "I was afraid something had happened. I heard you cry out as if you were in pain."

"Did you?" she said, carelessly. "I was in pain. It doesn't matter--it's over now."

Her hand mechanically swung something to and fro as she answered him. It was the little white silk bag which she had always kept hidden in her bosom up to this time. One of the relics which it held--one of the relics which she had not had the heart to part with before--was gone from its keeping forever. Alone, on a strange shore, she had torn from her the fondest of her virgin memories, the dearest of her virgin hopes. Alone, on a strange shore, she had taken the lock of Frank's hair from its once-treasured place, and had cast it away from her to the sea and the night.

CHAPTER II.

THE tall man who had passed Captain Wragge in the dark proceeded rapidly along the public walk, struck off across a little waste patch of ground, and entered the open door of the Aldborough Hotel. The light in the passage, falling full on his face as he passed it, proved the truth of Captain Wragge's surmise, and showed the stranger to be Mr. Kirke, of the merchant service.

Meeting the landlord in the passage, Mr. Kirke nodded to him with the familiarity of an old customer. "Have you got the paper?" he asked; "I want to look at the visitors' list."

"I have got it in my room, sir," said the landlord, leading the way into a parlor at the back of the house. "Are there any friends of yours staying here, do you think?"

Without replying, the seaman turned to the list as soon as the newspaper was placed in his hand, and ran his finger down it, name by name. The finger suddenly stopped at this line: "Sea-view Cottage; Mr. Noel Vanstone." Kirke of the merchant-service repeated the name to himself, and put down the paper thoughtfully.

"Have you found anybody you know, captain?" asked the landlord.

"I have found a name I know--a name my father used often to speak of in his time. Is this Mr. Vanstone a family man? Do you know if there is a young lady in the house?"

"I can't say, captain. My wife will be here directly; she is sure to know. It must have been some time ago, if your father knew this Mr. Vanstone?"

"It was some time ago. My father knew a subaltern officer of that name when he was with his regiment in Canada. It would be curious if the person here turned out to be the same man, and if that young lady was his daughter."

"Excuse me, captain--but the young lady seems to hang a little on your mind," said the landlord, with a pleasant smile.

Mr. Kirke looked as if the form which his host's good-humor had just taken was not quite to his mind. He returned abruptly to the subaltern officer and the regiment in Canada. "That poor fellow's story was as miserable a one as

ever I heard," he said, looking back again absently at the visitors' list.

"Would there be any harm in telling it, sir?" asked the landlord. "Miserable or not, a story's a story, when you know it to be true."

Mr. Kirke hesitated. "I hardly think I should be doing right to tell it," he said. "If this man, or any relations of his, are still alive, it is not a story they might like strangers to know. All I can tell you is, that my father was the salvation of that young officer under very dreadful circumstances. They parted in Canada. My father remained with his regiment; the young officer sold out and returned to England, and from that moment they lost sight of each other. It would be curious if this Vanstone here was the same man. It would be curious--"

He suddenly checked himself just as another reference to "the young lady" was on the point of passing his lips. At the same moment the landlord's wife came in, and Mr. Kirke at once transferred his inquiries to the higher authority in the house.

"Do you know anything of this Mr. Vanstone who is down here on the visitors' list?" asked the sailor. "Is he an old man?"

"He's a miserable little creature to look at," replied the landlady; "but he's not old, captain."

"Then he's not the man I mean. Perhaps he is the man's son? Has he got any ladies with him?"

The landlady tossed her head, and pursed up her lips disparagingly.

"He has a housekeeper with him," she said. "A middle-aged person--not one of my sort. I dare say I'm wrong--but I don't like a dressy woman in her station of life."

Mr. Kirke began to look puzzled. "I must have made some mistake about the house," he said. "Surely there's a lawn cut octagon-shape at Sea-view Cottage, and a white flag-staff in the middle of the gravel-walk?"

"That's not Sea-view, sir! It's North Shingles you're talking of. Mr. Bygrave's. His wife and his niece came here by the coach to-day. His wife's tall enough to be put in a show, and the worst-dressed woman I ever set eyes on. But Miss Bygrave is worth looking at, if I may venture to say so. She's the finest girl, to my mind, we've had at Aldborough for many a long day. I wonder

who they are! Do you know the name, captain?"

"No," said Mr. Kirke, with a shade of disappointment on his dark, weather-beaten face; "I never heard the name before."

After replying in those words, he rose to take his leave. The landlord vainly invited him to drink a parting glass; the landlady vainly pressed him to stay another ten minutes and try a cup of tea. He only replied that his sister expected him, and that he must return to the parsonage immediately.

On leaving the hotel Mr. Kirke set his face westward, and walked inland along the highroad as fast as the darkness would let him.

"Bygrave?" he thought to himself. "Now I know her name, how much am I the wiser for it! If it had been Vanstone, my father's son might have had a chance of making acquaintance with her." He stopped, and looked back in the direction of Aldborough. "What a fool I am!" he burst out suddenly, striking his stick on the ground. "I was forty last birthday." He turned and went on again faster than ever--his head down; his resolute black eyes searching the darkness on the land as they had searched it many a time on the sea from the deck of his ship.

After more than an hour's walking he reached a village, with a primitive little church and parsonage nestled together in a hollow. He entered the house by the back way, and found his sister, the clergyman's wife, sitting alone over her work in the parlor.

"Where is your husband, Lizzie?" he asked, taking a chair in a corner.

"William has gone out to see a sick person. He had just time enough before he went," she added, with a smile, "to tell me about the young lady; and he declares he will never trust himself at Aldborough with you again until you are a steady, married man." She stopped, and looked at her brother more attentively than she had looked at him yet. "Robert!" she said, laying aside her work, and suddenly crossing the room to him. "You look anxious, you look distressed. William only laughed about your meeting with the young lady. Is it serious? Tell me; what is she like?"

He turned his head away at the question.

She took a stool at his feet, and persisted in looking up at him. "Is it serious, Robert?" she repeated, softly.

Kirke's weather-beaten face was accustomed to no concealments--it answered for him before he spoke a word. "Don't tell your husband till I am gone," he said, with a roughness quite new in his sister's experience of him. "I know I only deserve to be laughed at; but it hurts me, for all that."

"Hurts you?" she repeated, in astonishment.

"You can't think me half such a fool, Lizzie, as I think myself," pursued Kirke, bitterly. "A man at my age ought to know better. I didn't set eyes on her for as much as a minute altogether; and there I have been hanging about the place till after nightfall on the chance of seeing her again--skulking, I should have called it, if I had found one of my men doing what I have been doing myself. I believe I'm bewitched. She's a mere girl, Lizzie--I doubt if she's out of her teens--I'm old enough to be her father. It's all one; she stops in my mind in spite of me. I've had her face looking at me, through the pitch darkness, every step of the way to this house; and it's looking at me now--as plain as I see yours, and plainer."

He rose impatiently, and began to walk backward and forward in the room. His sister looked after him, with surprise as well as sympathy expressed in her face. From his boyhood upward she had always been accustomed to see him master of himself. Years since, in the failing fortunes of the family, he had been their example and their support. She had heard of him in the desperate emergencies of a life at sea, when hundreds of his fellow-creatures had looked to his steady self-possession for rescue from close-threatening death--and had not looked in vain. Never, in all her life before, had his sister seen the balance of that calm and equal mind lost as she saw it lost now.

"How can you talk so unreasonably about your age and yourself?" she said. "There is not a woman alive, Robert, who is good enough for you. What is her name?"

"Bygrave. Do you know it?"

"No. But I might soon make acquaintance with her. If we only had a little time before us; if I could only get to Aldborough and see her--but you are going away to-morrow; your ship sails at the end of the week."

"Thank God for that!" said Kirke, fervently.

"Are you glad to be going away?" she asked, more and more amazed at him.

"Right glad, Lizzie, for my own sake. If I ever get to my senses again, I shall

find my way back to them on the deck of my ship. This girl has got between me and my thoughts already: she shan't go a step further, and get between me and my duty. I'm determined on that. Fool as I am, I have sense enough left not to trust myself within easy hail of Aldborough to-morrow morning. I'm good for another twenty miles of walking, and I'll begin my journey back tonight."

His sister started up, and caught him fast by the arm. "Robert!" she exclaimed; "you're not serious? You don't mean to leave us on foot, alone in the dark?"

"It's only saying good-by, my dear, the last thing at night instead of the first thing in the morning," he answered, with a smile. "Try and make allowances for me, Lizzie. My life has been passed at sea; and I'm not used to having my mind upset in this way. Men ashore are used to it; men ashore can take it easy. I can't. If I stopped here I shouldn't rest. If I waited till to-morrow, I should only be going back to have another look at her. I don't want to feel more ashamed of myself than I do already. I want to fight my way back to my duty and myself, without stopping to think twice about it. Darkness is nothing to me--I'm used to darkness. I have got the high-road to walk on, and I can't lose my way. Let me go, Lizzie! The only sweetheart I have any business with at my age is my ship. Let me get back to her!"

His sister still kept her hold of his arm, and still pleaded with him to stay till the morning. He listened to her with perfect patience and kindness, but she never shook his determination for an instant.

"What am I to say to William?" she pleaded. "What will he think when he comes back and finds you gone?"

"Tell him I have taken the advice he gave us in his sermon last Sunday. Say I have turned my back on the world, the flesh, and the devil."

"How can you talk so, Robert! And the boys, too--you promised not to go without bidding the boys good-by."

"That's true. I made my little nephews a promise, and I'll keep it." He kicked off his shoes as he spoke, on the mat outside the door. "Light me upstairs, Lizzie; I'll bid the two boys good-by without waking them."

She saw the uselessness of resisting him any longer; and, taking the candle, went before him upstairs.

The boys--both young children--were sleeping together in the same bed. The youngest was his uncle's favorite, and was called by his uncle's name. He lay peacefully asleep, with a rough little toy ship hugged fast in his arms. Kirke's eyes softened as he stole on tiptoe to the child's side, and kissed him with the gentleness of a woman. "Poor little man!" said the sailor, tenderly. "He is as fond of his ship as I was at his age. I'll cut him out a better one when I come back. Will you give me my nephew one of these days, Lizzie, and will you let me make a sailor of him?"

"Oh, Robert, if you were only married and happy, as I am!"

"The time has gone by, my dear. I must make the best of it as I am, with my little nephew there to help me."

He left the room. His sister's tears fell fast as she followed him into the parlor. "There is something so forlorn and dreadful in your leaving us like this," she said. "Shall I go to Aldborough to-morrow, Robert, and try if I can get acquainted with her for your sake?"

"No!" he replied. "Let her be. If it's ordered that I am to see that girl again, I shall see her. Leave it to the future, and you leave it right." He put on his shoes, and took up his hat and stick. "I won't overwalk myself," he said, cheerfully. "If the coach doesn't overtake me on the road, I can wait for it where I stop to breakfast. Dry your eyes, my dear, and give me a kiss."

She was like her brother in features and complexion, and she had a touch of her brother's spirit; she dashed away the tears, and took her leave of him bravely.

"I shall be back in a year's time," said Kirke, falling into his old sailor-like way at the door. "I'll bring you a China shawl, Lizzie, and a chest of tea for your store-room. Don't let the boys forget me, and don't think I'm doing wrong to leave you in this way. I know I am doing right. God bless you and keep you, my dear--and your husband, and your children! Good-by!"

He stooped and kissed her. She ran to the door to look after him. A puff of air extinguished the candle, and the black night shut him out from her in an instant.

Three days afterward the first-class merchantman Deliverance, Kirke, commander, sailed from London for the China Sea.

CHAPTER III.

THE threatening of storm and change passed away with the night. When morning rose over Aldborough, the sun was master in the blue heaven, and the waves were rippling gayly under the summer breeze.

At an hour when no other visitors to the watering--place were yet astir, the indefatigable Wragge appeared at the door of North Shingles Villa, and directed his steps northward, with a neatly-bound copy of "Joyce's Scientific Dialogues" in his hand. Arriving at the waste ground beyond the houses, he descended to the beach and opened his book. The interview of the past night had sharpened his perception of the difficulties to be encountered in the coming enterprise. He was now doubly determined to try the characteristic experiment at which he had hinted in his letter to Magdalen, and to concentrate on himself--in the character of a remarkably well-informed man--the entire interest and attention of the formidable Mrs. Lecount.

Having taken his dose of ready-made science (to use his own expression) the first thing in the morning on an empty stomach, Captain Wragge joined his small family circle at breakfast-time, inflated with information for the day. He observed that Magdalen's face showed plain signs of a sleepless night. She made no complaint: her manner was composed, and her temper perfectly under control. Mrs. Wragge--refreshed by some thirteen consecutive hours of uninterrupted repose--was in excellent spirits, and up at heel (for a wonder) with both shoes. She brought with her into the room several large sheets of tissue-paper, cut crisply into mysterious and many-varying forms, which immediately provoked from her husband the short and sharp question, "What have you got there?"

"Patterns, captain," said Mrs. Wragge, in timidly conciliating tones. "I went shopping in London, and bought an Oriental Cashmere Robe. It cost a deal of money; and I'm going to try and save, by making it myself. I've got my patterns, and my dress-making directions written out as plain as print. I'll be very tidy, captain; I'll keep in my own corner, if you'll please to give me one; and whether my head Buzzes, or whether it don't, I'll sit straight at my work all the same."

"You will do your work," said the captain, sternly, "when you know who you are, who I am, and who that young lady is--not before. Show me your shoes! Good. Show me you cap! Good. Make the breakfast."

When breakfast was over, Mrs. Wragge received her orders to retire into an adjoining room, and to wait there until her husband came to release her. As soon as her back was turned, Captain Wragge at once resumed the conversation which had been suspended, by Magdalen's own desire, on the preceding night. The questions he now put to her all related to the subject of her visit in disguise to Noel Vanstone's house. They were the questions of a thoroughly clear-headed man--short, searching, and straight to the point. In less than half an hour's time he had made himself acquainted with every incident that had happened in Vauxhall Walk.

The conclusions which the captain drew, after gaining his information, were clear and easily stated.

On the adverse side of the question, he expressed his conviction that Mrs. Lecount had certainly detected her visitor to be disguised; that she had never really left the room, though she might have opened and shut the door; and that on both the occasions, therefore, when Magdalen had been betrayed into speaking in her own voice, Mrs. Lecount had heard her. On the favorable side of the question, he was perfectly satisfied that the painted face and eyelids, the wig, and the padded cloak had so effectually concealed Magdalen's identity, that she might in her own person defy the housekeeper's closest scrutiny, so far as the matter of appearance was concerned. The difficulty of deceiving Mrs. Lecount's ears, as well as her eyes, was, he readily admitted, not so easily to be disposed of. But looking to the fact that Magdalen, on both the occasions when she had forgotten herself, had spoken in the heat of anger, he was of opinion that her voice had every reasonable chance of escaping detection, if she carefully avoided all outbursts of temper for the future, and spoke in those more composed and ordinary tones which Mrs. Lecount had not yet heard. Upon the whole, the captain was inclined to pronounce the prospect hopeful, if one serious obstacle were cleared away at the outset--that obstacle being nothing less than the presence on the scene of action of Mrs. Wragge.

To Magdalen's surprise, when the course of her narrative brought her to the story of the ghost, Captain Wragge listened with the air of a man who was more annoyed than amused by what he heard. When she had done, he plainly told her that her unlucky meeting on the stairs of the lodging-house with Mrs. Wragge was, in his opinion, the most serious of all the accidents that had happened in Vauxhall Walk.

"I can deal with the difficulty of my wife's stupidity," he said, "as I have often dealt with it before. I can hammer her new identity into her head, but I can't hammer the ghost out of it. We have no security that the woman in the gray

cloak and poke bonnet may not come back to her recollection at the most critical time, and under the most awkward circumstances. In plain English, my dear girl, Mrs. Wragge is a pitfall under our feet at every step we take."

"If we are aware of the pitfall," said Magdalen, "we can take our measures for avoiding it. What do you propose?"

"I propose," replied the captain, "the temporary removal of Mrs. Wragge. Speaking purely in a pecuniary point of view, I can't afford a total separation from her. You have often read of very poor people being suddenly enriched by legacies reaching them from remote and unexpected quarters? Mrs. Wragge's case, when I married her, was one of these. An elderly female relative shared the favors of fortune on that occasion with my wife; and if I only keep up domestic appearances, I happen to know that Mrs. Wragge will prove a second time profitable to me on that elderly relative's death. But for this circumstance, I should probably long since have transferred my wife to the care of society at large--in the agreeable conviction that if I didn't support her, somebody else would. Although I can't afford to take this course, I see no objection to having her comfortably boarded and lodged out of our way for the time being--say, at a retired farm-house, in the character of a lady in infirm mental health. You would find the expense trifling; I should find the relief unutterable. What do you say? Shall I pack her up at once, and take her away by the next coach?"

"No!" replied Magdalen, firmly. "The poor creature's life is hard enough already; I won't help to make it harder. She was affectionately and truly kind to me when I was ill, and I won't allow her to be shut up among strangers while I can help it. The risk of keeping her here is only one risk more. I will face it, Captain Wragge, if you won't."

"Think twice," said the captain, gravely, "before you decide on keeping Mrs. Wragge."

"Once is enough," rejoined Magdalen. "I won't have her sent away."

"Very good," said the captain, resignedly. "I never interfere with questions of sentiment. But I have a word to say on my own behalf. If my services are to be of any use to you, I can't have my hands tied at starting. This is serious. I won't trust my wife and Mrs. Lecount together. I'm afraid, if you're not, and I make it a condition that, if Mrs. Wragge stops here, she keeps her room. If you think her health requires it, you can take her for a walk early in the morning, or late in the evening; but you must never trust her out with the servant, and never trust her out by herself. I put the matter plainly, it is too

important to be trifled with. What do you say--yes or no?"

"I say yes," replied Magdalen, after a moment's consideration. "On the understanding that I am to take her out walking, as you propose."

Captain Wragge bowed, and recovered his suavity of manner. "What are our plans?" he inquired. "Shall we start our enterprise this afternoon? Are you ready for your introduction to Mrs. Lecount and her master?"

"Quite ready."

"Good again. We will meet them on the Parade, at their usual hour for going out--two o'clock. It is no t twelve yet. I have two hours before me--just time enough to fit my wife into her new Skin. The process is absolutely necessary, to prevent her compromising us with the servant. Don't be afraid about the results; Mrs. Wragge has had a copious selection of assumed names hammered into her head in the course of her matrimonial career. It is merely a question of hammering hard enough--nothing more. I think we have settled everything now. Is there anything I can do before two o'clock? Have you any employment for the morning?"

"No," said Magdalen. "I shall go back to my own room, and try to rest."

"You had a disturbed night, I am afraid?" said the captain, politely opening the door for her.

"I fell asleep once or twice," she answered, carelessly. "I suppose my nerves are a little shaken. The bold black eyes of that man who stared so rudely at me yesterday evening seemed to be looking at me again in my dreams. If we see him to-day, and if he annoys me any more, I must trouble you to speak to him. We will meet here again at two o'clock. Don't be hard with Mrs. Wragge; teach her what she must learn as tenderly as you can."

With those words she left him, and went upstairs.

She lay down on her bed with a heavy sigh, and tried to sleep. It was useless. The dull weariness of herself which now possessed her was not the weariness which finds its remedy in repose. She rose again and sat by the window, looking out listlessly over the sea.

A weaker nature than hers would not have felt the shock of Frank's desertion as she had felt it--as she was feeling it still. A weaker nature would have found refuge in indignation and comfort in tears. The passionate

strength of Magdalen's love clung desperately to the sinking wreck of its own delusion-clung, until she tore herself from it, by plain force of will. All that her native pride, her keen sense of wrong could do, was to shame her from dwelling on the thoughts which still caught their breath of life from the undying devotion of the past; which still perversely ascribed Frank's heartless farewell to any cause but the inborn baseness of the man who had written it. The woman never lived yet who could cast a true-love out of her heart because the object of that love was unworthy of her. All she can do is to struggle against it in secret--to sink in the contest if she is weak; to win her way through it if she is strong, by a process of self-laceration which is, of all moral remedies applied to a woman's nature, the most dangerous and the most desperate; of all moral changes, the change that is surest to mark her for life. Magdalen's strong nature had sustained her through the struggle; and the issue of it had left her what she now was.

After sitting by the window for nearly an hour, her eyes looking mechanically at the view, her mind empty of all impressions, and conscious of no thoughts, she shook off the strange waking stupor that possessed her, and rose to prepare herself for the serious business of the day.

She went to the wardrobe and took down from the pegs two bright, delicate muslin dresses, which had been made for summer wear at Combe-Raven a year since, and which had been of too little value to be worth selling when she parted with her other possessions. After placing these dresses side by side on the bed, she looked into the wardrobe once more. It only contained one other summer dress--the plain alpaca gown which she had worn during her memorable interview with Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount. This she left in its place, resolving not to wear it--less from any dread that the housekeeper might recognize a pattern too quiet to be noticed, and too common to be remembered, than from the conviction that it was neither gay enough nor becoming enough for her purpose. After taking a plain white muslin scarf, a pair of light gray kid gloves, and a garden-hat of Tuscan straw, from the drawers of the wardrobe, she locked it, and put the key carefully in her pocket.

Instead of at once proceeding to dress herself, she sat idly looking at the two muslin gowns; careless which she wore, and yet inconsistently hesitating which to choose. "What does it matter!" she said to herself, with a reckless laugh; "I am equally worthless in my own estimation, whichever I put on." She shuddered, as if the sound of her own laughter had startled her, and abruptly caught up the dress which lay nearest to her hand. Its colors were blue and white--the shade of blue which best suited her fair complexion. She hurriedly put on the gown, without going near her looking-glass. For the

first time in her life she shrank from meeting the reflection of herself--except for a moment, when she arranged her hair under her garden-hat, leaving the glass again immediately. She drew her scarf over her shoulders and fitted on her gloves, with her back to the toilet-table. "Shall I paint?" she asked herself, feeling instinctively that she was turning pale. "The rouge is still left in my box. It can't make my face more false than it is already." She looked round toward the glass, and again turned away from it. "No!" she said. "I have Mrs. Lecount to face as well as her master. No paint." After consulting her watch, she left the room and went downstairs again. It wanted ten minutes only of two o'clock.

Captain Wragge was waiting for her in the parlor--respectable, in a frock-coat, a stiff summer cravat, and a high white hat; specklessly and cheerfully rural, in a buff waistcoat, gray trousers, and gaiters to match. His collars were higher than ever, and he carried a brand-new camp-stool in his hand. Any tradesman in England who had seen him at that moment would have trusted him on the spot.

"Charming!" said the captain, paternally surveying Magdalen when she entered the room. "So fresh and cool! A little too pale, my dear, and a great deal too serious. Otherwise perfect. Try if you can smile."

"When the time comes for smiling," said Magdalen, bitterly, "trust my dramatic training for any change of face that may be necessary. Where is Mrs. Wragge?"

"Mrs. Wragge has learned her lesson," replied the captain, "and is rewarded by my permission to sit at work in her own room. I sanction her new fancy for dressmaking, because it is sure to absorb all her attention, and to keep her at home. There is no fear of her finishing the Oriental Robe in a hurry, for there is no mistake in the process of making it which she is not certain to commit. She will sit incubating her gown--pardon the expression--like a hen over an addled egg. I assure you, her new whim relieves me. Nothing could be more convenient, under existing circumstances."

He strutted away to the window, looked out, and beckoned to Magdalen to join him. "There they are!" he said, and pointed to the Parade.

Noel Vanstone slowly walked by, as she looked, dressed in a complete suit of old-fashioned nankeen. It was apparently one of the days when the state of his health was at the worst. He leaned on Mrs. Lecount's arm, and was protected from the sun by a light umbrella which she held over him. The housekeeper--dressed to perfection, as usual, in a quiet, lavender-colored

summer gown, a black mantilla, an unassuming straw bonnet, and a crisp blue veil--escorted her invalid master with the tenderest attention; sometimes directing his notice respectfully to the various objects of the sea view; sometimes bending her head in graceful acknowledgment of the courtesy of passing strangers on the Parade, who stepped aside to let the invalid pass by. She produced a visible effect among the idlers on the beach. They looked after her with unanimous interest, and exchanged confidential nods of approval which said, as plainly as words could have expressed it, "A very domestic person! a truly superior woman!"

Captain Wragge's party-colored eyes followed Mrs. Lecount with a steady, distrustful attention. "Tough work for us there," he whispered in Magdalen's ear; "tougher work than you think, before we turn that woman out of her place."

"Wait," said Magdalen, quietly. "Wait and see."

She walked to the door. The captain followed her without making any further remark. "I'll wait till you're married," he thought to himself--"not a moment longer, offer me what you may."

At the h ouse door Magdalen addressed him again.

"We will go that way," she said, pointing southward, "then turn, and meet them as they come back."

Captain Wragge signified his approval of the arrangement, and followed Magdalen to the garden gate. As she opened it to pass through, her attention was attracted by a lady, with a nursery-maid and two little boys behind her, loitering on the path outside the garden wall. The lady started, looked eagerly, and smiled to herself as Magdalen came out. Curiosity had got the better of Kirke's sister, and she had come to Aldborough for the express purpose of seeing Miss Bygrave.

Something in the shape of the lady's face, something in the expression of her dark eyes, reminded Magdalen of the merchant-captain whose uncontrolled admiration had annoyed her on the previous evening. She instantly returned the stranger's scrutiny by a frowning, ungracious look. The lady colored, paid the look back with interest, and slowly walked on.

"A hard, bold, bad girl," thought Kirke's sister. "What could Robert be thinking of to admire her? I am almost glad he is gone. I hope and trust he will never set eyes on Miss Bygrave again."

"What boors the people are here!" said Magdalen to Captain Wragge. "That woman was even ruder than the man last night. She is like him in the face. I wonder who she is?"

"I'll find out directly," said the captain. "We can't be too cautious about strangers." He at once appealed to his friends, the boatmen. They were close at hand, and Magdalen heard the questions and answers plainly.

"How are you all this morning?" said Captain Wragge, in his easy jocular way. "And how's the wind? Nor'-west and by west, is it? Very good. Who is that lady?"

"That's Mrs. Strickland, sir."

"Ay! ay! The clergyman's wife and the captain's sister. Where's the captain to-day?"

"On his way to London, I should think, sir. His ship sails for China at the end of the week."

China! As that one word passed the man's lips, a pang of the old sorrow struck Magdalen to the heart. Stranger as he was, she began to hate the bare mention of the merchant-captain's name. He had troubled her dreams of the past night; and now, when she was most desperately and recklessly bent on forgetting her old home-existence, he had been indirectly the cause of recalling her mind to Frank.

"Come!" she said, angrily, to her companion. "What do we care about the man or his ship? Come away."

"By all means," said Captain Wragge. "As long as we don't find friends of the Bygraves, what do we care about anybody?"

They walked on southward for ten minutes or more, then turned and walked back again to meet Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN WRAGGE and Magdalen retraced their steps until they were again within view of North Shingles Villa before any signs appeared of Mrs. Lecount and her master. At that point the housekeeper's lavender-colored dress, the umbrella, and the feeble little figure in nankeen walking under it, became visible in the distance. The captain slackened his pace immediately, and issued his directions to Magdalen for her conduct at the coming interview in these words:

"Don't forget your smile," he said. "In all other respects you will do. The walk has improved your complexion, and the hat becomes you. Look Mrs. Lecount steadily in the face; show no embarrassment when you speak; and if Mr. Noel Vanstone pays you pointed attention, don't take too much notice of him while his housekeeper's eye is on you. Mind one thing! I have been at Joyce's Scientific Dialogues all the morning; and I am quite serious in meaning to give Mrs. Lecount the full benefit of my studies. If I can't contrive to divert her attention from you and her master, I won't give sixpence for our chance of success. Small-talk won't succeed with that woman; compliments won't succeed; jokes won't succeed--ready-made science may recall the deceased professor, and ready-made science may do. We must establish a code of signals to let you know what I am about. Observe this camp-stool. When I shift it from my left hand to my right, I am talking Joyce. When I shift it from my right hand to my left, I am talking Wragge. In the first case, don't interrupt me--I am leading up to my point. In the second case, say anything you like; my remarks are not of the slightest consequence. Would you like a rehearsal? Are you sure you understand? Very good--take my arm, and look happy. Steady! here they are."

The meeting took place nearly midway between Sea-view Cottage and North Shingles. Captain Wragge took off his tall white hat and opened the interview immediately on the friendliest terms.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Lecount," he said, with the frank and cheerful politeness of a naturally sociable man. "Good-morning, Mr. Vanstone; I am sorry to see you suffering to-day. Mrs. Lecount, permit me to introduce my niece--my niece, Miss Bygrave. My dear girl, this is Mr. Noel Vanstone, our neighbor at Sea-view Cottage. We must positively be sociable at Aldborough, Mrs. Lecount. There is only one walk in the place (as my niece remarked to me just now, Mr. Vanstone); and on that walk we must all meet every time we go out. And why not? Are we formal people on either side? Nothing of the

sort; we are just the reverse. You possess the Continental facility of manner, Mr. Vanstone--I match you with the blunt cordiality of an old-fashioned Englishman--the ladies mingle together in harmonious variety, like flowers on the same bed--and the result is a mutual interest in making our sojourn at the sea-side agreeable to each other. Pardon my flow of spirits; pardon my feeling so cheerful and so young. The Iodine in the sea-air, Mrs. Lecount--the notorious effect of the Iodine in the sea-air!"

"You arrived yesterday, Miss Bygrave, did you not?" said the housekeeper, as soon as the captain's deluge of language had come to an end.

She addressed those words to Magdalen with a gentle motherly interest in her youth and beauty, chastened by the deferential amiability which became her situation in Noel Vanstone's household. Not the faintest token of suspicion or surprise betrayed itself in her face, her voice, or her manner, while she and Magdalen now looked at each other. It was plain at the outset that the true face and figure which she now saw recalled nothing to her mind of the false face and figure which she had seen in Vauxhall Walk. The disguise had evidently been complete enough even to baffle the penetration of Mrs. Lecount.

"My aunt and I came here yesterday evening," said Magdalen. "We found the latter part of the journey very fatiguing. I dare say you found it so, too?"

She designedly made her answer longer than was necessary for the purpose of discovering, at the earliest opportunity, the effect which the sound of her voice produced on Mrs. Lecount.

The housekeeper's thin lips maintained their motherly smile; the housekeeper's amiable manner lost none of its modest deference, but the expression of her eyes suddenly changed from a look of attention to a look of inquiry. Magdalen quietly said a few words more, and then waited again for results. The change spread gradually all over Mrs. Lecount's face, the motherly smile died away, and the amiable manner betrayed a slight touch of restraint. Still no signs of positive recognition appeared; the housekeeper's expression remained what it had been from the first--an expression of inquiry, and nothing more.

"You complained of fatigue, sir, a few minutes since," she said, dropping all further conversation with Magdalen and addressing her master. "Will you go indoors and rest?"

The proprietor of Sea-view Cottage had hitherto confined himself to bowing,

simpering and admiring Magdalen through his half-closed eyelids. There was no mistaking the sudden flutter and agitation in his manner, and the heightened color in his wizen little face. Even the reptile temperament of Noel Vanstone warmed under the influence of the sex: he had an undeniably appreciative eye for a handsome woman, and Magdalen's grace and beauty were not thrown away on him.

"Will you go indoors, sir, and rest?" asked the housekeeper, repeating her quest ion.

"Not yet, Lecount," said her master. "I fancy I feel stronger; I fancy I can go on a little." He turned simpering to Magdalen, and added, in a lower tone: "I have found a new interest in my walk, Miss Bygrave. Don't desert us, or you will take the interest away with you."

He smiled and smirked in the highest approval of the ingenuity of his own compliment--from which Captain Wragge dexterously diverted the housekeeper's attention by ranging himself on her side of the path and speaking to her at the same moment. They all four walked on slowly. Mrs. Lecount said nothing more. She kept fast hold of her master's arm, and looked across him at Magdalen with the dangerous expression of inquiry more marked than ever in her handsome black eyes. That look was not lost on the wary Wragge. He shifted his indicative camp-stool from the left hand to the right, and opened his scientific batteries on the spot.

"A busy scene, Mrs. Lecount," said the captain, politely waving his camp-stool over the sea and the passing ships. "The greatness of England, ma'am--the true greatness of England. Pray observe how heavily some of those vessels are laden! I am often inclined to wonder whether the British sailor is at all aware, when he has got his cargo on board, of the Hydrostatic importance of the operation that he has performed. If I were suddenly transported to the deck of one of those ships (which Heaven forbid, for I suffer at sea); and if I said to a member of the crew: 'Jack! you have done wonders; you have grasped the Theory of Floating Vessels'--how the gallant fellow would stare! And yet on that theory Jack's life depends. If he loads his vessel one-thirtieth part more than he ought, what happens? He sails past Aldborough, I grant you, in safety. He enters the Thames, I grant you again, in safety. He gets on into the fresh water as far, let us say, as Greenwich; and--down he goes! Down, ma'am, to the bottom of the river, as a matter of scientific certainty!"

Here he paused, and left Mrs. Lecount no polite alternative but to request an explanation.

"With infinite pleasure, ma'am," said the captain, drowning in the deepest notes of his voice the feeble treble in which Noel Vanstone paid his compliments to Magdalen. "We will start, if you please, with a first principle. All bodies whatever that float on the surface of the water displace as much fluid as is equal in weight to the weight of the bodies. Good. We have got our first principle. What do we deduce from it? Manifestly this: That, in order to keep a vessel above water, it is necessary to take care that the vessel and its cargo shall be of less weight than the weight of a quantity of water--pray follow me here!--of a quantity of water equal in bulk to that part of the vessel which it will be safe to immerse in the water. Now, ma'am, salt-water is specifically thirty times heavier than fresh or river water, and a vessel in the German Ocean will not sink so deep as a vessel in the Thames. Consequently, when we load our ship with a view to the London market, we have (Hydrostatically speaking) three alternatives. Either we load with one-thirtieth part less than we can carry at sea; or we take one-thirtieth part out at the mouth of the river; or we do neither the one nor the other, and, as I have already had the honor of remarking--down we go! Such," said the captain, shifting the camp-stool back again from his right hand to his left, in token that Joyce was done with for the time being; "such, my dear madam, is the Theory of Floating Vessels. Permit me to add, in conclusion, you are heartily welcome to it."

"Thank you, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "You have unintentionally saddened me; but the information I have received is not the less precious on that account. It is long, long ago, Mr. Bygrave, since I have heard myself addressed in the language of science. My dear husband made me his companion--my dear husband improved my mind as you have been trying to improve it. Nobody has taken pains with my intellect since. Many thanks, sir. Your kind consideration for me is not thrown away."

She sighed with a plaintive humility, and privately opened her ears to the conversation on the other side of her.

A minute earlier she would have heard her master expressing himself in the most flattering terms on the subject of Miss Bygrave's appearance in her sea-side costume. But Magdalen had seen Captain Wragge's signal with the camp-stool, and had at once diverted Noel Vanstone to the topic of himself and his possessions by a neatly-timed question about his house at Aldborough.

"I don't wish to alarm you, Miss Bygrave," were the first words of Noel Vanstone's which caught Mrs. Lecount's attention, "but there is only one

safe house in Aldborough, and that house is mine. The sea may destroy all the other houses--it can't destroy Mine. My father took care of that; my father was a remarkable man. He had My house built on piles. I have reason to believe they are the strongest piles in England. Nothing can possibly knock them down--I don't care what the sea does--nothing can possibly knock them down."

"Then, if the sea invades us," said Magdalen, "we must all run for refuge to you."

Noel Vanstone saw his way to another compliment; and, at the same moment, the wary captain saw his way to another burst of science.

"I could almost wish the invasion might happen," murmured one of the gentlemen, "to give me the happiness of offering the refuge."

"I could almost swear the wind had shifted again!" exclaimed the other. "Where is a man I can ask? Oh, there he is. Boatman! How's the wind now? Nor'west and by west still--hey? And southeast and by south yesterday evening--ha? Is there anything more remarkable, Mrs. Lecount, than the variableness of the wind in this climate?" proceeded the captain, shifting the camp-stool to the scientific side of him. "Is there any natural phenomenon more bewildering to the scientific inquirer? You will tell me that the electric fluid which abounds in the air is the principal cause of this variableness. You will remind me of the experiment of that illustrious philosopher who measured the velocity of a great storm by a flight of small feathers. My dear madam, I grant all your propositions--"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Mrs. Lecount; "you kindly attribute to me a knowledge that I don't possess. Propositions, I regret to say, are quite beyond me."

"Don't misunderstand me, ma'am," continued the captain, politely unconscious of the interruption. "My remarks apply to the temperate zone only. Place me on the coasts beyond the tropics--place me where the wind blows toward the shore in the day-time, and toward the sea by night--and I instantly advance toward conclusive experiments. For example, I know that the heat of the sun during the day rarefies the air over the land, and so causes the wind. You challenge me to prove it. I escort you down the kitchen stairs (with your kind permission); take my largest pie-dish out of the cook's hands; I fill it with cold water. Good! that dish of cold water represents the ocean. I next provide myself with one of our most precious domestic conveniences, a hot-water plate; I fill it with hot water and I put it in the

middle of the pie-dish. Good again! the hot-water plate represents the land rarefying the air over it. Bear that in mind, and give me a lighted candle. I hold my lighted candle over the cold water, and blow it out. The smoke immediately moves from the dish to the plate. Before you have time to express your satisfaction, I light the candle once more, and reverse the whole proceeding. I fill the pie-dish with hot-water, and the plate with cold; I blow the candle out again, and the smoke moves this time from the plate to the dish. The smell is disagreeable--but the experiment is conclusive."

He shifted the camp-stool back again, and looked at Mrs. Lecount with his ingratiating smile. "You don't find me long-winded, ma'am--do you?" he said, in his easy, cheerful way, just as the housekeeper was privately opening her e ars once more to the conversation on the other side of her.

"I am amazed, sir, by the range of y our information," replied Mrs. Lecount, observing the captain with some perplexity--but thus far with no distrust. She thought him eccentric, even for an Englishman, and possibly a little vain of his knowledge. But he had at least paid her the implied compliment of addressing that knowledge to herself; and she felt it the more sensibly, from having hitherto found her scientific sympathies with her deceased husband treated with no great respect by the people with whom she came in contact. "Have you extended your inquiries, sir," she proceeded, after a momentary hesitation, "to my late husband's branch of science? I merely ask, Mr. Bygrave, because (though I am only a woman) I think I might exchange ideas with you on the subject of the reptile creation."

Captain Wragge was far too sharp to risk his ready-made science on the enemy's ground. The old militia-man shook his wary head.

"Too vast a subject, ma'am," he said, "for a smatterer like me. The life and labors of such a philosopher as your husband, Mrs. Lecount, warn men of my intellectual caliber not to measure themselves with a giant. May I inquire," proceeded the captain, softly smoothing the way for future intercourse with Sea-view Cottage, "whether you possess any scientific memorials of the late Professor?"

"I possess his Tank, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, modestly casting her eyes on the ground, "and one of his Subjects--a little foreign Toad."

"His Tank!" exclaimed the captain, in tones of mournful interest; "and his Toad! Pardon my blunt way of speaking my mind, ma'am. You possess an object of public interest; and, as one of the public, I acknowledge my curiosity to see it."

Mrs. Lecount's smooth cheeks colored with pleasure. The one assailable place in that cold and secret nature was the place occupied by the memory of the Professor. Her pride in his scientific achievements, and her mortification at finding them but little known out of his own country, were genuine feelings. Never had Captain Wragge burned his adulterated incense on the flimsy altar of human vanity to better purpose than he was burning it now.

"You are very good, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "In honoring my husband's memory, you honor me. But though you kindly treat me on a footing of equality, I must not forget that I fill a domestic situation. I shall feel it a privilege to show you my relics, if you will allow me to ask my master's permission first."

She turned to Noel Vanstone; her perfectly sincere intention of making the proposed request, mingling--in that strange complexity of motives which is found so much oftener in a woman's mind than in a man's--with her jealous distrust of the impression which Magdalen had produced on her master.

"May I make a request, sir?" asked Mrs. Lecount, after waiting a moment to catch any fragments of tenderly-personal talk that might reach her, and after being again neatly baffled by Magdalen--thanks to the camp-stool. "Mr. Bygrave is one of the few persons in England who appreciate my husband's scientific labors. He honors me by wishing to see my little world of reptiles. May I show it to him?"

"By all means, Lecount," said Noel Vanstone, graciously. "You are an excellent creature, and I like to oblige you. Lecount's Tank, Mr. Bygrave, is the only Tank in England--Lecount's Toad is the oldest Toad in the world. Will you come and drink tea at seven o'clock to-night? And will you prevail on Miss Bygrave to accompany you? I want her to see my house. I don't think she has any idea what a strong house it is. Come and survey my premises, Miss Bygrave. You shall have a stick and rap on the walls; you shall go upstairs and stamp on the floors, and then you shall hear what it all cost." His eyes wrinkled up cunningly at the corners, and he slipped another tender speech into Magdalen's ear, under cover of the all-predominating voice in which Captain Wragge thanked him for the invitation. "Come punctually at seven," he whispered, "and pray wear that charming hat!"

Mrs. Lecount's lips closed ominously. She set down the captain's niece as a very serious drawback to the intellectual luxury of the captain's society.

"You are fatiguing yourself, sir," she said to her master. "This is one of your bad days. Let me recommend you to be careful; let me beg you to walk back."

Having carried his point by inviting the new acquaintances to tea, Noel Vanstone proved to be unexpectedly docile. He acknowledged that he was a little fatigued, and turned back at once in obedience to the housekeeper's advice.

"Take my arm, sir--take my arm on the other side," said Captain Wragge, as they turned to retrace their steps. His party-colored eyes looked significantly at Magdalen while he spoke, and warned her not to stretch Mrs. Lecount's endurance too far at starting. She instantly understood him; and, in spite of Noel Vanstone's reiterated assertions that he stood in no need of the captain's arm, placed herself at once by the housekeeper's side. Mrs. Lecount recovered her good-humor, and opened another conversation with Magdalen by making the one inquiry of all others which, under existing circumstances, was the hardest to answer.

"I presume Mrs. Bygrave is too tired, after her journey, to come out to-day?" said Mrs. Lecount. "Shall we have the pleasure of seeing her tomorrow?"

"Probably not," replied Magdalen. "My aunt is in delicate health."

"A complicated case, my dear madam," added the captain; conscious that Mrs. Wragge's personal appearance (if she happened to be seen by accident) would offer the flattest of all possible contradictions to what Magdalen had just said of her. "There is some remote nervous mischief which doesn't express itself externally. You would think my wife the picture of health if you looked at her, and yet, so delusive are appearances, I am obliged to forbid her all excitement. She sees no society--our medical attendant, I regret to say, absolutely prohibits it."

"Very sad," said Mrs. Lecount. "The poor lady must often feel lonely, sir, when you and your niece are away from her?"

"No," replied the captain. "Mrs. Bygrave is a naturally domestic woman. When she is able to employ herself, she finds unlimited resources in her needle and thread." Having reached this stage of the explanation, and having purposely skirted, as it were, round the confines of truth, in the event of the housekeeper's curiosity leading her to make any private inquiries on the subject of Mrs. Wragge, the captain wisely checked his

fluent tongue from carrying him into any further details. "I have great hope from the air of this place," he remarked, in conclusion. "The Iodine, as I have already observed, does wonders."

Mrs. Lecount acknowledged the virtues of Iodine, in the briefest possible form of words, and withdrew into the innermost sanctuary of her own thoughts. "Some mystery here," said the housekeeper to herself. "A lady who looks the picture of health; a lady who suffers from a complicated nervous malady; and a lady whose hand is steady enough to use her needle and thread--is a living mass of contradictions I don't quite understand. Do you make a long stay at Aldborough, sir?" she added aloud, her eyes resting for a moment, in steady scrutiny, on the captain's face.

"It all depends, my dear madam, on Mrs. Bygrave. I trust we shall stay through the autumn. You are settled at Sea-view Cottage, I presume, for the season?"

"You must ask my master, sir. It is for him to decide, not for me."

The answer was an unfortunate one. Noel Vanstone had been secretly annoyed by the change in the walking arrangements, which had separated him from Magdalen. He attributed that change to the meddling influence of Mrs. Lecount, and he now took the earliest opportunity of resenting it on the spot.

"I have nothing to do with our stay at Aldborough," he broke out, peevishly. "You know as well as I do, Lecount, it all depends on you. Mrs. Lecount has a brother in Switzerland," he went on, addressing himself to the captain--"a brother who is seriously ill. If he gets worse, she will have to go the re to see him. I can't accompany her, and I can't be left in the house by myself. I shall have t o break up my establishment at Aldborough, and stay with some friends. It all depends on you, Lecount--or on your brother, which comes to the same thing. If it depended on me," continued Mr. Noel Vanstone, looking pointedly at Magdalen across the housekeeper, "I should stay at Aldborough all through the autumn with the greatest pleasure. With the greatest pleasure," he reiterated, repeating the words with a tender look for Magdalen, and a spiteful accent for Mrs. Lecount.

Thus far Captain Wragge had remained silent; carefully noting in his mind the promising possibilities of a separation between Mrs. Lecount and her master which Noel Vanstone's little fretful outbreak had just disclosed to him. An ominous trembling in the housekeeper's thin lips, as her master openly exposed her family affairs before strangers, and openly set her

jealously at defiance, now warned him to interfere. If the misunderstanding were permitted to proceed to extremities, there was a chance that the invitation for that evening to Sea-view Cottage might be put off. Now, as ever, equal to the occasion, Captain Wragge called his useful information once more to the rescue. Under the learned auspices of Joyce, he plunged, for the third time, into the ocean of science, and brought up another pearl. He was still haranguing (on Pneumatics this time), still improving Mrs. Lecount's mind with his politest perseverance and his smoothest flow of language--when the walking party stopped at Noel Vanstone's door.

"Bless my soul, here we are at your house, sir!" said the captain, interrupting himself in the middle of one of his graphic sentences. "I won't keep you standing a moment. Not a word of apology, Mrs. Lecount, I beg and pray! I will put that curious point in Pneumatics more clearly before you on a future occasion. In the meantime I need only repeat that you can perform the experiment I have just mentioned to your own entire satisfaction with a bladder, an exhausted receiver, and a square box. At seven o'clock this evening, sir--at seven o'clock, Mrs. Lecount. We have had a remarkably pleasant walk, and a most instructive interchange of ideas. Now, my dear girl, your aunt is waiting for us."

While Mrs. Lecount stepped aside to open the garden gate, Noel Vanstone seized his opportunity and shot a last tender glance at Magdalen, under shelter of the umbrella, which he had taken into his own hands for that express purpose. "Don't forget," he said, with the sweetest smile; "don't forget, when you come this evening, to wear that charming hat!" Before he could add any last words, Mrs. Lecount glided back to her place, and the sheltering umbrella changed hands again immediately.

"An excellent morning's work!" said Captain Wragge, as he and Magdalen walked on together to North Shingles. "You and I and Joyce have all three done wonders. We have secured a friendly invitation at the first day's fishing for it."

He paused for an answer; and, receiving none, observed Magdalen more attentively than he had observed her yet. Her face had turned deadly pale again; her eyes looked out mechanically straight before her in heedless, reckless despair.

"What is the matter?" he asked, with the greatest surprise. "Are you ill?"

She made no reply; she hardly seemed to hear him.

"Are you getting alarmed about Mrs. Lecount?" he inquired next. "There is not the least reason for alarm. She may fancy she has heard something like your voice before, but your face evidently bewilders her. Keep your temper, and you keep her in the dark. Keep her in the dark, and you will put that two hundred pounds into my hands before the autumn is over."

He waited again for an answer, and again she remained silent. The captain tried for the third time in another direction.

"Did you get any letters this morning?" he went on. "Is there bad news again from home? Any fresh difficulties with your sister?"

"Say nothing about my sister!" she broke out passionately. "Neither you nor I are fit to speak of her."

She said those words at the garden-gate, and hurried into the house by herself. He followed her, and heard the door of her own room violently shut to, violently locked and double-locked. Solacing his indignation by an oath, Captain Wragge sullenly went into one of the parlors on the ground-floor to look after his wife. The room communicated with a smaller and darker room at the back of the house by means of a quaint little door with a window in the upper half of it. Softly approaching this door, the captain lifted the white muslin curtain which hung over the window, and looked into the inner room.

There was Mrs. Wragge, with her cap on one side, and her shoes down at heel; with a row of pins between her teeth; with the Oriental Cashmere Robe slowly slipping off the table; with her scissors suspended uncertain in one hand, and her written directions for dressmaking held doubtfully in the other--so absorbed over the invincible difficulties of her employment as to be perfectly unconscious that she was at that moment the object of her husband's superintending eye. Under other circumstances she would have been soon brought to a sense of her situation by the sound of his voice. But Captain Wragge was too anxious about Magdalen to waste any time on his wife, after satisfying himself that she was safe in her seclusion, and that she might be trusted to remain there.

He left the parlor, and, after a little hesitation in the passage, stole upstairs and listened anxiously outside Magdalen's door. A dull sound of sobbing--a sound stifled in her handkerchief, or stifled in the bed-clothes--was all that caught his ear. He returned at once to the ground-floor, with some faint suspicion of the truth dawning on his mind at last.

"The devil take that sweetheart of hers!" thought the captain. "Mr. Noel Vanstone has raised the ghost of him at starting."

CHAPTER V.

WHEN Magdalen appeared in the parlor shortly before seven o'clock, not a trace of discomposure was visible in her manner. She looked and spoke as quietly and unconcernedly as usual.

The lowering distrust on Captain Wragge's face cleared away at the sight of her. There had been moments during the afternoon when he had seriously doubted whether the pleasure of satisfying the grudge he owed to Noel Vanstone, and the prospect of earning the sum of two hundred pounds, would not be dearly purchased by running the risk of discovery to which Magdalen's uncertain temper might expose him at any hour of the day. The plain proof now before him of her powers of self-control relieved his mind of a serious anxiety. It mattered little to the captain what she suffered in the privacy of her own chamber, as long as she came out of it with a face that would bear inspection, and a voice that betrayed nothing.

On the way to Sea-view Cottage, Captain Wragge expressed his intention of asking the housekeeper a few sympathizing questions on the subject of her invalid brother in Switzerland. He was of opinion that the critical condition of this gentleman's health might exercise an important influence on the future progress of the conspiracy. Any chance of a separation, he remarked, between the housekeeper and her master was, under existing circumstances, a chance which merited the closest investigation. "If we can only get Mrs. Lecount out of the way at the right time," whispered the captain, as he opened his host's garden gate, "our man is caught!"

In a minute more Magdalen was again under Noel Vanstone's roof; this time in the character of his own invited guest.

The proceedings of the evening were for the most part a repetition of the proceedings during the morning walk. Noel Vanstone vibrated between his admiration of Magdalen's beauty and his glorification of his own possessions. Captain Wragge's inexhaustible outbursts of information--relieved by delicately-indirect inquiries relating to Mrs. Lecount's brother--perpetually diverted the housekeeper's jealous vigilance from dwelling on the looks and language of her master. So the evening passed until ten o'clock. By that time the captain's ready-made science was exhausted, and the housekeeper's temper was forcing its way to the surface. Once more Captain Wragge warned Magdalen by a look, and, in spite of Noel Vanstone's hospitable protest, wisely rose to say good-night.

"I have got my information," remarked the captain on the way back. "Mrs. Lecount's brother lives at Zurich. He is a bachelor; he possesses a little money, and his sister is his nearest relation. If he will only be so obliging as to break up altogether, he will save us a world of trouble with Mrs. Lecount."

It was a fine moonlight night. He looked round at Magdalen, as he said those words, to see if her intractable depression of spirits had seized on her again.

No! her variable humor had changed once more. She looked about her with a flaunting, feverish gayety; she scoffed at the bare idea of any serious difficulty with Mrs. Lecount; she mimicked Noel Vanstone's high-pitched voice, and repeated Noel Vanstone's high-flown compliments, with a bitter enjoyment of turning him into ridicule. Instead of running into the house as before, she sauntered carelessly by her companion's side, humming little snatches of song, and kicking the loose pebbles right and left on the garden-walk. Captain Wragge hailed the change in her as the best of good omens. He thought he saw plain signs that the family spirit was at last coming back again.

"Well," he said, as he lit her bedroom candle for her, "when we all meet on the Parade tomorrow, we shall see, as our nautical friends say, how the land lies. One thing I can tell you, my dear girl--I have used my eyes to very little purpose if there is not a storm brewing tonight in Mr. Noel Vanstone's domestic atmosphere."

The captain's habitual penetration had not misled him. As soon as the door of Sea-view Cottage was closed on the parting guests, Mrs. Lecount made an effort to assert the authority which Magdalen's influence was threatening already.

She employed every artifice of which she was mistress to ascertain Magdalen's true position in Noel Vanstone's estimation. She tried again and again to lure him into an unconscious confession of the pleasure which he felt already in the society of the beautiful Miss Bygrave; she twined herself in and out of every weakness in his character, as the frogs and efts twined themselves in and out of the rock-work of her Aquarium. But she made one serious mistake which very clever people in their intercourse with their intellectual inferiors are almost universally apt to commit--she trusted implicitly to the folly of a fool. She forgot that one of the lowest of human qualities--cunning--is exactly the capacity which is often most largely developed in the lowest of intellectual natures. If she had been honestly

angry with her master, she would probably have frightened him. If she had opened her mind plainly to his view, she would have astonished him by presenting a chain of ideas to his limited perceptions which they were not strong enough to grasp; his curiosity would have led him to ask for an explanation; and by practicing on that curiosity, she might have had him at her mercy. As it was, she set her cunning against his, and the fool proved a match for her. Noel Vanstone, to whom all large-minded motives under heaven were inscrutable mysteries, saw the small-minded motive at the bottom of his housekeeper's conduct with as instantaneous a penetration as if he had been a man of the highest ability. Mrs. Lecount left him for the night, foiled, and knowing she was foiled--left him, with the tigerish side of her uppermost, and a low-lived longing in her elegant finger-nails to set them in her master's face.

She was not a woman to be beaten by one defeat or by a hundred. She was positively determined to think, and think again, until she had found a means of checking the growing intimacy with the Bygraves at once and forever. In the solitude of her own room she recovered her composure, and set herself for the first time to review the conclusions which she had gathered from the events of the day.

There was something vaguely familiar to her in the voice of this Miss Bygrave, and, at the same time, in unaccountable contradiction, something strange to her as well. The face and figure of the young lady were entirely new to her. It was a striking face, and a striking figure; and if she had seen either at any former period, she would certainly have remembered it. Miss Bygrave was unquestionably a stranger; and yet--

She had got no further than this during the day; she could get no further now: the chain of thought broke. Her mind took up the fragments, and formed another chain which attached itself to the lady who was kept in seclusion--to the aunt, who looked well, and yet was nervous; who was nervous, and yet able to ply her needle and thread. An incomprehensible resemblance to some unremembered voice in the niece; an unintelligible malady which kept the aunt secluded from public view; an extraordinary range of scientific cultivation in the uncle, associated with a coarseness and audacity of manner which by no means suggested the idea of a man engaged in studious pursuits--were the members of this small family of three what they seemed on the surface of them?

With that question on her mind, she went to bed.

As soon as the candle was out, the darkness seemed to communicate some

inexplicable perversity to her thoughts. They wandered back from present things to past, in spite of her. They brought her old master back to life again; they revived forgotten sayings and doings in the English circle at Zurich; they veered away to the old man's death-bed at Brighton; they moved from Brighton to London; they entered the bare, comfortless room at Vauxhall Walk; they set the Aquarium back in its place on the kitchen table, and put the false Miss Garth in the chair by the side of it, shading her inflamed eyes from the light; they placed the anonymous letter, the letter which glanced darkly at a conspiracy, in her hand again, and brought her with it into her master's presence; they recalled the discussion about filling in the blank space in the advertisement, and the quarrel that followed when she told Noel Vanstone that the sum he had offered was preposterously small; they revived an old doubt which had not troubled her for weeks past--a doubt whether the threatened conspiracy had evaporated in mere words, or whether she and her master were likely to hear of it again. At this point her thoughts broke off once more, and there was a momentary blank. The next instant she started up in bed; her heart beating violently, her head whirling as if she had lost her senses. With electric suddenness her mind pieced together its scattered multitude of thoughts, and put them before her plainly under one intelligible form. In the all-mastering agitation of the moment, she clapped her hands together, and cried out suddenly in the darkness:

"Miss Vanstone again!!!"

She got out of bed and kindled the light once more. Steady as her nerves were, the shock of her own suspicion had shaken them. Her firm hand trembled as she opened her dressing-case and took from it a little bottle of sal-volatile. In spite of her smooth cheeks and her well-preserved hair, she looked every year of her age as she mixed the spirit with water, greedily drank it, and, wrapping her dressing-gown round her, sat down on the bedside to get possession again of her calmer self.

She was quite incapable of tracing the mental process which had led her to discovery. She could not get sufficiently far from herself to see that her half-formed conclusions on the subject of the Bygraves had ended in making that family objects of suspicion to her; that the association of ideas had thereupon carried her mind back to that other object of suspicion which was represented by the conspiracy against her master; and that the two ideas of those two separate subjects of distrust, coming suddenly in contact, had struck the light. She was not able to reason back in this way from the effect to the cause. She could only feel that the suspicion had become more than a suspicion already: conviction itself could not have been more firmly rooted

in her mind.

Looking back at Magdalen by the new light now thrown on her, Mrs. Lecount would fain have persuaded herself that she recognized some traces left of the false Miss Garth's face and figure in the graceful and beautiful girl who had sat at her master's table hardly an hour since--that she found resemblances now, which she had never thought of before, between the angry voice she had heard in Vauxhall Walk and the smooth, well-bred tones which still hung on her ears after the evening's experience downstairs. She would fain have persuaded herself that she had reached these results with no undue straining of the truth as she really knew it, but the effort was in vain.

Mrs. Lecount was not a woman to waste time and thought in trying to impose on herself. She accepted the inevitable conclusion that the guesswork of a moment had led her to discovery. And, more than that, she recognized the plain truth--unwelcome as it was--that the conviction now fixed in her own mind was thus far unsupported by a single fragment of producible evidence to justify it to the minds of others.

Under these circumstances, what was the safe course to take with her master?

If she candidly told him, when they met the next morning, what had passed through her mind that night, her knowledge of Noel Vanstone warned her that one of two results would certainly happen. Either he would be angry and disputatious; would ask for proofs; and, finding none forthcoming, would accuse her of alarming him without a cause, to serve her own jealous end of keeping Magdalen out of the house; or he would be seriously startled, would clamor for the protection of the law, and would warn the Bygraves to stand on their defense at the outset. If Magdalen only had been concerned in the plot this latter consequence would have assumed no great importance in the housekeeper's mind. But seeing the deception as she now saw it, she was far too clever a woman to fail in estimating the captain's inexhaustible fertility of resource at its true value. "If I can't meet this impudent villain with plain proofs to help me," thought Mrs. Lecount, "I may open my master s eyes to-morrow morning, and Mr. Bygrave will shut them up again before night. The rascal is playing with all his own cards under the table, and he will win the game to a certainty, if he sees my hand at starting."

This policy of waiting was so manifestly the wise policy--the wily Mr. Bygrave was so sure to have provided himself, in case of emergency, with evidence to prove the identity which he and his niece had assumed for their purpose--

that Mrs. Lecount at once decided to keep her own counsel the next morning, and to pause before attacking the conspiracy until she could produce unanswerable facts to help her. Her master's acquaintance with the Bygraves was only an acquaintance of one day's standing. There was no fear of its developing into a dangerous intimacy if she merely allowed it to continue for a few days more, and if she permanently checked it, at the latest, in a week's time.

In that period what measures could she take to remove the obstacles which now stood in her way, and to provide herself with the weapons which she now wanted?

Reflection showed her three different chances in her favor--three different ways of arriving at the necessary discovery.

The first chance was to cultivate friendly terms with Magdalen, and then, taking her unawares, to entrap her into betraying herself in Noel Vanstone's presence. The second chance was to write to the elder Miss Vanstone, and to ask (with some alarming reason for putting the question) for information on the subject of her younger sister's whereabouts, and of any peculiarities in her personal appearance which might enable a stranger to identify her. The third chance was to penetrate the mystery of Mrs. Bygrave's seclusion, and to ascertain at a personal interview whether the invalid lady's real complaint might not possibly be a defective capacity for keeping her husband's secrets. Resolving to try all three chances, in the order in which they are here enumerated, and to set her snares for Magdalen on the day that was now already at hand, Mrs. Lecount at last took off her dressing-gown and allowed her weaker nature to plead with her for a little sleep.

The dawn was breaking over the cold gray sea as she lay down in her bed again. The last idea in her mind before she fell asleep was characteristic of the woman--it was an idea that threatened the captain. "He has trifled with the sacred memory of my husband," thought the Professor's widow. "On my life and honor, I will make him pay for it."

Early the next morning Magdalen began the day, according to her agreement with the captain, by taking Mrs. Wragge out for a little exercise at an hour when there was no fear of her attracting the public attention. She pleaded hard to be left at home; having the Oriental Cashmere Robe still on her mind, and feeling it necessary to read her directions for dressmaking, for the hundredth time at least, before (to use her own expression) she could "screw up her courage to put the scissors into the stuff." But her companion would take no denial, and she was forced to go out. The one guileless

purpose of the life which Magdalen now led was the resolution that poor Mrs. Wragge should not be made a prisoner on her account; and to that resolution she mechanically clung, as the last token left her by which she knew her better-self.

They returned later than usual to breakfast. While Mrs. Wragge was upstairs, straightening herself from head to foot to meet the morning inspection of her husband's orderly eye; and while Magdalen and the captain were waiting for her in the parlor, the servant came in with a note from Sea-view Cottage. The messenger was waiting for an answer, and the note was addressed to Captain Wragge.

The captain opened the note and read these lines:

"DEAR SIR--Mr. Noel Vanstone desires me to write and tell you that he proposes enjoying this fine day by taking a long drive to a place on the coast here called Dunwich. He is anxious to know if you will share the expense of a carriage, and give him the pleasure of your company and Miss Bygrave's company on this excursion. I am kindly permitted to be one of the party; and if I may say so without impropriety, I would venture to add that I shall feel as much pleasure as my master if you and your young lady will consent to join us. We propose leaving Aldborough punctually at eleven o'clock. Believe me, dear sir, your humble servant,

"VIRGINIE LECOUNT."

"Who is the letter from?" asked Magdalen, noticing a change in Captain Wragge's face as he read it. "What do they want with us at Sea-view Cottage?"

"Pardon me," said the captain, gravely, "this requires consideration. Let me have a minute or two to think."

He took a few turns up and down the room, then suddenly stepped aside to a table in a corner on which his writing materials were placed. "I was not born yesterday, ma'am!" said the captain, speaking jocosely to himself. He winked his brown eye, took up his pen, and wrote the answer.

"Can you speak now?" inquired Magdalen, when the servant had left the room. "What does that letter say, and how have you answered it?"

The captain placed the letter in her hand. "I have accepted the invitation," he replied, quietly.

Magdalen read the letter. "Hidden enmity yesterday," she said, "and open friendship to-day. What does it mean?"

"It means," said Captain Wragge, "that Mrs. Lecount is even sharper than I thought her. She has found you out."

"Impossible," cried Magdalen. "Quite impossible in the time."

"I can't say how she has found you out," proceeded the captain, with perfect composure. "She may know more of your voice than we supposed she knew. Or she may have thought us, on reflection, rather a suspicious family; and anything suspicious in which a woman was concerned may have taken her mind back to that morning call of yours in Vauxhall Walk. Whichever way it may be, the meaning of this sudden change is clear enough. She has found you out; and she wants to put her discovery to the proof by slipping in an awkward question or two, under cover of a little friendly talk. My experience of humanity has been a varied one, and Mrs. Lecount is not the first sharp practitioner in petticoats whom I have had to deal with. All the world's a stage, my dear girl, and one of the scenes on our little stage is shut in from this moment."

With those words he took his copy of Joyce's Scientific Dialogues out of his pocket. "You're done with already, my friend!" said the captain, giving his useful information a farewell smack with his hand, and locking it up in the cupboard. "Such is human popularity!" continued the indomitable vagabond, putting the key cheerfully in his pocket. "Yesterday Joyce was my all-in-all. To-day I don't care that for him!" He snapped his fingers and sat down to breakfast.

"I don't understand you," said Magdalen, looking at him angrily. "Are you leaving me to my own resources for the future?"

"My dear girl!" cried Captain Wragge, "can't you accustom yourself to my dash of humor yet? I have done with my ready-made science simply because I am quite sure that Mrs. Lecount has done believing in me. Haven't I accepted the invitation to Dunwich? Make your mind easy. The help I have given you already counts for nothing compared with the help I am going to give you now. My honor is concerned in bowling out Mrs. Lecount. This last move of hers has made it a personal matter between us. The woman actually thinks she can take me in!!!" cried the captain, striking his knife-handle on the table in a transport of virtuous indignation. "By heavens, I never was so insulted before in my life! Draw your chair in to the table, my dear, and give

me half a minute's attention to what I have to say next."

Magdalen obeyed him. Captain Wragge cautiously lowered his voice before he went on.

"I have told you all along," he said, "the one thing needful is never to let Mrs. Lecount catch you with your wits wool-gathering. I say the same after what has happened this morning. Let her suspect you! I defy her to find a fragment of foundation for her suspicions, unless we help her. We shall see to-day if she has been foolish enough to betray herself to her master before she has any facts to support her. I doubt it. If she has told him, we will rain down proofs of our identity with the Bygraves on his feeble little head till it absolutely aches with conviction. You have two things to do on this excursion. First, to distrust every word Mrs. Lecount says to you. Secondly, to exert all your fascinations, and make sure of Mr. Noel Vanstone, dating from to-day. I will give you the opportunity when we leave the carriage and take our walk at Dunwich. Wear your hat, wear your smile; do your figure justice, lace tight; put on your neatest boots and brightest gloves; tie the miserable little wretch to your apron-string--tie him fast; and leave the whole management of the matter after that to me. Steady! here is Mrs. Wragge: we must be doubly careful in looking after her now. Show me your cap, Mrs. Wragge! show me your shoes! What do I see on your apron? A spot? I won't have spots! Take it off after breakfast, and put on another. Pull your chair to the middle of the table--more to the left--more still. Make the breakfast."

At a quarter before eleven Mrs. Wragge (with her own entire concurrence) was dismissed to the back room, to bewilder herself over the science of dressmaking for the rest of the day. Punctually as the clock struck the hour, Mrs. Lecount and her master drove up to the gate of North Shingles, and found Magdalen and Captain Wragge waiting for them in the garden.

On the way to Dunwich nothing occurred to disturb the enjoyment of the drive. Noel Vanstone was in excellent health and high good-humor. Lecount had apologized for the little misunderstanding of the previous night; Lecount had petitioned for the excursion as a treat to herself. He thought of these concessions, and looked at Magdalen, and smirked and simpered without intermission. Mrs. Lecount acted her part to perfection. She was motherly with Magdalen and tenderly attentive to Noel Vanstone. She was deeply interested in Captain Wragge's conversation, and meekly disappointed to find it turn on general subjects, to the exclusion of science. Not a word or look escaped her which hinted in the remotest degree at her real purpose. She was dressed with her customary elegance and propriety; and she was

the only one of the party on that sultry summer's day who was perfectly cool in the hottest part of the journey.

As they left the carriage on their arrival at Dunwich, the captain seized a moment when Mrs. Lecount's eye was off him and fortified Magdalen by a last warning word.

"'Ware the cat!" he whispered. "She will show her claws on the way back."

They left the village and walked to the ruins of a convent near at hand--the last relic of the once populous city of Dunwich which has survived the destruction of the place, centuries since, by the all-devouring sea. After looking at the ruins, they sought the shade of a little wood between the village and the low sand-hills which overlook the German Ocean. Here Captain Wragge maneuvered so as to let Magdalen and Noel Vanstone advance some distance in front of Mrs. Lecount and himself, took the wrong path, and immediately lost his way with the most consummate dexterity. After a few minutes' wandering (in the wrong direction), he reached an open space near the sea; and politely opening his camp-stool for the housekeeper's accommodation, proposed waiting where they were until the missing members of the party came that way and discovered them.

Mrs. Lecount accepted the proposal. She was perfectly well aware that her escort had lost himself on purpose, but that discovery exercised no disturbing influence on the smooth amiability of her manner. Her day of reckoning with the captain had not come yet--she merely added the new item to her list, and availed herself of the camp-stool. Captain Wragge stretched himself in a romantic attitude at her feet, and the two determined enemies (grouped like two lovers in a picture) fell into as easy and pleasant a conversation as if they had been friends of twenty years' standing.

"I know you, ma'am!" thought the captain, while Mrs. Lecount was talking to him. "You would like to catch me tripping in my ready-made science, and you wouldn't object to drown me in the Professor's Tank!"

"You villain with the brown eye and the green!" thought Mrs. Lecount, as the captain caught the ball of conversation in his turn; "thick as your skin is, I'll sting you through it yet!"

In this frame of mind toward each other they talked fluently on general subjects, on public affairs, on local scenery, on society in England and society in Switzerland, on health, climate, books, marriage and money--talked, without a moment's pause, without a single misunderstanding on

either side for nearly an hour, before Magdalen and Noel Vanstone strayed that way and made the party of four complete again.

When they reached the inn at which the carriage was waiting for them, Captain Wragge left Mrs. Lecount in undisturbed possession of her master, and signed to Magdalen to drop back for a moment and speak to him.

"Well?" asked the captain, in a whisper, "is he fast to your apron-string?"

She shuddered from head to foot as she answered.

"He has kissed my hand," she said. "Does that tell you enough? Don't let him sit next me on the way home! I have borne all I can bear--spare me for the rest of the day."

"I'll put you on the front seat of the carriage," replied the captain, "side by side with me."

On the journey back Mrs. Lecount verified Captain Wragge's prediction. She showed her claws.

The time could not have been better chosen; the circumstances could hardly have favored her more. Magdalen's spirits were depressed: she was weary in body and mind; and she sat exactly opposite the housekeeper, who had been compelled, by the new arrangement, to occupy the seat of honor next her master. With every facility for observing the slightest changes that passed over Magdalen's face, Mrs. Lecount tried he r first experiment by leading the conversation to the subject of London, and to the relative advantages offered to residents by the various quarters of the metropolis on both sides of the river. The ever-ready Wragge penetrated her intention sooner than she had anticipated, and interposed immediately. "You're coming to Vauxhall Walk, ma'am," thought the captain; "I'll get there before you."

He entered at once into a purely fictitious description of the various quarters of London in which he had himself resided; and, adroitly mentioning Vauxhall Walk as one of them, saved Magdalen from the sudden question relating to that very locality with which Mrs. Lecount had proposed startling her, to begin with. From his residences he passed smoothly to himself, and poured his whole family history (in the character of Mr. Bygrave) into the housekeeper's ears--not forgetting his brother's grave in Honduras, with the monument by the self-taught negro artist, and his brother's hugely corpulent widow, on the ground-floor of the boarding-house at Cheltenham.

As a means of giving Magdalen time to compose herself, this outburst of autobiographical information attained its object, but it answered no other purpose. Mrs. Lecount listened, without being imposed on by a single word the captain said to her. He merely confirmed her conviction of the hopelessness of taking Noel Vanstone into her confidence before she had facts to help her against Captain Wragge's otherwise unassailable position in the identity which he had assumed. She quietly waited until he had done, and then returned to the charge.

"It is a coincidence that your uncle should have once resided in Vauxhall Walk," she said, addressing herself to Magdalen. "Mr. Noel has a house in the same place, and we lived there before we came to Aldborough. May I inquire, Miss Bygrave, whether you know anything of a lady named Miss Garth?"

This time she put the question before the captain could interfere. Magdalen ought to have been prepared for it by what had already passed in her presence, but her nerves had been shaken by the earlier events of the day; and she could only answer the question in the negative, after an instant's preliminary pause to control herself. Her hesitation was of too momentary a nature to attract the attention of any unsuspicious person. But it lasted long enough to confirm Mrs. Lecount's private convictions, and to encourage her to advance a little further.

"I only asked," she continued, steadily fixing her eyes on Magdalen, steadily disregarding the efforts which Captain Wragge made to join in the conversation, "because Miss Garth is a stranger to me, and I am curious to find out what I can about her. The day before we left town, Miss Bygrave, a person who presented herself under the name I have mentioned paid us a visit under very extraordinary circumstances."

With a smooth, ingratiating manner, with a refinement of contempt which was little less than devilish in its ingenious assumption of the language of pity, she now boldly described Magdalen's appearance in disguise in Magdalen's own presence. She slightingly referred to the master and mistress of Combe-Raven as persons who had always annoyed the elder and more respectable branch of the family; she mourned over the children as following their parents' example, and attempting to take a mercenary advantage of Mr. Noel Vanstone, under the protection of a respectable person's character and a respectable person's name. Cleverly including her master in the conversation, so as to prevent the captain from effecting a diversion in that quarter; sparing no petty aggravation; striking at every tender place which the tongue of a spiteful woman can wound, she would,

beyond all doubt, have carried her point, and tortured Magdalen into openly betraying herself, if Captain Wragge had not checked her in full career by a loud exclamation of alarm, and a sudden clutch at Magdalen's wrist.

"Ten thousand pardons, my dear madam!" cried the captain. "I see in my niece's face, I feel in my niece's pulse, that one of her violent neuralgic attacks has come on again. My dear girl, why hesitate among friends to confess that you are in pain? What mistimed politeness! Her face shows she is suffering--doesn't it Mrs. Lecount? Darting pains, Mr. Vanstone, darting pains on the left side of the head. Pull down your veil, my dear, and lean on me. Our friends will excuse you; our excellent friends will excuse you for the rest of the day."

Before Mrs. Lecount could throw an instant's doubt on the genuineness of the neuralgic attack, her master's fidgety sympathy declared itself exactly as the captain had anticipated, in the most active manifestations. He stopped the carriage, and insisted on an immediate change in the arrangement of the places--the comfortable back seat for Miss Bygrave and her uncle, the front seat for Lecount and himself. Had Lecount got her smelling-bottle? Excellent creature! let her give it directly to Miss Bygrave, and let the coachman drive carefully. If the coachman shook Miss Bygrave he should not have a half-penny for himself. Mesmerism was frequently useful in these cases. Mr. Noel Vanstone's father had been the most powerful mesmerist in Europe, and Mr. Noel Vanstone was his father's son. Might he mesmerize? Might he order that infernal coachman to draw up in a shady place adapted for the purpose? Would medical help be preferred? Could medical help be found any nearer than Aldborough? That ass of a coachman didn't know. Stop every respectable man who passed in a gig, and ask him if he was a doctor! So Mr. Noel Vanstone ran on, with brief intervals for breathing-time, in a continually-ascending scale of sympathy and self-importance, throughout the drive home.

Mrs. Lecount accepted her defeat without uttering a word. From the moment when Captain Wragge interrupted her, her thin lips closed and opened no more for the remainder of the journey. The warmest expressions of her master's anxiety for the suffering young lady provoked from her no outward manifestations of anger. She took as little notice of him as possible. She paid no attention whatever to the captain, whose exasperating consideration for his vanquished enemy made him more polite to her than ever. The nearer and the nearer they got to Aldborough the more and more fixedly Mrs. Lecount's hard black eyes looked at Magdalen reclining on the opposite seat, with her eyes closed and her veil down.

It was only when the carriage stopped at North Shingles, and when Captain Wragge was handing Magdalen out, that the housekeeper at last condescended to notice him. As he smiled and took off his hat at the carriage door, the strong restraint she had laid on herself suddenly gave way, and she flashed one look at him which scorched up the captain's politeness on the spot. He turned at once, with a hasty acknowledgment of Noel Vanstone's last sympathetic inquiries, and took Magdalen into the house. "I told you she would show her claws," he said. "It is not my fault that she scratched you before I could stop her. She hasn't hurt you, has she?"

"She has hurt me, to some purpose," said Magdalen--"she has given me the courage to go on. Say what must be done to-morrow, and trust me to do it." She sighed heavily as she said those words, and went up to her room.

Captain Wragge walked meditatively into the parlor, and sat down to consider. He felt by no means so certain as he could have wished of the next proceeding on the part of the enemy after the defeat of that day. The housekeeper's farewell look had plainly informed him that she was not at the end of her resources yet, and the old militia-man felt the full importance of preparing himself in good time to meet the next step which she took in advance. He lit a cigar, and bent his wary mind on the dangers of the future.

While Captain Wragge was considering in the parlor at North Shingles, Mrs. Lecount was meditating in her bedroom at Sea View. Her exasperation at the failure of her first attempt to expose the conspiracy had not blinded her to the instant necessity of making a second effort before Noel Vanstone's growing infatuation got beyond her control. The snare set for Magdalen having failed, the chance of entrapping Magdalen's sister was the next chance to try. Mrs. Lecount ordered a cup of tea, opened her writing-case, and began the rough draft of a letter to be sent to Miss Vanstone, the elder, by the morrow's post.

So the day's skirmish ended. The heat of the battle was yet to come.

CHAPTER VI.

ALL human penetration has its limits. Accurately as Captain Wragge had seen his way hitherto, even his sharp insight was now at fault. He finished his cigar with the mortifying conviction that he was totally unprepared for Mrs. Lecount's next proceeding. In this emergency, his experience warned him that there was one safe course, and one only, which he could take. He resolved to try the confusing effect on the housekeeper of a complete change of tactics before she had time to press her advantage and attack him in the dark. With this view he sent the servant upstairs to request that Miss Bygrave would come down and speak to him.

"I hope I don't disturb you," said the captain, when Magdalen entered the room. "Allow me to apologize for the smell of tobacco, and to say two words on the subject of our next proceedings. To put it with my customary frankness, Mrs. Lecount puzzles me, and I propose to return the compliment by puzzling her. The course of action which I have to suggest is a very simple one. I have had the honor of giving you a severe neuralgic attack already, and I beg your permission (when Mr. Noel Vanstone sends to inquire to-morrow morning) to take the further liberty of laying you up altogether. Question from Sea-view Cottage: 'How is Miss Bygrave this morning?' Answer from North Shingles: 'Much worse: Miss Bygrave is confined to her room.' Question repeated every day, say for a fortnight: 'How is Miss Bygrave?' Answer repeated, if necessary, for the same time: 'No better.' Can you bear the imprisonment? I see no objection to your getting a breath of fresh air the first thing in the morning, or the last thing at night. But for the whole of the day, there is no disguising it, you must put yourself in the same category with Mrs. Wragge--you must keep your room."

"What is your object in wishing me to do this?" inquired Magdalen.

"My object is twofold," replied the captain. "I blush for my own stupidity; but the fact is, I can't see my way plainly to Mrs. Lecount's next move. All I feel sure of is, that she means to make another attempt at opening her master's eyes to the truth. Whatever means she may employ to discover your identity, personal communication with you must be necessary to the accomplishment of her object. Very good. If I stop that communication, I put an obstacle in her way at starting--or, as we say at cards, I force her hand. Do you see the point?"

Magdalen saw it plainly. The captain went on.

"My second reason for shutting you up," he said, "refers entirely to Mrs. Lecount's master. The growth of love, my dear girl, is, in one respect, unlike all other growths--it flourishes under adverse circumstances. Our first course of action is to make Mr. Noel Vanstone feel the charm of your society. Our next is to drive him distracted by the loss of it. I should have proposed a few more meetings, with a view to furthering this end, but for our present critical position toward Mrs. Lecount. As it is, we must trust to the effect you produced yesterday, and try the experiment of a sudden separation rather sooner than I could have otherwise wished. I shall see Mr. Noel Vanstone, though you don't; and if there is a raw place established anywhere about the region of that gentleman's heart, trust me to hit him on it! You are now in full possession of my views. Take your time to consider, and give me your answer--Yes or no."

"Any change is for the better," said Magdalen "which keeps me out of the company of Mrs. Lecount and her master! Let it be as you wish."

She had hitherto answered faintly and wearily; but she spoke those last words with a heightened tone and a rising color--signs which warned Captain Wragge not to press her further.

"Very good," said the captain. "As usual, we understand each other. I see you are tired; and I won't detain you any longer."

He rose to open the door, stopped half-way to it, and came back again. "Leave me to arrange matters with the servant downstairs," he continued. "You can't absolutely keep your bed, and we must purchase the girl's discretion when she answers the door, without taking her into our confidence, of course. I will make her understand that she is to say you are ill, just as she might say you are not at home, as a way of keeping unwelcome acquaintances out of the house. Allow me to open the door for you--I beg your pardon, you are going into Mrs. Wragge's work-room instead of going to your own."

"I know I am," said Magdalen. "I wish to remove Mrs. Wragge from the miserable room she is in now, and to take her upstairs with me."

"For the evening?"

"For the whole fortnight."

Captain Wragge followed her into the dining-room, and wisely closed the

door before he spoke again.

"Do you seriously mean to inflict my wife's society on yourself for a fortnight?" he asked, in great surprise.

"Your wife is the only innocent creature in this guilty house," she burst out vehemently. "I must and will have her with me!"

"Pray don't agitate yourself," said the captain. "Take Mrs. Wragge, by all means. I don't want her." Having resigned the partner of his existence in those terms, he discreetly returned to the parlor. "The weakness of the sex!" thought the captain, tapping his sagacious head. "Lay a strain on the female intellect, and the female temper gives way directly."

The strain to which the captain alluded was not confined that evening to the female intellect at North Shingles: it extended to the female intellect at Sea View. For nearly two hours Mrs. Lecount sat at her desk writing, correcting, and writing again, before she could produce a letter to Miss Vanstone, the elder, which exactly accomplished the object she wanted to attain. At last the rough draft was completed to her satisfaction; and she made a fair copy of it forthwith, to be posted the next day.

Her letter thus produced was a masterpiece of ingenuity. After the first preliminary sentences, the housekeeper plainly informed Norah of the appearance of the visitor in disguise at Vauxhall Walk; of the conversation which passed at the interview; and of her own suspicion that the person claiming to be Miss Garth was, in all probability, the younger Miss Vanstone herself. Having told the truth thus far, Mrs. Lecount next proceeded to say that her master was in possession of evidence which would justify him in putting the law in force; that he knew the conspiracy with which he was threatened to be then in process of direction against him at Aldborough; and that he only hesitated to protect himself in deference to family considerations, and in the hope that the elder Miss Vanstone might so influence her sister as to render it unnecessary to proceed to extremities.

Under these circumstances (the letter continued) it was plainly necessary that the disguised visitor to Vauxhall Walk should be properly identified; for if Mrs. Lecount's guess proved to be wrong, and if the person turned out to be a stranger, Mr. Noel Vanstone was positively resolved to prosecute in his own defense. Events at Aldborough, on which it was not necessary to dwell, would enable Mrs. Lecount in a few days to gain sight of the suspected person in her own character. But as the housekeeper was entirely unacquainted with the younger Miss Vanstone, it was obviously desirable

that some better informed person should, in this particular, take the matter in hand. If the elder Miss Vanstone happened to be at liberty to come to Aldborough herself, would she kindly write and say so? and Mrs. Lecount would write back again to appoint a day. If, on the other hand, Miss Vanstone was prevented from taking the journey, Mrs. Lecount suggested that her reply should contain the fullest description of her sister's personal appearance--should mention any little peculiarities which might exist in the way of marks on her face or her hands--and should state (in case she had written lately) what the address was in her last letter, and failing that, what the post-mark was on the envelope. With this information to help her, Mrs. Lecount would, in the interest of the misguided young lady herself, accept the responsibility of privately identifying her, and would write back immediately to acquaint the elder Miss Vanstone with the result.

The difficulty of sending this letter to the right address gave Mrs. Lecount very little trouble. Remembering the name of the lawyer who had pleaded the cause of the two sisters in Michael Vanstone's time, she directed her letter to "Miss Vanstone, care of----Pendril, Esquire, London." This she inclosed in a second envelope, addressed to Mr. Noel Vanstone's solicitor, with a line inside, requesting that gentleman to send it at once to the office of Mr. Pendril.

"Now," thought Mrs. Lecount, as she locked the letter up in her desk, preparatory to posting it the next day with her own hand, "now I have got her!"

The next morning the servant from Sea View came, with her master's compliments, to make inquiries after Miss Bygrave's health. Captain Wragge's bulletin was duly announced--Miss Bygrave was so ill as to be confined to her room.

On the reception of this intelligence, Noel Vanstone's anxiety led him to call at North Shingles himself when he went out for his afternoon walk. Miss Bygrave was no better. He inquired if he could see Mr. Bygrave. The worthy captain was prepared to meet this emergency. He thought a little irritating suspense would do Noel Vanstone no harm, and he had carefully charged the servant, in case of necessity, with her answer: "Mr. Bygrave begged to be excused; he was not able to see any one."

On the second day inquiries were made as before, by message in the morning, and by Noel Vanstone himself in the afternoon. The morning answer (relating to Magdalen) was, "a shade better." The afternoon answer (relating to Captain Wragge) was, "Mr. Bygrave has just gone out." That

evening Noel Vanstone's temper was very uncertain, and Mrs. Lecount's patience and tact were sorely tried in the effort to avoid offending him.

On the third morning the report of the suffering young lady was less favorable--"Miss Bygrave was still very poorly, and not able to leave her bed." The servant returning to Sea View with this message, met the postman, and took into the breakfast-room with her two letters addressed to Mrs. Lecount.

The first letter was in a handwriting familiar to the housekeeper. It was from the medical attendant on her invalid brother at Zurich; and it announced that the patient's malady had latterly altered in so marked a manner for the better that there was every hope now of preserving his life.

The address on the second letter was in a strange handwriting. Mrs. Lecount, concluding that it was the answer from Miss Vanstone, waited to read it until breakfast was over, and she could retire to her own room.

She opened the letter, looked at once for the name at the end, and started a little as she read it. The signature was not "Norah Vanstone," but "Harriet Garth."

Miss Garth announced that the elder Miss Vanstone had, a week since, accepted an engagement as governess, subject to the condition of joining the family of her employer at their temporary residence in the south of France, and of returning with them when they came back to England, probably in a month or six weeks' time. During the interval of this necessary absence Miss Vanstone had requested Miss Garth to open all her letters, her main object in making that arrangement being to provide for the speedy answering of any communication which might arrive for her from her sister. Miss Magdalen Vanstone had not written since the middle of July--on which occasion the postmark on the letter showed that it must have been posted in London, in the district of Lambeth--and her elder sister had left England in a state of the most distressing anxiety on her account.

Having completed this explanation, Miss Garth then mentioned that family circumstances prevented her from traveling personally to Aldborough to assist Mrs. Lecount's object, but that she was provided with a substitute; in every way fitter for the purpose, in the person of Mr. Pendril. That gentleman was well acquainted with Miss Magdalen Vanstone, and his professional experience and discretion would render his assistance doubly valuable. He had kindly consented to travel to Aldborough whenever it might be thought necessary. But as his time was very valuable, Miss Garth specially requested that he might not be sent for until Mrs. Lecount was

quite sure of the day on which his services might be required.

While proposing this arrangement, Miss Garth added that she thought it right to furnish her correspondent with a written description of the younger Miss Vanstone as well. An emergency might happen which would allow Mrs. Lecount no time for securing Mr. Pendril's services; and the execution of Mr. Noel Vanstone's intentions toward the unhappy girl who was the object of his forbearance might be fatally delayed by an unforeseen difficulty in establishing her identity. The personal description, transmitted under these circumstances, then followed. It omitted no personal peculiarity by which Magdalen could be recognized, and it included the "two little moles close together on the left side of the neck," which had been formerly mentioned in the printed handbills sent to York.

In conclusion, Miss Garth expressed her fears that Mrs. Lecount's suspicions were only too likely to be proved true. While, however, there was the faintest chance that the conspiracy might turn out to be directed by a stranger, Miss Garth felt bound, in gratitude toward Mr. Noel Vanstone, to assist the legal proceedings which would in that case be instituted. She accordingly appended her own formal denial--which she would personally repeat if necessary--of any identity between herself and the person in disguise who had made use of her name. She was the Miss Garth who had filled the situation of the late Mr. Andrew Vanstone's governess, and she had never in her life been in, or near, the neighborhood of Vauxhall Wall.

With this disclaimer, and with the writer's fervent assurances that she would do all for Magdalen's advantage which her sister might have done if her sister had been in England, the letter concluded. It was signed in full, and was dated with the business-like accuracy in such matters which had always distinguished Miss Garth's character.

This letter placed a formidable weapon in the housekeeper's hands.

It provided a means of establishing Magdalen's identity through the intervention of a lawyer by profession. It contained a personal description minute enough to be used to advantage, if necessary, before Mr. Pendril's appearance. It presented a signed exposure of the false Miss Garth under the hand of the true Miss Garth; and it established the fact that the last letter received by the elder Miss Vanstone from the younger had been posted (and therefore probably written) in the neighborhood of Vauxhall Walk. If any later letter had been received with the Aldborough postmark, the chain of evidence, so far as the question of localities was concerned, might doubtless have been more complete. But as it was, there was testimony

enough (aided as that testimony might be by the fragment of the brown alpaca dress still in Mrs. Lecount's possession) to raise the veil which hung over the conspiracy, and to place Mr. Noel Vanstone face to face with the plain and startling truth.

The one obstacle which now stood in the way of immediate action on the housekeeper's part was the obstacle of Miss Bygrave's present seclusion within the limits of her own room. The question of gaining personal access to her was a question which must be decided before any communication could be opened with Mr. Pendril. Mrs. Lecount put on her bonnet at once, and called at North Shingles to try what discoveries she could make for herself before post-time.

On this occasion Mr. Bygrave was at home, and she was admitted without the least difficulty.

Careful consideration that morning had dec ided Captain Wragge on advancing matters a little nearer to the crisis. The means by which he proposed achieving this result made it necessary for him to see the housekeeper and her master separately, and to set them at variance by producing two totally opposite impressions relating to himself on their minds. Mrs. Lecount's visit, therefore, instead of causing him any embarrassment, was the most welcome occurrence he could have wished for. He received her in the parlor with a marked restraint of manner for which she was quite unprepared. His ingratiating smile was gone, and an impenetrable solemnity of countenance appeared in its stead.

"I have ventured to intrude on you, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, "to express the regret with which both my master and I have heard of Miss Bygrave's illness. Is there no improvement?"

"No, ma'am," replied the captain, as briefly as possible. "My niece is no better."

"I have had some experience, Mr. Bygrave, in nursing. If I could be of any use--"

"Thank you, Mrs. Lecount. There is no necessity for our taking advantage of your kindness."

This plain answer was followed by a moment's silence. The housekeeper felt some little perplexity. What had become of Mr. Bygrave's elaborate courtesy, and Mr. Bygrave's many words? Did he want to offend her? If he did, Mrs.

Lecount then and there determined that he should not gain his object.

"May I inquire the nature of the illness?" she persisted. "It is not connected, I hope, with our excursion to Dunwich?"

"I regret to say, ma'am," replied the captain, "it began with that neuralgic attack in the carriage."

"So! so!" thought Mrs. Lecount. "He doesn't even try to make me think the illness a real one; he throws off the mask at starting.--Is it a nervous illness, sir?" she added, aloud.

The captain answered by a solemn affirmative inclination of the head.

"Then you have two nervous sufferers in the house, Mr. Bygrave?"

"Yes, ma'am--two. My wife and my niece."

"That is rather a strange coincidence of misfortunes."

"It is, ma'am. Very strange."

In spite of Mrs. Lecount's resolution not to be offended, Captain Wragge's exasperating insensibility to every stroke she aimed at him began to ruffle her. She was conscious of some little difficulty in securing her self-possession before she could say anything more.

"Is there no immediate hope," she resumed, "of Miss Bygrave being able to leave her room?"

"None whatever, ma'am."

"You are satisfied, I suppose, with the medical attendance?"

"I have no medical attendance," said the captain, composedly. "I watch the case myself."

The gathering venom in Mrs. Lecount swelled up at that reply, and overflowed at her lips.

"Your smattering of science, sir," she said, with a malicious smile, "includes, I presume, a smattering of medicine as well?"

"It does, ma'am," answered the captain, without the slightest disturbance of face or manner. "I know as much of one as I do of the other."

The tone in which he spoke those words left Mrs. Lecount but one dignified alternative. She rose to terminate the interview. The temptation of the moment proved too much for her, and she could not resist casting the shadow of a threat over Captain Wragge at parting.

"I defer thanking you, sir, for the manner in which you have received me," she said, "until I can pay my debt of obligation to some purpose. In the meantime I am glad to infer, from the absence of a medical attendant in the house, that Miss Bygrave's illness is much less serious than I had supposed it to be when I came here."

"I never contradict a lady, ma'am," rejoined the incorrigible captain. "If it is your pleasure, when we next meet to think my niece quite well, I shall bow resignedly to the expression of your opinion." With those words, he followed the housekeeper into the passage, and politely opened the door for her. "I mark the trick, ma'am!" he said to himself, as he closed it again. "The trump-card in your hand is a sight of my niece, and I'll take care you don't play it!"

He returned to the parlor, and composedly awaited the next event which was likely to happen--a visit from Mrs. Lecount's master. In less than an hour results justified Captain Wragge's anticipations, and Noel Vanstone walked in.

"My dear sir!" cried the captain, cordially seizing his visitor's reluctant hand, "I know what you have come for. Mrs. Lecount has told you of her visit here, and has no doubt declared that my niece's illness is a mere subterfuge. You feel surprised--you feel hurt--you suspect me of trifling with your kind sympathies--in short, you require an explanation. That explanation you shall have. Take a seat. Mr. Vanstone. I am about to throw myself on your sense and judgment as a man of the world. I acknowledge that we are in a false position, sir; and I tell you plainly at the outset--your housekeeper is the cause of it."

For once in his life, Noel Vanstone opened his eyes. "Lecount!" he exclaimed, in the utmost bewilderment.

"The same, sir," replied Captain Wragge. "I am afraid I offended Mrs. Lecount, when she came here this morning, by a want of cordiality in my manner. I am a plain man, and I can't assume what I don't feel. Far be it

from me to breathe a word against your housekeeper's character. She is, no doubt, a most excellent and trustworthy woman, but she has one serious failing common to persons at her time of life who occupy her situation--she is jealous of her influence over her master, although you may not have observed it."

"I beg your pardon," interposed Noel Vanstone; "my observation is remarkably quick. Nothing escapes me."

"In that case, sir," resumed the captain, "you cannot fail to have noticed that Mrs. Lecount has allowed her jealousy to affect her conduct toward my niece?"

Noel Vanstone thought of the domestic passage at arms between Mrs. Lecount and himself when his guests of the evening had left Sea View, and failed to see his way to any direct reply. He expressed the utmost surprise and distress--he thought Lecount had done her best to be agreeable on the drive to Dunwich--he hoped and trusted there was some unfortunate mistake.

"Do you mean to say, sir," pursued the captain, severely, "that you have not noticed the circumstance yourself? As a man of honor and a man of observation, you can't tell me that! Your housekeeper's superficial civility has not hidden your housekeeper's real feeling. My niece has seen it, and so have you, and so have I. My niece, Mr. Vanstone, is a sensitive, high-spirited girl; and she has positively declined to cultivate Mrs. Lecount's society for the future. Don't misunderstand me! To my niece as well as to myself, the attraction of your society, Mr. Vanstone, remains the same. Miss Bygrave simply declines to be an apple of discord (if you will permit the classical allusion) cast into your household. I think she is right so far, and I frankly confess that I have exaggerated a nervous indisposition, from which she is really suffering, into a serious illness--purely and entirely to prevent these two ladies for the present from meeting every day on the Parade, and from carrying unpleasant impressions of each other into your domestic establishment and mine."

"I allow nothing unpleasant in my establishment," remarked Noel Vanstone. "I'm master--you must have noticed that already, Mr. Bygrave--I'm master."

"No doubt of it, my dear sir. But to live morning, noon, and night in the perpetual exercise of your authority is more like the life of a governor of a prison than the life of a master of a household. The wear and tear--consider the wear and tear."

"It strikes you in that light, does it?" said Noel Vanstone, soothed by Captain Wragge's ready recognition of his authority. "I don't know that you're not right. But I must take some steps directly. I won't be made ridiculous--I'll send Lecount away altogether, sooner than be made ridiculous." His color rose, and he folded his little arms fiercely. Captain Wragge's artfully irritating explanation had awakened that dormant suspicion of his housekeeper's influence over him which habitually lay hidden in his mind, and which Mrs. Lecount was now not present to charm back to repose as usual. "What must Miss Bygrave think of me!" he exclaimed, with a sudden outburst of vexation. "I'll send Lecount away. Damme, I'll send Lecount away on the spot!"

"No, no, no!" said the captain, whose interest it was to avoid driving Mrs. Lecount to any desperate extremities. "Why take strong measures when mild measures will do? Mrs. Lecount is an old servant; Mrs. Lecount is attached and useful. She has this little drawback of jealousy--jealousy of her domestic position with her bachelor master. She sees you paying courteous attention to a handsome young lady; she sees that young lady properly sensible of your politeness; and, poor soul, she loses her temper! What is the obvious remedy? Humor her--make a manly concession to the weaker sex. If Mrs. Lecount is with you, the next time we meet on the Parade, walk the other way. If Mrs. Lecount is not with you, give us the pleasure of your company by all means. In short, my dear sir, try the suaviter in modo (as we classical men say) before you commit yourself to the fortiter in re!"

There was one excellent reason why Noel Vanstone should take Captain Wragge's conciliatory advice. An open rupture with Mrs. Lecount--even if he could have summoned the courage to face it--would imply the recognition of her claims to a provision, in acknowledgment of the services she had rendered to his father and to himself. His sordid nature quailed within him at the bare prospect of expressing the emotion of gratitude in a pecuniary form; and, after first consulting appearances by a show of hesitation, he consented to adopt the captain's suggestion, and to humor Mrs. Lecount.

"But I must be considered in this matter," proceeded Noel Vanstone. "My concession to Lecount's weakness must not be misunderstood. Miss Bygrave must not be allowed to suppose I am afraid of my housekeeper."

The captain declared that no such idea ever had entered, or ever could enter, Miss Bygrave's mind. Noel Vanstone returned to the subject nevertheless, again and again, with his customary pertinacity. Would it be indiscreet if he asked leave to set himself right personally with Miss

Bygrave? Was there any hope that he might have the happiness of seeing her on that day? or, if not, on the next day? or if not, on the day after? Captain Wragge answered cautiously: he felt the importance of not rousing Noel Vanstone's distrust by too great an alacrity in complying with his wishes.

"An interview to-day, my dear sir, is out of the question," he said. "She is not well enough; she wants repose. To-morrow I propose taking her out before the heat of the day begins--not merely to avoid embarrassment, after what has happened with Mrs. Lecount, but because the morning air and the morning quiet are essential in these nervous cases. We are early people here--we shall start at seven o'clock. If you are early, too, and if you would like to join us, I need hardly say that we can feel no objection to your company on our morning walk. The hour, I am aware, is an unusual one--but later in the day my niece may be resting on the sofa, and may not be able to see visitors."

Having made this proposal purely for the purpose of enabling Noel Vanstone to escape to North Shingles at an hour in the morning when his housekeeper would be probably in bed, Captain Wragge left him to take the hint, if he could, as indirectly as it had been given. He proved sharp enough (the case being one in which his own interests were concerned) to close with the proposal on the spot. Politely declaring that he was always an early man when the morning presented any special attraction to him, he accepted the appointment for seven o'clock, and rose soon afterward to take his leave.

"One word at parting," said Captain Wragge. "This conversation is entirely between ourselves. Mrs. Lecount must know nothing of the impression she has produced on my niece. I have only mentioned it to you to account for my apparently churlish conduct and to satisfy your own mind. In confidence, Mr. Vanstone--strictly in confidence. Good-morning!"

With these parting words, the captain bowed his visitor out. Unless some unexpected disaster occurred, he now saw his way safely to the end of the enterprise. He had gained two important steps in advance that morning. He had sown the seeds of variance between the housekeeper and her master, and he had given Noel Vanstone a common interest with Magdalen and himself, in keeping a secret from Mrs. Lecount. "We have caught our man," thought Captain Wragge, cheerfully rubbing his hands--"we have caught our man at last!"

On leaving North Shingles Noel Vanstone walked straight home, fully restored to his place in his own estimation, and sternly determined to carry

matters with a high hand if he found himself in collision with Mrs. Lecount.

The housekeeper received her master at the door with her mildest manner and her gentlest smile. She addressed him with downcast eyes; she opposed to his contemplated assertion of independence a barrier of impenetrable respect.

"May I venture to ask, sir," she began, "if your visit to North Shingles has led you to form the same conclusion as mine on the subject of Miss Bygrave's illness?"

"Certainly not, Lecount. I consider your conclusion to have been both hasty and prejudiced."

"I am sorry to hear it, sir. I felt hurt by Mr. Bygrave's rude reception of me, but I was not aware that my judgment was prejudiced by it. Perhaps he received you, sir, with a warmer welcome?"

"He received me like a gentleman--that is all I think it necessary to say, Lecount--he received me like a gentleman."

This answer satisfied Mrs. Lecount on the one doubtful point that had perplexed her. Whatever Mr. Bygrave's sudden coolness toward herself might mean, his polite reception of her master implied that the risk of detection had not daunted him, and that the plot was still in full progress. The housekeeper's eyes brightened; she had expressly calculated on this result. After a moment's thinking, she addressed her master with another question: "You will probably visit Mr. Bygrave again, sir?"

"Of course I shall visit him--if I please."

"And perhaps see Miss Bygrave, if she gets better?"

"Why not? I should be glad to know why not? Is it necessary to ask your leave first, Lecount?"

"By no means, sir. As you have often said (and as I have often agreed with you), you are master. It may surprise you to hear it, Mr. Noel, but I have a private reason for wishing that you should see Miss Bygrave again."

Mr. Noel started a little, and looked at his housekeeper with some curiosity.

"I have a strange fancy of my own, sir, about that young lady," proceeded

Mrs. Lecount. "If you will excuse my fancy, and indulge it, you will do me a favor for which I shall be very grateful."

"A fancy?" repeated her master, in growing surprise. "What fancy?"

"Only this, sir," said Mrs. Lecount.

She took from one of the neat little pockets of her apron a morsel of note-paper, carefully folded into the smallest possible compass, and respectfully placed it in Noel Vanstone's hands.

"If you are willing to oblige an old and faithful servant, Mr. Noel," she said, in a very quiet and very impressive manner, "you will kindly put that morsel of paper into your waistcoat pocket; you will open and read it, for the first time, when you are next in Miss Bygrave's company, and you will say nothing of what has now passed between us to any living creature, from this time to that. I promise to explain my strange request, sir, when you have done what I ask, and when your next interview with Miss Bygrave has come to an end."

She courtesied with her best grace, and quietly left the room.

Noel Vanstone looked from the folded paper to the door, and from the door back to the folded paper, in unutterable astonishment. A mystery in his own house! under his own nose! What did it mean?

It meant that Mrs. Lecount had not wasted her time that morning. While the captain was casting the net over his visitor at North Shingles, the housekeeper was steadily mining the ground under his feet. The folded paper contained nothing less than a carefully written extract from the personal description of Magdalen in Miss Garth's letter. With a daring ingenuity which even Captain Wragge might have envied, Mrs. Lecount had found her instrument for exposing the conspiracy in the unsuspecting person of the victim himself!

CHAPTER VII.

LATE that evening, when Magdalen and Mrs. Wragge came back from their walk in the dark, the captain stopped Magdalen on her way upstairs to inform her of the proceedings of the day. He added the expression of his opinion that the time had come for bringing Noel Vanstone, with the least possible delay, to the point of making a proposal. She merely answered that she understood him, and that she would do what was required of her. Captain Wragge requested her in that case to oblige him by joining a walking excursion in Mr. Noel Vanstone's company at seven o'clock the next morning. "I will be ready," she replied. "Is there anything more?" There was nothing more. Magdalen bade him good-night and returned to her own room.

She had shown the same disinclination to remain any longer than was necessary in the captain's company throughout the three days of her seclusion in the house.

During all that time, instead of appearing to weary of Mrs. Wragge's society, she had patiently, almost eagerly, associated herself with her companion's one absorbing pursuit. She who had often chafed and fretted in past days under the monotony of her life in the freedom of Combe-Raven, now accepted without a murmur the monotony of her life at Mrs. Wragge's work-table. She who had hated the sight of her needle and thread in old times--who had never yet worn an article of dress of her own making--now toiled as anxiously over the making of Mrs. Wragge's gown, and bore as patiently with Mrs. Wragge's blunders, as if the sole object of her existence had been the successful completion of that one dress. Anything was welcome to her--the trivial difficulties of fitting a gown: the small, ceaseless chatter of the poor half-witted creature who was so proud of her assistance, and so happy in her company--anything was welcome that shut her out from the coming future, from the destiny to which she stood self-condemned. That sorely-wounded nature was soothed by such a trifle now as the grasp of her companion's rough and friendly hand--that desolate heart was cheered, when night parted them, by Mrs. Wragge's kiss.

The captain's isolated position in the house produced no depressing effect on the captain's easy and equal spirits. Instead of resenting Magdalen's systematic avoidance of his society, he looked to results, and highly approved of it. The more she neglected him for his wife the more directly useful she became in the character of Mrs. Wragge's self-appointed guardian. He had more than once seriously contemplated revoking the concession which had been extorted from him, and removing his wife, at his

own sole responsibility, out of harm's way; and he had only abandoned the idea on discovering that Magdalen's resolution to keep Mrs. Wragge in her own company was really serious. While the two were together, his main anxiety was set at rest. They kept their door locked by his own desire while he was out of the house, and, whatever Mrs. Wragge might do, Magdalen was to be trusted not to open it until he came back. That night Captain Wragge enjoyed his cigar with a mind at ease, and sipped his brandy-and-water in happy ignorance of the pitfall which Mrs. Lecount had prepared for him in the morning.

Punctually at seven o'clock Noel Vanstone made his appearance. The moment he entered the room Captain Wragge detected a change in his visitor's look and manner. "Something wrong!" thought the captain. "We have not done with Mrs. Lecount yet."

"How is Miss Bygrave this morning?" asked Noel Vanstone. "Well enough, I hope, for our early walk?" His half-closed eyes, weak and watery with the morning light and the morning air, looked about the room furtively, and he shifted his place in a restless manner from one chair to another, as he made those polite inquiries.

"My niece is better--she is dressing for the walk," replied the captain, steadily observing his restless little friend while he spoke. "Mr. Vanstone!" he added, on a sudden, "I am a plain Englishman--excuse my blunt way of speaking my mind. You don't meet me this morning as cordially as you met me yesterday. There is something unsettled in your face. I distrust that housekeeper of yours, sir! Has she been presuming on your forbearance? Has she been trying to poison your mind against me or my niece?"

If Noel Vanstone had obeyed Mrs. Lecount's injunctions, and had kept her little morsel of note-paper folded in his pocket until the time came to use it, Captain Wragge's designedly blunt appeal might not have found him unprepared with an answer. But curiosity had got the better of him; he had opened the note at night, and again in the morning; it had seriously perplexed and startled him; and it had left his mind far too disturbed to allow him the possession of his ordinary resources. He hesitated; and his answer, when he succeeded in making it, began with a prevarication.

Captain Wragge stopped him before he had got beyond his first sentence.

"Pardon me, sir," said the captain, in his loftiest manner. "If you have secrets to keep, you have only to say so, and I have done. I intrude on no man's secrets. At the same time, Mr. Vanstone, you must allow me to recall

to your memory that I met you yesterday without any reserves on my side. I admitted you to my frankest and fullest confidence, sir--and, highly as I prize the advantages of your society, I can't consent to cultivate your friendship on any other than equal terms." He threw open his respectable frock-coat and surveyed his visitor with a manly and virtuous severity.

"I mean no offense!" cried Noel Vanstone, piteously. "Why do you interrupt me, Mr. Bygrave? Why don't you let me explain? I mean no offense."

"No offense is taken, sir," said the captain. "You have a perfect right to the exercise of your own discretion. I am not offended--I only claim for myself the same privilege which I accord to you." He rose with great dignity and rang the bell. "Tell Miss Bygrave," he said to the servant, "that our walk this morning is put off until another opportunity, and that I won't trouble her to come downstairs."

This strong proceeding had the desired effect. Noel Vanstone vehemently pleaded for a moment's private conversation before the message was delivered. Captain Wragge's severity partially relaxed. He sent the servant downstairs again, and, resuming his chair, waited confidently for results. In calculating the facilities for practicing on his visitor's weakness, he had one great superiority over Mrs. Lecount. His judgment was not warped by latent female jealousies, and he avoided the error into which the housekeeper had fallen, self-deluded--the error of underrating the impression on Noel Vanstone that Magdalen had produced. One of the forces in this world which no middle-aged woman is capable of estimating at its full value, when it acts against her, is the force of beauty in a woman younger than herself.

"You are so hasty, Mr. Bygrave--you won't give me time--you won't wait and hear what I have to say!" cried Noel Vanstone, piteously, when the servant had closed the parlor door.

"My family failing, sir--the blood of the Bygraves. Accept my excuses. We are alone, as you wished; pray proceed."

Placed between the alternatives of losing Magdalen's society or betraying Mrs. Lecount, unenlightened by any suspicion of the housekeeper's ultimate object, cowed by the immovable scrutiny of Captain Wragge's inquiring eye, Noel Vanstone was not long in making his choice. He confusedly described his singular interview of the previous evening with Mrs. Lecount, and, taking the folded paper from his pocket, placed it in the captain's hand.

A suspicion of the truth dawned on Captain Wragge's mind the moment he

saw the mysterious note. He withdrew to the window before he opened it. The first lines that attracted his attention were these: "Oblige me, Mr. Noel, by comparing the young lady who is now in your company with the personal description which follows these lines, and which has been communicated to me by a friend. You shall know the name of the person described--which I have left a blank--as soon as the evidence of your own eyes has forced you to believe what you would refuse to credit on the unsupported testimony of Virginie Lecount."

That was enough for the captain. Before he had read a word of the description itself, he knew what Mrs. Lecount had done, and felt, with a profound sense of humiliation, that his female enemy had taken him by surprise.

There was no time to think; the whole enterprise was threatened with irrevocable overthrow. The one resource in Captain Wragge's present situation was to act instantly on the first impulse of his own audacity. Line by line he read on, and still the ready inventiveness which had never deserted him yet failed to answer the call made on it now. He came to the closing sentence--to the last words which mentioned the two little moles on Magdalen's neck. At that crowning point of the description, an idea crossed his mind; his party-colored eyes twinkled; his curly lips twisted up at the corners; Wragge was himself again. He wheeled round suddenly from the window, and looked Noel Vanstone straight in the face with a grimly-quiet suggestiveness of something serious to come.

"Pray, sir, do you happen to know anything of Mrs. Lecount's family?" he inquired.

"A respectable family," said Noel Vanstone--"that's all I know. Why do you ask?"

"I am not usually a betting man," pursued Captain Wragge. "But on this occasion I will lay you any wager you like there is madness in your housekeeper's family."

"Madness!" repeated Noel Vanstone, amazedly

"Madness!" reiterated the captain, sternly tapping the note with his forefinger. "I see the cunning of insanity, the suspicion of insanity, the feline treachery of insanity in every line of this deplorable document. There is a far more alarming reason, sir, than I had supposed for Mrs. Lecount's behavior to my niece. It is clear to me that Miss Bygrave resembles some other lady

who has seriously offended your housekeeper--who has been formerly connected, perhaps, with an outbreak of insanity in your housekeeper--and who is now evidently confused with my niece in your housekeeper's wandering mind. That is my conviction, Mr. Vanstone. I may be right, or I may be wrong. All I say is this--neither you, nor any man, can assign a sane motive for the production of that incomprehensible document, and for the use which you are requested to make of it."

"I don't think Lecount's mad," said Noel Vanstone, with a very blank look, and a very discomposed manner. "It couldn't have escaped me, with my habits of observation; it couldn't possibly have escaped me if Lecount had been mad."

"Very good, my dear sir. In my opinion, she is the subject of an insane delusion. In your opinion, she is in possession of her senses, and has some mysterious motive which neither you nor I can fathom. Either way, there can be no harm in putting Mrs. Lecount's description to the test, not only as a matter of curiosity, but for our own private satisfaction on both sides. It is of course impossible to tell my niece that she is to be made the subject of such a preposterous experiment as that note of yours suggests. But you can use your own eyes, Mr. Vanstone; you can keep your own counsel; and--mad or not--you can at least tell your housekeeper, on the testimony of your own senses, that she is wrong. Let me look at the description again. The greater part of it is not worth two straws for any purpose of identification; hundreds of young ladies have tall figures, fair complexions, light brown hair, and light gray eyes. You will say, on the other hand, hundreds of young ladies have not got two little moles close together on the left side of the neck. Quite true. The moles supply us with what we scientific men call a Crucial Test. When my niece comes downstairs, sir, you have my full permission to take the liberty of looking at her neck."

Noel Vanstone expressed his high approval of the Crucial Test by smirking and simpering for the first time that morning.

"Of looking at her neck," repeated the captain, returning the note to his visitor, and then making for the door. "I will go upstairs myself, Mr. Vanstone," he continued, "and inspect Miss Bygrave's walking-dress. If she has innocently placed any obstacles in your way, if her hair is a little too low, or her frill is a little too high, I will exert my authority, on the first harmless pretext I can think of, to have those obstacles removed. All I ask is, that you will choose your opportunity discreetly, and that you will not allow my niece to suppose that her neck is the object of a gentleman's inspection."

The moment he was out of the parlor Captain Wragge ascended the stairs at the top of his speed and knocked at Magdalen's door. She opened it to him in her walking-dress, obedient to the signal agreed on between them which summoned her downstairs.

"What have you done with your paints and powders?" asked the captain, without wasting a word in preliminary explanations. "They were not in the box of costumes which I sold for you at Birmingham. Where are they?"

"I have got them here," replied Magdalen. "What can you possibly mean by wanting them now?"

"Bring them instantly into my dressing-room--the whole collection, brushes, palette, and everything. Don't waste time in asking questions; I'll tell you what has happened as we go on. Every moment is precious to us. Follow me instantly!"

His face plainly showed that there was a serious reason for his strange proposal. Magdalen secured her collection of cosmetics and followed him into the dressing-room. He locked the door, placed her on a chair close to the light, and then told her what had happened.

"We are on the brink of detection," proceeded the captain, carefully mixing his colors with liquid glue, and with a strong "drier" added from a bottle in his own possession. "There is only one chance for us (lift up your hair from the left side of your neck)--I have told Mr. Noel Vanstone to take a private opportunity of looking at you; and I am going to give the lie direct to that she-devil Lecount by painting out your moles."

"They can't be painted out," said Magdalen. "No color will stop on them."

"My color will," remarked Captain Wragge. "I have tried a variety of professions in my time--the profession of painting among the rest. Did you ever hear of such a thing as a Black Eye? I lived some months once in the neighborhood of Drury Lane entirely on Black Eyes. My flesh-color stood on bruises of all sorts, shades, and sizes, and it will stand, I promise you, on your moles."

With this assurance, the captain dipped his brush into a little lump of opaque color which he had mixed in a saucer, and which he had graduated as nearly as the materials would permit to the color of Magdalen's skin. After first passing a cambric handkerchief, with some white powder on it, over the part of her neck on which he designed to operate, he placed two

layers of color on the moles with the tip of the brush. The process was performed in a few moments, and the moles, as if by magic, disappeared from view. Nothing but the closest inspection could have discovered the artifice by which they had been concealed; at the distance of two or three feet only, it was perfectly invisible.

"Wait here five minutes," said Captain Wragge, "to let the paint dry--and then join us in the parlor. Mrs. Lecount herself would be puzzled if she looked at you now."

"Stop!" said Magdalen. "There is one thing you have not told me yet. How did Mrs. Lecount get the description which you read downstairs? Whatever else she has seen of me, she has not seen the mark on my neck--it is too far back, and too high up; my hair hides it."

"Who knows of the mark?" asked Captain Wragge.

She turned deadly pale under the anguish of a sudden recollection of Frank.

"My sister knows it," s he said, faintly.

"Mrs. Lecount may have written to your sister," suggested the captain:

"Do you think my sister would tell a stranger what no stranger has a right to know? Never! never!"

"Is there nobody else who could tell Mrs. Lecount? The mark was mentioned in the handbills at York. Who put it there?"

"Not Norah! Perhaps Mr. Pendril. Perhaps Miss Garth."

"Then Mrs. Lecount has written to Mr. Pendril or Miss Garth--more likely to Miss Garth. The governess would be easier to deal with than the lawyer."

"What can she have said to Miss Garth?"

Captain Wragge considered a little.

"I can't say what Mrs. Lecount may have written," he said, "but I can tell you what I should have written in Mrs. Lecount's place. I should have frightened Miss Garth by false reports about you, to begin with, and then I should have asked for personal particulars, to help a benevolent stranger in restoring you to your friends." The angry glitter flashed up instantly in Magdalen's

eyes.

"What you would have done is what Mrs. Lecount has done," she said, indignantly. "Neither lawyer nor governess shall dispute my right to my own will and my own way. If Miss Garth thinks she can control my actions by corresponding with Mrs. Lecount, I will show Miss Garth she is mistaken! It is high time, Captain Wragge, to have done with these wretched risks of discovery. We will take the short way to the end we have in view sooner than Mrs. Lecount or Miss Garth think for. How long can you give me to wring an offer of marriage out of that creature downstairs?"

"I dare not give you long," replied Captain Wragge. "Now your friends know where you are, they may come down on us at a day's notice. Could you manage it in a week?"

"I'll manage it in half the time," she said, with a hard, defiant laugh. "Leave us together this morning as you left us at Dunwich, and take Mrs. Wragge with you, as an excuse for parting company. Is the paint dry yet? Go downstairs and tell him I am coming directly."

So, for the second time, Miss Garth's well-meant efforts defeated their own end. So the fatal force of circumstance turned the hand that would fain have held Magdalen back into the hand that drove her on.

The captain returned to his visitor in the parlor, after first stopping on his way to issue his orders for the walking excursion to Mrs. Wragge.

"I am shocked to have kept you waiting," he said, sitting down again confidentially by Noel Vanstone's side. "My only excuse is, that my niece had accidentally dressed her hair so as to defeat our object. I have been persuading her to alter it, and young ladies are apt to be a little obstinate on questions relating to their toilet. Give her a chair on that side of you when she comes in, and take your look at her neck comfortably before we start for our walk."

Magdalen entered the room as he said those words, and after the first greetings were exchanged, took the chair presented to her with the most unsuspicious readiness. Noel Vanstone applied the Crucial Test on the spot, with the highest appreciation of the fair material which was the subject of experiment. Not the vestige of a mole was visible on any part of the smooth white surface of Miss Bygrave's neck. It mutely answered the blinking inquiry of Noel Vanstone's half-closed eyes by the flattest practical contradiction of Mrs. Lecount. That one central incident in the events of the

morning was of all the incidents that had hitherto occurred, the most important in its results. That one discovery shook the housekeeper's hold on her master as nothing had shaken it yet.

In a few minutes Mrs. Wragge made her appearance, and excited as much surprise in Noel Vanstone's mind as he was capable of feeling while absorbed in the enjoyment of Magdalen's society. The walking-party left the house at once, directing their steps northward, so as not to pass the windows of Sea-view Cottage. To Mrs. Wragge's unutterable astonishment, her husband, for the first time in the course of their married life, politely offered her his arm, and led her on in advance of the young people, as if the privilege of walking alone with her presented some special attraction to him! "Step out!" whispered the captain, fiercely. "Leave your niece and Mr. Vanstone alone! If I catch you looking back at them, I'll put the Oriental Cashmere Robe on the top of the kitchen fire! Turn your toes out, and keep step--confound you, keep step!" Mrs. Wragge kept step to the best of her limited ability. Her sturdy knees trembled under her. She firmly believed the captain was intoxicated.

The walk lasted for rather more than an hour. Before nine o'clock they were all back again at North Shingles. The ladies went at once into the house. Noel Vanstone remained with Captain Wragge in the garden. "Well," said the captain, "what do you think now of Mrs. Lecount?"

"Damn Lecount!" replied Noel Vanstone, in great agitation. "I'm half inclined to agree with you. I'm half inclined to think my infernal housekeeper is mad."

He spoke fretfully and unwillingly, as if the merest allusion to Mrs. Lecount was distasteful to him. His color came and went; his manner was absent and undecided; he fidgeted restlessly about the garden walk. It would have been plain to a far less acute observation than Captain Wragge's, that Magdalen had met his advances by an unexpected grace and readiness of encouragement which had entirely overthrown his self-control.

"I never enjoyed a walk so much in my life!" he exclaimed, with a sudden outburst of enthusiasm. "I hope Miss Bygrave feels all the better, for it. Do you go out at the same time to-morrow morning? May I join you again?"

"By all means, Mr. Vanstone," said the Captain, cordially. "Excuse me for returning to the subject--but what do you propose saying to Mrs. Lecount?"

"I don't know. Lecount is a perfect nuisance! What would you do, Mr.

Bygrave, if you were in my place?"

"Allow me to ask a question, my dear sir, before I tell you. What is your breakfast-hour?"

"Half-past nine."

"Is Mrs. Lecount an early riser?"

"No. Lecount is lazy in the morning. I hate lazy women! If you were in my place, what should you say to her?"

"I should say nothing," replied Captain Wragge. "I should return at once by the back way; I should let Mrs. Lecount see me in the front garden as if I was taking a turn before breakfast; and I should leave her to suppose that I was only just out of my room. If she asks you whether you mean to come here today, say No. Secure a quiet life until circumstances force you to give her an answer. Then tell the plain truth--say that Mr. Bygrave's niece and Mrs. Lecount's description are at variance with each other in the most important particular, and beg that the subject may not be mentioned again. There is my advice. What do you think of it?"

If Noel Vanstone could have looked into his counselor's mind, he might have thought the captain's advice excellently adapted to serve the captain's interests. As long as Mrs. Lecount could be kept in ignorance of her master's visits to North Shingles, so long she would wait until the opportunity came for trying her experiment, and so long she might be trusted not to endanger the conspiracy by any further proceedings. Necessarily incapable of viewing Captain Wragge's advice under this aspect, Noel Vanstone simply looked at it as offering him a temporary means of escape from an explanation with his housekeeper. He eagerly declared that the course of action suggested to him should be followed to the letter, and returned to Sea View without further delay.

On this occasion Captain Wragge's anticipations were in no respect falsified by Mrs. Lecount's conduct. She had no suspicion of her master's visit to North Shingles: she had made up her mind, if necessary, to wait patiently for his interview with Miss Bygrave until the end of the week; and she did not embarrass him by any unexpected questions when he announced his intention of holding no personal communication with the Bygraves on that day. All she said was, "Don't you feel well enough, Mr. Noel? or don't you feel inclined?" He answered, shortly, "I don't feel well enough"; and there the conversation ended.

The next day the proceedings of the previous morning were exactly repeated. This time Noel Vanstone went home rapturously with a keepsake in his breast-pocket; he had taken tender possession of one of Miss Bygrave's gloves. At intervals during the day, whenever he was alone, he took out the glove and kissed it with a devotion which was almost passionate in its fervor. The miserable little creature luxuriated in his moments of stolen happiness with a speechless and stealthy delight which was a new sensation to him. The few young girls whom he had met with, in his father's narrow circle at Zurich, had felt a mischievous pleasure in treating him like a quaint little plaything; the strongest impression he could make on their hearts was an impression in which their lap-dogs might have rivaled him; the deepest interest he could create in them was the interest they might have felt in a new trinket or a new dress. The only women who had hitherto invited his admiration, and taken his compliments seriously had been women whose charms were on the wane, and whose chances of marriage were fast failing them. For the first time in his life he had now passed hours of happiness in the society of a beautiful girl, who had left him to think of her afterward without a single humiliating remembrance to lower him in his own esteem.

Anxiously as he tried to hide it, the change produced in his look and manner by the new feeling awakened in him was not a change which could be concealed from Mrs. Lecount. On the second day she pointedly asked him whether he had not made an arrangement to call on the Bygraves. He denied it as before. "Perhaps you are going to-morrow, Mr. Noel?" persisted the housekeeper. He was at the end of his resources; he was impatient to be rid of her inquiries; he trusted to his friend at North Shingles to help him; and this time he answered Yes. "If you see the young lady," proceeded Mrs. Lecount, "don't forget that note of mine, sir, which you have in your waistcoat-pocket." No more was said on either side, but by that night's post the housekeeper wrote to Miss Garth. The letter merely acknowledged, with thanks, the receipt of Miss Garth's communication, and informed her that in a few days Mrs. Lecount hoped to be in a position to write again and summon Mr. Pendril to Aldborough.

Late in the evening, when the parlor at North Shingles began to get dark, and when the captain rang the bell for candles as usual, he was surprised by hearing Magdalen's voice in the passage telling the servant to take the lights downstairs again. She knocked at the door immediately afterward, and glided into the obscurity of the room like a ghost.

"I have a question to ask you about your plans for to-morrow," she said. "My

eyes are very weak this evening, and I hope you will not object to dispense with the candles for a few minutes."

She spoke in low, stifled tones, and felt her way noiselessly to a chair far removed from the captain in the darkest part of the room. Sitting near the window, he could just discern the dim outline of her dress, he could just hear the faint accents of her voice. For the last two days he had seen nothing of her except during their morning walk. On that afternoon he had found his wife crying in the little backroom down-stairs. She could only tell him that Magdalen had frightened her--that Magdalen was going the way again which she had gone when the letter came from China in the terrible past time at Vauxhall Walk.

"I was sorry to her that you were ill to-day, from Mrs. Wragge," said the captain, unconsciously dropping his voice almost to a whisper as he spoke.

"It doesn't matter," she answered quietly, out of the darkness. "I am strong enough to suffer, and live. Other girls in my place would have been happier--they would have suffered, and died. It doesn't matter; it will be all the same a hundred years hence. Is he coming again tomorrow morning at seven o'clock?"

"He is coming, if you feel no objection to it."

"I have no objection to make; I have done with objecting. But I should like to have the time altered. I don't look my best in the early morning---I have bad nights, and I rise haggard and worn. Write him a note this evening, and tell him to come at twelve o'clock."

"Twelve is rather late, under the circumstances, for you to be seen out walking."

"I have no intention of walking. Let him be shown into the parlor--"

Her voice died away in silence before she ended the sentence.

"Yes?" said Captain Wragge.

"And leave me alone in the parlor to receive him."

"I understand," said the captain. "An admirable idea. I'll be out of the way in the dining-room while he is here, and you can come and tell me about it when he has gone."

There was another moment of silence.

"Is there no way but telling you?" she asked, suddenly. "I can control myself while he is with me, but I can't answer for what I may say or do afterward. Is there no other way?"

"Plenty of ways," said the captain. "Here is the first that occurs to me. Leave the blind down over the window of your room upstairs before he comes. I will go out on the beach, and wait there within sight of the house. When I see him come out again, I will look at the window. If he has said nothing, leave the blind down. If he has made you an offer, draw the blind up. The signal is simplicity itself; we can't misunderstand each other. Look your best to-morrow! Make sure of him, my dear girl--make sure of him, if you possibly can."

He had spoken loud enough to feel certain that she had heard him, but no answering word came from her. The dead silence was only disturbed by the rustling of her dress, which told him she had risen from her chair. Her shadowy presence crossed the room again; the door shut softly; she was gone. He rang the bell hurriedly for the lights. The servant found him standing close at the window, looking less self-possessed than usual. He told her he felt a little poorly, and sent her to the cupboard for the brandy.

At a few minutes before twelve the next day Captain Wragge withdrew to his post of observation, concealing himself behind a fishing-boat drawn up on the beach. Punctually as the hour struck, he saw Noel Vanstone approach North Shingles and open the garden gate. When the house door had closed on the visitor, Captain Wragge settled himself comfortably against the side of the boat and lit his cigar.

He smoked for half an hour--for ten minutes over the half-hour, by his watch. He finished the cigar down to the last morsel of it that he could hold in his lips. Just as he had thrown away the end, the door opened again and Noel Vanstone came out.

The captain looked up instantly at Magdalen's window. In the absorbing excitement of the moment, he counted the seconds. She might get from the parlor to her own room in less than a minute. He counted to thirty, and nothing happened. He counted to fifty, and nothing happened. He gave up counting, and left the boat impatiently, to return to the house.

As he took his first step forward he saw the signal.

The blind was drawn up.

Cautiously ascending the eminence of the beach, Captain Wragge looked toward Sea-view Cottage before he showed himself on the Parade. Noel Vanstone had reached home again; he was just entering his own door.

"If all your money was offered me to stand in your shoes," said the captain, looking after him--"rich as you are, I wouldn't take it!"

CHAPTER VIII.

ON returning to the house, Captain Wragge received a significant message from the servant. "Mr. Noel Vanstone would call again at two o'clock that afternoon, when he hoped to have the pleasure of finding Mr. Bygrave at home."

The captain's first inquiry after hearing this message referred to Magdalen. "Where was Miss Bygrave?" "In her own room." "Where was Mrs. Bygrave?" "In the back parlor." Captain Wragge turned his steps at once in the latter direction, and found his wife, for the second time, in tears. She had been sent out of Magdalen's room for the whole day, and she was at her wits' end to know what she had done to deserve it. Shortening her lamentations without ceremony, her husband sent her upstairs on t he spot, with instructions to knock at the door, and to inquire whether Magdalen could give five minutes' attention to a question of importance which must be settled before two o'clock.

The answer returned was in the negative. Magdalen requested that the subject on which she was asked to decide might be mentioned to her in writing. She engaged to reply in the same way, on the understanding that Mrs. Wragge, and not the servant, should be employed to deliver the note and to take back the answer.

Captain Wragge forthwith opened his paper-case and wrote these lines: "Accept my warmest congratulations on the result of your interview with Mr. N. V. He is coming again at two o'clock--no doubt to make his proposals in due form. The question to decide is, whether I shall press him or not on the subject of settlements. The considerations for your own mind are two in number. First, whether the said pressure (without at all underrating your influence over him) may not squeeze for a long time before it squeezes money out of Mr. N. V. Secondly, whether we are altogether justified--considering our present position toward a certain sharp practitioner in petticoats--in running the risk of delay. Consider these points, and let me have your decision as soon as convenient."

The answer returned to this note was written in crooked, blotted characters, strangely unlike Magdalen's usually firm and clear handwriting. It only contained these words: "Give yourself no trouble about settlements. Leave the use to which he is to put his money for the future in my hands."

"Did you see her?" asked the captain, when his wife had delivered the answer.

"I tried," said Mrs. Wragge, with a fresh burst of tears--"but she only opened the door far enough to put out her hand. I took and gave it a little squeeze--and, oh poor soul, it felt so cold in mine!"

When Mrs. Lecount's master made his appearance at two o'clock, he stood alarmingly in need of an anodyne application from Mrs. Lecount's green fan. The agitation of making his avowal to Magdalen; the terror of finding himself discovered by the housekeeper; the tormenting suspicion of the hard pecuniary conditions which Magdalen's relative and guardian might impose on him--all these emotions, stirring in conflict together, had overpowered his feebly-working heart with a trial that strained it sorely. He gasped for breath as he sat down in the parlor at North Shingles, and that ominous bluish pallor which always overspread his face in moments of agitation now made its warning appearance again. Captain Wragge seized the brandy bottle in genuine alarm, and forced his visitor to drink a wine-glassful of the spirit before a word was said between them on either side.

Restored by the stimulant, and encouraged by the readiness with which the captain anticipated everything that he had to say, Noel Vanstone contrived to state the serious object of his visit in tolerably plain terms. All the conventional preliminaries proper to the occasion were easily disposed of. The suitor's family was respectable; his position in life was undeniably satisfactory; his attachment, though hasty, was evidently disinterested and sincere. All that Captain Wragge had to do was to refer to these various considerations with a happy choice of language in a voice that trembled with manly emotion, and this he did to perfection. For the first half-hour of the interview, no allusion whatever was made to the delicate and dangerous part of the subject. The captain waited until he had composed his visitor, and when that result was achieved came smoothly to the point in these terms:

"There is one little difficulty, Mr. Vanstone, which I think we have both overlooked. Your housekeeper's recent conduct inclines me to fear that she will view the approaching change in your life with anything but a friendly eye. Probably you have not thought it necessary yet to inform her of the new tie which you propose to form?"

Noel Vanstone turned pale at the bare idea of explaining himself to Mrs. Lecount.

"I can't tell what I'm to do," he said, glancing aside nervously at the window,

as if he expected to see the housekeeper peeping in. "I hate all awkward positions, and this is the most unpleasant position I ever was placed in. You don't know what a terrible woman Lecount is. I'm not afraid of her; pray don't suppose I'm afraid of her--"

At those words his fears rose in his throat, and gave him the lie direct by stopping his utterance.

"Pray don't trouble yourself to explain," said Captain Wragge, coming to the rescue. "This is the common story, Mr. Vanstone. Here is a woman who has grown old in your service, and in your father's service before you; a woman who has contrived, in all sorts of small, underhand ways, to presume systematically on her position for years and years past; a woman, in short, whom your inconsiderate but perfectly natural kindness has allowed to claim a right of property in you--"

"Property!" cried Noel Vanstone, mistaking the captain, and letting the truth escape him through sheer inability to conceal his fears any longer. "I don't know what amount of property she won't claim. She'll make me pay for my father as well as for myself. Thousands, Mr. Bygrave--thousands of pounds sterling out of my pocket!!!" He clasped his hands in despair at the picture of pecuniary compulsion which his fancy had conjured up--his own golden life-blood spouting from him in great jets of prodigality, under the lancet of Mrs. Lecount.

"Gently, Mr. Vanstone--gently! The woman knows nothing so far, and the money is not gone yet."

"No, no; the money is not gone, as you say. I'm only nervous about it; I can't help being nervous. You were saying something just now; you were going to give me advice. I value your advice; you don't know how highly I value your advice." He said those words with a conciliatory smile which was more than helpless; it was absolutely servile in its dependence on his judicious friend.

"I was only assuring you, my dear sir, that I understood your position," said the captain. "I see your difficulty as plainly as you can see it yourself. Tell a woman like Mrs. Lecount that she must come off her domestic throne, to make way for a young and beautiful successor, armed with the authority of a wife, and an unpleasant scene must be the inevitable result. An unpleasant scene, Mr. Vanstone, if your opinion of your housekeeper's sanity is well founded. Something far more serious, if my opinion that her intellect is unsettled happens to turn out the right one."

"I don't say it isn't my opinion, too," rejoined Noel Vanstone. "Especially after what has happened to-day."

Captain Wragge immediately begged to know what the event alluded to might be.

Noel Vanstone thereupon explained--with an infinite number of parentheses all referring to himself--that Mrs. Lecount had put the dreaded question relating to the little note in her master's pocket barely an hour since. He had answered her inquiry as Mr. Bygrave had advised him. On hearing that the accuracy of the personal description had been fairly put to the test, and had failed in the one important particular of the moles on the neck, Mrs. Lecount had considered a little, and had then asked him whether he had shown her note to Mr. Bygrave before the experiment was tried. He had answered in the negative, as the only safe form of reply that he could think of on the spur of the moment, and the housekeeper had then addressed him in these strange and startling words: "You are keeping the truth from me, Mr. Noel. You are trusting strangers, and doubting your old servant and your old friend. Every time you go to Mr. Bygrave's house, every time you see Miss Bygrave, you are drawing nearer and nearer to your destruction. They have got the bandage over your eyes in spite of me; but I tell them, and tell you, before many days are over I will take it off!" To this extraordinary outbreak--accompanied as it was by an expression in Mrs. Lecount's face which he had never seen there before--Noel Vanstone had made no reply. Mr. Bygrave's conviction that there was a lurking taint of insanity in the housekeeper's blood had recurred to his memory, and he had left the room at the first opportunity.

Captain Wragge listened with the closest attention to the narrative thus presented to him. But one conclusion could be drawn from it--it was a plain warning to him to hasten the end.

"I am not surprised," he said, gravely, "to hear that you are inclining more favorably to my opinion. After what you have just told me, Mr. Vanstone, no sensible man could do otherwise. This is becoming serious. I hardly know what results may not be expected to follow the communication of your approaching change in life to Mrs. Lecount. My niece may be involved in those results. She is nervous; she is sensitive in the highest degree; she is the innocent object of this woman's unreasoning hatred and distrust. You alarm me, sir! I am not easily thrown off my balance, but I acknowledge you alarm me for the future." He frowned, shook his head, and looked at his visitor despondently.

Noel Vanstone began to feel uneasy. The change in Mr. Bygrave's manner seemed ominous of a reconsideration of his proposals from a new and unfavorable point of view. He took counsel of his inborn cowardice and his inborn cunning, and proposed a solution of the difficulty discovered by himself.

"Why should we tell Lecount at all?" he asked. "What right has Lecount to know? Can't we be married without letting her into the secret? And can't somebody tell her afterward when we are both out of her reach?"

Captain Wragge received this proposal with an expression of surprise which did infinite credit to his power of control over his own countenance. His foremost object throughout the interview had been to conduct it to this point, or, in other words, to make the first idea of keeping the marriage a secret from Mrs. Lecount emanate from Noel Vanstone instead of from himself. No one knew better than the captain that the only responsibilities which a weak man ever accepts are responsibilities which can be perpetually pointed out to him as resting exclusively on his own shoulders.

"I am accustomed to set my face against clandestine proceedings of all kinds," said Captain Wragge. "But there are exceptions to the strictest rules; and I am bound to admit, Mr. Vanstone, that your position in this matter is an exceptional position, if ever there was one yet. The course you have just proposed--however unbecoming I may think it, however distasteful it may be to myself--would not only spare you a very serious embarrassment (to say the least of it), but would also protect you from the personal assertion of those pecuniary claims on the part of your housekeeper to which you have already adverted. These are both desirable results to achieve--to say nothing of the removal, on my side, of all apprehension of annoyance to my niece. On the other hand, however, a marriage solemnized with such privacy as you propose must be a hasty marriage; for, as we are situated, the longer the delay the greater will be the risk that our secret may escape our keeping. I am not against hasty marriages where a mutual flame is fanned by an adequate income. My own was a love-match contracted in a hurry. There are plenty of instances in the experience of every one, of short courtships and speedy marriages, which have turned up trumps--I beg your pardon--which have turned out well after all. But if you and my niece, Mr. Vanstone, are to add one to the number of these eases, the usual preliminaries of marriage among the higher classes must be hastened by some means. You doubtless understand me as now referring to the subject of settlements."

"I'll take another teaspoonful of brandy," said Noel Vanstone, holding out his glass with a trembling hand as the word "settlements" passed Captain

Wragge's lips.

"I'll take a teaspoonful with you," said the captain, nimbly dismounting from the pedestal of his respectability, and sipping his brandy with the highest relish. Noel Vanstone, after nervously following his host's example, composed himself to meet the coming ordeal, with reclining head and grasping hands, in the position familiarly associated to all civilized humanity with a seat in a dentist's chair.

The captain put down his empty glass and got up again on his pedestal.

"We were talking of settlements," he resumed. "I have already mentioned, Mr. Vanstone, at an early period of our conversation, that my niece presents the man of her choice with no other dowry than the most inestimable of all gifts--the gift of herself. This circumstance, however (as you are no doubt aware), does not disentitle me to make the customary stipulations with her future husband. According to the usual course in this matter, my lawyer would see yours--consultations would take place--delays would occur--strangers would be in possession of your intentions--and Mrs. Lecount would, sooner or later, arrive at that knowledge of the truth which you are anxious to keep from her. Do you agree with me so far?"

Unutterable apprehension closed Noel Vanstone's lips. He could only reply by an inclination of the head.

"Very good," said the captain. "Now, sir, you may possibly have observed that I am a man of a very original turn of mind. If I have not hitherto struck you in that light, it may then be necessary to mention that there are some subjects on which I persist in thinking for myself. The subject of marriage settlements is one of them. What, let me ask you, does a parent or guardian in my present condition usually do? After having trusted the man whom he has chosen for his son-in-law with the sacred deposit of a woman's happiness, he turns round on that man, and declines to trust him with the infinitely inferior responsibility of providing for her pecuniary future. He fetters his son-in-law with the most binding document the law can produce, and employs with the husband of his own child the same precautions which he would use if he were dealing with a stranger and a rogue. I call such conduct as this inconsistent and unbecoming in the last degree. You will not find it my course of conduct, Mr. Vanstone--you will not find me preaching what I don't practice. If I trust you with my niece, I trust you with every inferior responsibility toward her and toward me. Give me your hand, sir; tell me, on your word of honor, that you will provide for your wife as becomes her position and your means, and the question of settlements is

decided between us from this moment at once and forever!" Having carried out Magdalen's instructions in this lofty tone, he threw open his respectable frockcoat, and sat with head erect and hand extended, the model of parental feeling and the picture of human integrity.

For one moment Noel Vanstone remained literally petrified by astonishment. The next, he started from his chair and wrung the hand of his magnanimous friend in a perfect transport of admiration. Never yet, throughout his long and varied career, had Captain Wragge felt such difficulty in keeping his countenance as he felt now. Contempt for the outburst of miserly gratitude of which he was the object; triumph in the sense of successful conspiracy against a man who had rated the offer of his protection at five pounds; regret at the lost opportunity of effecting a fine stroke of moral agriculture, which his dread of involving himself in coming consequences had forced him to let slip--all these varied emotions agitated the captain's mind; all strove together to find their way to the surface through the outlets of his face or his tongue. He allowed Noel Vanstone to keep possession of his hand, and to heap one series of shrill protestations and promises on another, until he had regained his usual mastery over himself. That result achieved, he put the little man back in his chair, and returned forthwith to the subject of Mrs. Lecount.

"Suppose we now revert to the difficulty which we have not conquered yet," said the captain. "Let us say that I do violence to my own habits and feelings; that I allow the considerations I have already mentioned to weigh with me; and that I sanction your wish to be united to my niece without the knowledge of Mrs. Lecount. Allow me to inquire in that case what means you can suggest for the accomplishment of your end?"

"I can't suggest anything," replied Noel Vanstone, helplessly. "Would you object to suggest for me?"

"You are making a bolder request than you think, Mr. Vanstone. I never do things by halves. When I am acting with my customary candor, I am frank (as you know already) to the utmost verge of imprudence. When exceptional circumstances compel me to take an opposite course, there isn't a slyer fox alive than I am. If, at your express request, I take off my honest English coat here and put on a Jesuit's gown--if, purely out of sympathy for your awkward position, I consent to keep your secret for you from Mrs. Lecount--I must have no unseasonable scruples to contend with on your part. If it is neck or nothing on my side, sir, it must be neck or nothing on yours also."

"Neck or nothing, by all means," said Noel Vanstone, briskly--"on the

understanding that you go first. I have no scruples about keeping Lecount in the dark. But she is devilish cunning, Mr. Bygrave. How is it to be done?"

"You shall hear directly," replied the captain. "Before I develop my views, I should like to have your opinion on an abstract question of morality. What do you think, my dear sir, of pious frauds in general?"

Noel Vanstone looked a little embarrassed by the question.

"Shall I put it more plainly?" continued Captain Wragge. "What do you say to the universally-accepted maxim that 'all stratagems are fair in love and war'?--Yes or No?"

"Yes!" answered Noel Vanstone, with the utmost readiness.

"One more question and I have done," said the captain. "Do you see any particular objection to practicing a pious fraud on Mrs. Lecount?"

Noel Vanstone's resolution began to falter a little.

"Is Lecount likely to find it out?" he asked cautiously.

"She can't possibly discover it until you are married and out of her reach."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Play any trick you like on Lecount," said Noel Vanstone, with an air of unutterable relief. "I have had my suspicions lately that she is trying to domineer over me; I am beginning to feel that I have borne with Lecount long enough. I wish I was well rid of her."

"You shall have your wish," said Captain Wragge. "You shall be rid of her in a week or ten days."

Noel Vanstone rose eagerly and approached the captain's chair.

"You don't say so!" he exclaimed. "How do you mean to send her away?"

"I mean to send her on a journey," replied Captain Wragge.

"Where?"

"From your house at Aldborough to her brother's bedside at Zurich."

Noel Vanstone started back at the answer, and returned suddenly to his chair.

"How can you do that?" he inquired, in the greatest perplexity. "Her brother (hang him!) is much better. She had another letter from Zurich to say so, this morning."

"Did you see the letter?"

"Yes. She always worries about her brother--she would show it to me."

"Who was it from? and what did it say?"

"It was from the doctor--he always writes to her. I don't care two straws about her brother, and I don't remember much of the letter, except that it was a short one. The fellow was much better; and if the doctor didn't write again, she might take it for granted that he was getting well. That was the substance of it."

"Did you notice where she put the letter when you gave it her back again?"

"Yes. She put it in the drawer where she keeps her account-books."

"Can you get at that drawer?"

"Of course I can. I have got a duplicate key--I always insist on a duplicate key of the place where she keeps her account books. I never allow the account-books to be locked up from my inspection: it's a rule of the house."

"Be so good as to get that letter to-day, Mr. Vanstone, without your housekeeper's knowledge, and add to the favor by letting me have it here privately for an hour or two."

"What do you want it for?"

"I have some more questions to ask before I tell you. Have you any intimate friend at Zurich whom you could trust to help you in playing a trick on Mrs. Lecount?"

"What sort of help do you mean?" asked Noel Vanstone.

"Suppose," said the captain, "you were to send a letter addressed to Mrs. Lecount at Aldborough, inclosed in another letter addressed to one of your friends abroad? And suppose you were to instruct that friend to help a harmless practical joke by posting Mrs. Lecount's letter at Zurich? Do you know any one who could be trusted to do that?"

"I know two people who could be trusted!" cried Noel Vanstone. "Both ladies--both spinsters--both bitter enemies of Lecount's. But what is your drift, Mr. Bygrave? Though I am not usually wanting in penetration, I don't altogether see your drift."

"You shall see it directly, Mr. Vanstone."

With those words he rose, withdrew to his desk in the corner of the room, and wrote a few lines on a sheet of note-paper. After first reading them carefully to himself, he beckoned to Noel Vanstone to come and read them too.

"A few minutes since," said the captain, pointing complacently to his own composition with the feather end of his pen, "I had the honor of suggesting a pious fraud on Mrs. Lecount. There it is!"

He resigned his chair at the writing-table to his visitor. Noel Vanstone sat down, and read these lines:

"MY DEAR MADAM--Since I last wrote, I deeply regret to inform you that your brother has suffered a relapse. The symptoms are so serious, that it is my painful duty to summon you instantly to his bedside. I am making every effort to resist the renewed progress of the malady, and I have not yet lost all hope of success. But I cannot reconcile it to my conscience to leave you in ignorance of a serious change in my patient for the worse, which may be attended by fatal results. With much sympathy, I remain, etc. etc."

Captain Wragge waited with some anxiety for the effect which this letter might produce. Mean, selfish, and cowardly as he was, even Noel Vanstone might feel some compunction at practicing such a deception as was here suggested on a woman who stood toward him in the position of Mrs. Lecount. She had served him faithfully, however interested her motives might be--she had lived since he was a lad in the full possession of his father's confidence--she was living now under the protection of his own roof. Could be fail to remember this; and, remembering it, could he lend his aid without hesitation to the scheme which was now proposed to him? Captain

Wragge unconsciously retained belief enough in human nature to doubt it. To his surprise, and, it must be added, to his relief, also, his apprehensions proved to be groundless. The only emotions aroused in Noel Vanstone's mind by a perusal of the letter were a hearty admiration of his friend's idea, and a vainglorious anxiety to claim the credit to himself of being the person who carried it out. Examples may be found every day of a fool who is no coward; examples may be found occasionally of a fool who is not cunning; but it may reasonably be doubted whether there is a producible instance anywhere of a fool who is not cruel.

"Perfect!" cried Noel Vanstone, clapping his hands. "Mr. Bygrave, you are as good as Figaro in the French comedy. Talking of French, there is one serious mistake in this clever letter of yours--it is written in the wrong language. When the doctor writes to Lecount, he writes in French. Perhaps you meant me to translate it? You can't manage without my help, can you? I write French as fluently as I write English. Just look at me! I'll translate it, while I sit here, in two strokes of the pen."

He completed the translation almost as rapidly as Captain Wragge had produced the original. "Wait a minute!" he cried, in high critical triumph at discovering another defect in the composition of his ingenious friend. "The doctor always dates his letters. Here is no date to yours."

"I leave the date to you," said the captain, with a sardonic smile. "You have discovered the fault, my dear sir--pray correct it!"

Noel Vanstone mentally looked into the great gulf which separates the faculty that can discover a defect, from the faculty that can apply a remedy, and, following the example of many a wiser man, declined to cross over it.

"I couldn't think of ta king the liberty," he said, politely. "Perhaps you had a motive for leaving the date out?"

"Perhaps I had," replied Captain Wragge, with his easiest good-humor. "The date must depend on the time a letter takes to get to Zurich. I have had no experience on that point--you must have had plenty of experience in your father's time. Give me the benefit of your information, and we will add the date before you leave the writing-table."

Noel Vanstone's experience was, as Captain Wragge had anticipated, perfectly competent to settle the question of time. The railway resources of the Continent (in the year eighteen hundred and forty-seven) were but scanty; and a letter sent at that period from England to Zurich, and from

Zurich back again to England, occupied ten days in making the double journey by post.

"Date the letter in French five days on from to-morrow," said the captain, when he had got his information. "Very good. The next thing is to let me have the doctor's note as soon as you can. I may be obliged to practice some hours before I can copy your translation in an exact imitation of the doctor's handwriting. Have you got any foreign note-paper? Let me have a few sheets, and send, at the same time, an envelope addressed to one of those lady-friends of yours at Zurich, accompanied by the necessary request to post the inclosure. This is all I need trouble you to do, Mr. Vanstone. Don't let me seem inhospitable; but the sooner you can supply me with my materials, the better I shall be pleased. We entirely understand each other, I suppose? Having accepted your proposal for my niece's hand, I sanction a private marriage in consideration of the circumstances on your side. A little harmless stratagem is necessary to forward your views. I invent the stratagem at your request, and you make use of it without the least hesitation. The result is, that in ten days from to-morrow Mrs. Lecount will be on her way to Switzerland; in fifteen days from to-morrow Mrs. Lecount will reach Zurich, and discover the trick we have played her; in twenty days from to-morrow Mrs. Lecount will be back at Aldborough, and will find her master's wedding-cards on the table, and her master himself away on his honey-moon trip. I put it arithmetically, for the sake of putting it plain. God bless you. Good-morning!"

"I suppose I may have the happiness of seeing Miss Bygrave to-morrow?" said Noel Vanstone, turning round at the door.

"We must be careful," replied Captain Wragge. "I don't forbid to-morrow, but I make no promise beyond that. Permit me to remind you that we have got Mrs. Lecount to manage for the next ten days."

"I wish Lecount was at the bottom of the German Ocean!" exclaimed Noel Vanstone, fervently. "It's all very well for you to manage her--you don't live in the house. What am I to do?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow," said the captain. "Go out for your walk alone, and drop in here, as you dropped in to-day, at two o'clock. In the meantime, don't forget those things I want you to send me. Seal them up together in a large envelope. When you have done that, ask Mrs. Lecount to walk out with you as usual; and while she is upstairs putting her bonnet on, send the servant across to me. You understand? Good-morning."

An hour afterward, the sealed envelope, with its inclosures, reached Captain Wragge in perfect safety. The double task of exactly imitating a strange handwriting, and accurately copying words written in a language with which he was but slightly acquainted, presented more difficulties to be overcome than the captain had anticipated. It was eleven o'clock before the employment which he had undertaken was successfully completed, and the letter to Zurich ready for the post.

Before going to bed, he walked out on the deserted Parade to breathe the cool night air. All the lights were extinguished in Sea-view Cottage, when he looked that way, except the light in the housekeeper's window. Captain Wragge shook his head suspiciously. He had gained experience enough by this time to distrust the wakefulness of Mrs. Lecount.

CHAPTER IX.

IF Captain Wragge could have looked into Mrs. Lecount's room while he stood on the Parade watching the light in her window, he would have seen the housekeeper sitting absorbed in meditation over a worthless little morsel of brown stuff which lay on her toilet-table.

However exasperating to herself the conclusion might be, Mrs. Lecount could not fail to see that she had been thus far met and baffled successfully at every point. What was she to do next? If she sent for Mr. Pendril when he came to Aldborough (with only a few hours spared from his business at her disposal), what definite course would there be for him to follow? If she showed Noel Vanstone the original letter from which her note had been copied, he would apply instantly to the writer for an explanation: would expose the fabricated story by which Mrs. Lecount had succeeded in imposing on Miss Garth; and would, in any event, still declare, on the evidence of his own eyes, that the test by the marks on the neck had utterly failed. Miss Vanstone, the elder, whose unexpected presence at Aldborough might have done wonders--whose voice in the hall at North Shingles, even if she had been admitted no further, might have reached her sister's ears and led to instant results--Miss Vanstone, the elder, was out of the country, and was not likely to return for a month at least. Look as anxiously as Mrs. Lecount might along the course which she had hitherto followed, she failed to see her way through the accumulated obstacles which now barred her advance.

Other women in this position might have waited until circumstances altered, and helped them. Mrs. Lecount boldly retraced her steps, and determined to find her way to her end in a new direction. Resigning for the present all further attempt to prove that the false Miss Bygrave was the true Magdalen Vanstone, she resolved to narrow the range of her next efforts; to leave the actual question of Magdalen's identity untouched; and to rest satisfied with convincing her master of this simple fact--that the young lady who was charming him at North Shingles, and the disguised woman who had terrified him in Vauxhall Walk, were one and the same person.

The means of effecting this new object were, to all appearance, far less easy of attainment than the means of effecting the object which Mrs. Lecount had just resigned. Here no help was to be expected from others, no ostensibly benevolent motives could be put forward as a blind--no appeal could be made to Mr. Pendril or to Miss Garth. Here the housekeeper's only chance of

success depended, in the first place, on her being able to effect a stolen entrance into Mr. Bygrave's house, and, in the second place, on her ability to discover whether that memorable alpaca dress from which she had secretly cut the fragment of stuff happened to form part of Miss Bygrave's wardrobe.

Taking the difficulties now before her in their order as they occurred, Mrs. Lecount first resolved to devote the next few days to watching the habits of the inmates of North Shingles, from early in the morning to late at night, and to testing the capacity of the one servant in the house to resist the temptation of a bribe. Assuming that results proved successful, and that, either by money or by stratagem, she gained admission to North Shingles (without the knowledge of Mr. Bygrave or his niece), she turned next to the second difficulty of the two--the difficulty of obtaining access to Miss Bygrave's wardrobe.

If the servant proved corruptible, all obstacles in this direction might be considered as removed beforehand. But if the servant proved honest, the new problem was no easy one to solve.

Long and careful consideration of the question led the housekeeper at last to the bold resolution of obtaining an interview--if the servant failed her--with Mrs. Bygrave herself. What was the true cause of this lady's mysterious seclusion? Was she a person of the strictest and the most inconvenient integrity? or a person who could not be depended on to preserve a secret? or a person who was as artful as Mr. Bygrave himself, and who was kept in reserve to forward the object of some new deception which was yet to come? In the first two cases, Mrs. Lecount could trust in her own powers of dissimulation, and in the results which they might achieve. In the last case (if no other end was gained), it might be of vital importance to her to discover an enemy hidden in the dark. In any event, she determined to run the risk. Of the three chances in her favor on which she had reckoned at the outset of the struggle--the chance of entrapping Magdalen by word of mouth, the chance of entrapping her by the help of her friends, and the chance of entrapping her by means of Mrs. Bygrave--two had been tried, and two had failed. The third remained to be tested yet; and the third might succeed.

So, the captain's enemy plotted against him in the privacy of her own chamber, while the captain watched the light in her window from the beach outside.

Before breakfast the next morning, Captain Wragge posted the forged letter

to Zurich with his own hand. He went back to North Shingles with his mind not quite decided on the course to take with Mrs. Lecount during the all-important interval of the next ten days.

Greatly to his surprise, his doubts on this point were abruptly decided by Magdalen herself.

He found her waiting for him in the room where the breakfast was laid. She was walking restlessly to and fro, with her head drooping on her bosom and her hair hanging disordered over her shoulders. The moment she looked up on his entrance, the captain felt the fear which Mrs. Wragge had felt before him--the fear that her mind would be struck prostrate again, as it had been struck once already, when Frank's letter reached her in Vauxhall Walk.

"Is he coming again to-day?" she asked, pushing away from her the chair which Captain Wragge offered, with such violence that she threw it on the floor.

"Yes," said the captain, wisely answering her in the fewest words. "He is coming at two o'clock."

"Take me away!" she exclaimed, tossing her hair back wildly from her face. "Take me away before he comes. I can't get over the horror of marrying him while I am in this hateful place; take me somewhere where I can forget it, or I shall go mad! Give me two days' rest--two days out of sight of that horrible sea--two days out of prison in this horrible house--two days anywhere in the wide world away from Aldborough. I'll come back with you! I'll go through with it to the end! Only give me two days' escape from that man and everything belonging to him! Do you hear, you villain?" she cried, seizing his arm and shaking it in a frenzy of passion; "I have been tortured enough--I can bear it no longer!"

There was but one way of quieting her, and the captain instantly took it.

"If you will try to control yourself," he said, "you shall leave Aldborough in an hour's time."

She dropped his arm, and leaned back heavily against the wall behind her.

"I'll try," she answered, struggling for breath, but looking at him less wildly. "You shan't complain of me, if I can help it." She attempted confusedly to take her handkerchief from her apron pocket, and failed to find it. The captain took it out for her. Her eyes softened, and she drew her breath more

freely as she received the handkerchief from him. "You are a kinder man than I thought you were," she said; "I am sorry I spoke so passionately to you just now--I am very, very sorry." The tears stole into her eyes, and she offered him her hand with the native grace and gentleness of happier days. "Be friends with me again," she said, pleadingly. "I'm only a girl, Captain Wragge--I'm only a girl!"

He took her hand in silence, patted it for a moment, and then opened the door for her to go back to her own room again. There was genuine regret in his face as he showed her that trifling attention. He was a vagabond and a cheat; he had lived a mean, shuffling, degraded life, but he was human; and she had found her way to the lost sympathies in him which not even the self-profanation of a swindler's existence could wholly destroy. "Damn the breakfast!" he said, when the servant came in for her orders. "Go to the inn directly, and say I want a carriage and pair at the door in an hour's time." He went out into the passage, still chafing under a sense of mental disturbance which was new to him, and shouted to his wife more fiercely than ever--"Pack up what we want for a week's absence, and be ready in half an hour!" Having issued those directions, he returned to the breakfast-room, and looked at the half-spread table with an impatient wonder at his disinclination to do justice to his own meal. "She has rubbed off the edge of my appetite," he said to himself, with a forced laugh. "I'll try a cigar, and a turn in the fresh air."

If he had been twenty years younger, those remedies might have failed him. But where is the man to be found whose internal policy succumbs to revolution when that man is on the wrong side of fifty? Exercise and change of place gave the captain back into the possession of himself. He recovered the lost sense of the flavor of his cigar, and recalled his wandering attention to the question of his approaching absence from Aldborough. A few minutes' consideration satisfied his mind that Magdalen's outbreak had forced him to take the course of all others which, on a fair review of existing emergencies, it was now most desirable to adopt.

Captain Wragge's inquiries on the evening when he and Magdalen had drunk tea at Sea View had certainly informed him that the housekeeper's brother possessed a modest competence; that his sister was his nearest living relative; and that there were some unscrupulous cousins on the spot who were anxious to usurp the place in his will which properly belonged to Mrs. Lecount. Here were strong motives to take the housekeeper to Zurich when the false report of her brother's relapse reached England. But if any idea of Noel Vanstone's true position dawned on her in the meantime, who could say whether she might not, at the eleventh hour, prefer asserting her

large pecuniary interest in her master, to defending her small pecuniary interest at her brother's bedside? While that question remained undecided, the plain necessity of checking the growth of Noel Vanstone's intimacy with the family at North Shingles did not admit of a doubt; and of all means of effecting that object, none could be less open to suspicion than the temporary removal of the household from their residence at Aldborough. Thoroughly satisfied with the soundness of this conclusion, Captain Wragge made straight for Sea-view Cottage, to apologize and explain before the carriage came and the departure took place.

Noel Vanstone was easily accessible to visitors; he was walking in the garden before breakfast. His disappointment and vexation were freely expressed when he heard the news which his friend had to communicate. The captain's fluent tongue, however, soon impressed on him the necessity of resignation to present circumstances. The bare hint that the "pious fraud" might fail after all, if anything happened in the ten days' interval to enlighten Mrs. Lecount, had an instant effect in making Noel Vanstone as patient and as submissive as could be wished.

"I won't tell you where we are going, for two good reasons," said Captain Wragge, when his preliminary explanations were completed. "In the first place, I haven't made up my mind yet; and, in the second place, if you don't know where our destination is, Mrs. Lecount can't worm it out of you. I have not the least doubt she is watching us at this moment from behind her window-curtain. When she asks what I wanted with you this morning, tell her I came to say good-by for a few days, finding my niece not so well again, and wishing to take her on a short visit to some friends to try change of air. If you could produce an impression on Mrs. Lecount's mind (without overdoing it), that you are a little disappointed in me, and that you are rather inclined to doubt my heartiness in cultivating your acquaintance, you will greatly help our present object. You may depend on our return to North Shingles in four or five days at furthest. If anything strikes me in the meanwhile, the post is always at our service, and I won't fail to write to you."

"Won't Miss Bygrave write to me?" inquired Noel Vanstone, piteously. "Did she know you were coming here? Did she send me no message?"

"Unpardonable on my part to have forgotten it!" cried the captain. "She sent you her love."

Noel Vanstone closed his eyes in silent ecstasy.

When he opened them again Captain Wragge had passed through the

garden gate and was on his way back to North Shingles. As soon as his own door had closed on him, Mrs. Lecount descended from the post of observation which the captain had rightly suspected her of occupying, and addressed the inquiry to her master which the captain had rightly foreseen would follow his departure. The reply she received produced but one impression on her mind. She at once set it down as a falsehood, and returned to her own window to keep watch over North Shingles more vigilantly than ever.

To her utter astonishment, after a lapse of less than half an hour she saw an empty carriage draw up at Mr. Bygrave's door. Luggage was brought out and packed on the vehicle. Miss Bygrave appeared, and took her seat in it. She was followed into the carriage by a lady of great size and stature, whom the housekeeper conjectured to be Mrs. Bygrave. The servant came next, and stood waiting on the path. The last person to appear was Mr. Bygrave. He locked the house door, and took the key away with him to a cottage near at hand, which was the residence of the landlord of North Shingles. On his return, he nodded to the servant, who walked away by herself toward the humbler quarter of the little town, and joined the ladies in the carriage. The coachman mounted the box, and the vehicle disappeared.

Mrs. Lecount laid down the opera-glass, through which she had been closely investigating these proceedings, with a feeling of helpless perplexity which she was almost ashamed to acknowledge to herself. The secret of Mr. Bygrave's object in suddenly emptying his house at Aldborough of every living creature in it was an impenetrable mystery to her.

Submitting herself to circumstances with a ready resignation which Captain Wragge had not shown, on his side, in a similar situation, Mrs. Lecount wasted neither time nor temper in unprofitable guess-work. She left the mystery to thicken or to clear, as the future might decide, and looked exclusively at the uses to which she might put the morning's event in her own interests. Whatever might have become of the family at North Shingles, the servant was left behind, and the servant was exactly the person whose assistance might now be of vital importance to the housekeeper's projects. Mrs. Lecount put on her bonnet, inspected the collection of loose silver in her purse, and set forth on the spot to make the servant's acquaintance.

She went first to the cottage at which Mr. Bygrave had left the key of North Shingles, to discover the servant's present address from the landlord. So far as this object was concerned, her errand proved successful. The landlord knew that the girl had been allowed to go home for a few days to her friends, and knew in what part of Aldborough her friends lived. But here his sources

of information suddenly dried up. He knew nothing of the destination to which Mr. Bygrave and his family had betaken themselves, and he was perfectly ignorant of the number of days over which their absence might be expected to extend. All he could say was, that he had not received a notice to quit from his tenant, and that he had been requested to keep the key of the house in his possession until Mr. Bygrave returned to claim it in his own person.

Baffled, but not discouraged, Mrs. Lecount turned her steps next toward the back street of Aldborough, and astonished the servant's relatives by conferring on them the honor of a morning call.

Easily imposed on at starting by Mrs. Lecount's pretense of calling to engage her, under the impression that she had left Mr. Bygrave's service, the servant did her best to answer the questions put to her. But she knew as little as the landlord of her master's plans. All she could say about them was, that she had not been dismissed, and that she was to await the receipt of a note recalling her when necessary to her situation at North Shingles. Not having expected to find her better informed on this part of the subject, Mrs. Lecount smoothly shifted her ground, and led the woman into talking generally of the advantages and defects of her situation in Mr. Bygrave's family.

Profiting by the knowledge gained, in this indirect manner, of the little secrets of the household, Mrs. Lecount made two discoveries. She found out, in the first place, that the servant (having enough to do in attending to the coarser part of the domestic work) was in no position to disclose the secrets of Miss Bygrave's wardrobe, which were known only to the young lady herself and to her aunt. In the second place, the housekeeper ascertained that the true reason of Mrs. Bygrave's rigid seclusion was to be found in the simple fact that she was little better than an idiot, and that her husband was probably ashamed of allowing her to be seen in public. These apparently trivial discoveries enlightened Mrs. Lecount on a very important point which had been previously involved in doubt. She was now satisfied that the likeliest way to obtaining a private investigation of Magdalen's wardrobe lay through deluding the imbecile lady, and not through bribing the ignorant servant.

Having reached that conclusion--pregnant with coming assaults on the weakly-fortified discretion of poor Mrs. Wragge--the housekeeper cautiously abstained from exhibiting herself any longer under an inquisitive aspect. She changed the conversation to local topics, waited until she was sure of leaving an excellent impression behind her, and then took her leave.

Three days passed; and Mrs. Lecount and her master--each with their widely-different ends in view--watched with equal anxiety for the first signs of returning life in the direction of North Shingles. In that interval, no letter either from the uncle or the niece arrived for Noel Vanstone. His sincere feeling of irritation under this neglectful treatment greatly assisted the effect of those feigned doubts on the subject of his absent friends which the captain had recommended him to express in the housekeeper's presence. He confessed his apprehensions of having been mistaken, not in Mr. Bygrave only, but even in his niece as well, with such a genuine air of annoyance that he actually contributed a new element of confusion to the existing perplexities of Mrs. Lecount.

On the morning of the fourth day Noel Vanstone met the postman in the garden; and, to his great relief, discovered among the letters delivered to him a note from Mr. Bygrave.

The date of the note was "Woodbridge," and it contained a few lines only. Mr. Bygrave mentioned that his niece was better, and that she sent her love as before. He proposed returning to Aldborough on the next day, when he would have some new considerations of a strictly private nature to present to Mr. Noel Vanstone's mind. In the meantime he would beg Mr. Vanstone not to call at North Shingles until he received a special invitation to do so--which invitation should certainly be given on the day when the family returned. The motive of this apparently strange request should be explained to Mr. Vanstone's perfect satisfaction when he was once more united to his friends. Until that period arrived, the strictest caution was enjoined on him in all his communications with Mrs. Lecount; and the instant destruction of Mr. Bygrave's letter, after due perusal of it, was (if the classical phrase might be pardoned) a sine qua non.

The fifth day came. Noel Vanstone (after submitting himself to the sine qua non, and destroying the letter) waited anxiously for results; while Mrs. Lecount, on her side, watched patiently for events. Toward three o'clock in the afternoon th e carriage appeared again at the gate of North Shingles. Mr. Bygrave got out and tripped away briskly to the landlord's cottage for the key. He returned with the servant at his heels. Miss Bygrave left the carriage; her giant relative followed her example; the house door was opened; the trunks were taken off; the carriage disappeared, and the Bygraves were at home again!

Four o'clock struck, five o'clock, six o'clock, and nothing happened. In half an hour more, Mr. Bygrave--spruce, speckless, and respectable as ever--

appeared on the Parade, sauntering composedly in the direction of Sea View.

Instead of at once entering the house, he passed it; stopped, as if struck by a sudden recollection; and, retracing his steps, asked for Mr. Vanstone at the door. Mr. Vanstone came out hospitably into the passage. Pitching his voice to a tone which could be easily heard by any listening individual through any open door in the bedroom regions, Mr. Bygrave announced the object of his visit on the door-mat in the fewest possible words. He had been staying with a distant relative. The distant relative possessed two pictures--Gems by the Old Masters--which he was willing to dispose of, and which he had intrusted for that purpose to Mr. Bygrave's care. If Mr. Noel Vanstone, as an amateur in such matters, wished to see the Gems, they would be visible in half an hour's time, when Mr. Bygrave would have returned to North Shingles.

Having delivered himself of this incomprehensible announcement, the arch-conspirator laid his significant forefinger along the side of his short Roman nose, said, "Fine weather, isn't it? Good-afternoon!" and sauntered out inscrutably to continue his walk on the Parade.

On the expiration of the half-hour Noel Vanstone presented himself at North Shingles, with the ardor of a lover burning inextinguishably in his bosom, through the superincumbent mental fog of a thoroughly bewildered man. To his inexpressible happiness, he found Magdalen alone in the parlor. Never yet had she looked so beautiful in his eyes. The rest and relief of her four days' absence from Aldborough had not failed to produce their results; she had more than recovered her composure. Vibrating perpetually from one violent extreme to another, she had now passed from the passionate despair of five days since to a feverish exaltation of spirits which defied all remorse and confronted all consequences. Her eyes sparkled; her cheeks were bright with color; she talked incessantly, with a forlorn mockery of the girlish gayety of past days; she laughed with a deplorable persistency in laughing; she imitated Mrs. Lecount's smooth voice, and Mrs. Lecount's insinuating graces of manner with an overcharged resemblance to the original, which was but the coarse reflection of the delicately-accurate mimicry of former times. Noel Vanstone, who had never yet seen her as he saw her now, was enchanted; his weak head whirled with an intoxication of enjoyment; his wizen cheeks flushed as if they had caught the infection from hers. The half-hour during which he was alone with her passed like five minutes to him. When that time had elapsed, and when she suddenly left him--to obey a previously-arranged summons to her aunt's presence--miser as he was, he would have paid at that moment five golden sovereigns out of his pocket for five golden minutes more passed in her society.

The door had hardly closed on Magdalen before it opened again, and the captain walked in. He entered on the explanations which his visitor naturally expected from him with the unceremonious abruptness of a man hard pressed for time, and determined to make the most of every moment at his disposal.

"Since we last saw each other," he began, "I have been reckoning up the chances for and against us as we stand at present. The result on my own mind is this: If you are still at Aldborough when that letter from Zurich reaches Mrs. Lecount, all the pains we have taken will have been pains thrown away. If your housekeeper had fifty brothers all dying together, she would throw the whole fifty over sooner than leave you alone at Sea View while we are your neighbors at North Shingles."

Noel Vanstone's flushed cheek turned pale with dismay. His own knowledge of Mrs. Lecount told him that this view of the case was the right one.

"If we go away again," proceeded the captain, "nothing will be gained, for nothing would persuade your housekeeper, in that case, that we have not left you the means of following us. You must leave Aldborough this time; and, what is more, you must go without leaving a single visible trace behind you for us to follow. If we accomplish this object in the course of the next five days, Mrs. Lecount will take the journey to Zurich. If we fail, she will be a fixture at Sea View, to a dead certainty. Don't ask questions! I have got your instructions ready for you, and I want your closest attention to them. Your marriage with my niece depends on your not forgetting a word of what I am now going to tell you.--One question first. Have you followed my advice? Have you told Mrs. Lecount you are beginning to think yourself mistaken in me?"

"I did worse than that," replied Noel Vanstone penitently. "I committed an outrage on my own feelings. I disgraced myself by saying that I doubted Miss Bygrave!"

"Go on disgracing yourself, my dear sir! Doubt us both with all your might, and I'll help you. One question more. Did I speak loud enough this afternoon? Did Mrs. Lecount hear me?"

"Yes. Lecount opened her door; Lecount heard you. What made you give me that message? I see no pictures here. Is this another pious fraud, Mr. Bygrave?"

"Admirably guessed, Mr. Vanstone! You will see the object of my imaginary picture-dealing in the very next words which I am now about to address to you. When you get back to Sea View, this is what you are to say to Mrs. Lecount. Tell her that my relative's works of Art are two worthless pictures--copies from the Old Masters, which I have tried to sell you as originals at an exorbitant price. Say you suspect me of being little better than a plausible impostor, and pity my unfortunate niece for being associated with such a rascal as I am. There is your text to speak from. Say in many words what I have just said in a few. You can do that, can't you?"

"Of course I can do it," said Noel Vanstone. "But I can tell you one thing--Lecount won't believe me."

"Wait a little, Mr. Vanstone; I have not done with my instructions yet. You understand what I have just told you? Very good. We may get on from to-day to to-morrow. Go out to-morrow with Mrs. Lecount at your usual time. I will meet you on the Parade, and bow to you. Instead of returning my bow, look the other way. In plain English, cut me! That is easy enough to do, isn't it?"

"She won't believe me, Mr. Bygrave--she won't believe me!"

"Wait a little again, Mr. Vanstone. There are more instructions to come. You have got your directions for to-day, and you have got your directions for to-morrow. Now for the day after. The day after is the seventh day since we sent the letter to Zurich. On the seventh day decline to go out walking as before, from dread of the annoyance of meeting me again. Grumble about the smallness of the place; complain of your health; wish you had never come to Aldborough, and never made acquaintances with the Bygraves; and when you have well worried Mrs. Lecount with your discontent, ask her on a sudden if she can't suggest a change for the better. If you put that question to her naturally, do you think she can be depended on to answer it?"

"She won't want to be questioned at all," replied Noel Vanstone, irritably. "I have only got to say I am tired of Aldborough; and, if she believes me--which she won't; I'm quite positive, Mr. Bygrave, she won't!--she will have her suggestion ready before I can ask for it."

"Ay! ay!" said the captain eagerly. "There is some place, then, that Mrs. Lecount wants to go to this autumn?"

"She wants to go there (hang her!) every autumn."

"To go where?"

"To Admiral Bartram's--you don't know him, do you?--at St. Crux-in-the-Marsh."

"Don't lose your patience, Mr. Vanstone! What you are now telling me is of the most vital importance to the object we ha ve in view. Who is Admiral Bartram?"

"An old friend of my father's. My father laid him under obligations--my father lent him money when they were both young men. I am like one of the family at St. Crux; my room is always kept ready for me. Not that there's any family at the admiral's except his nephew, George Bartram. George is my cousin; I'm as intimate with George as my father was with the admiral; and I've been sharper than my father, for I haven't lent my friend any money. Lecount always makes a show of liking George--I believe to annoy me. She likes the admiral, too; he flatters her vanity. He always invites her to come with me to St. Crux. He lets her have one of the best bedrooms, and treats her as if she was a lady. She is as proud as Lucifer--she likes being treated like a lady--and she pesters me every autumn to go to St. Crux. What's the matter? What are you taking out your pocketbook for?"

"I want the admiral's address, Mr. Vanstone, for a purpose which I will explain immediately."

With those words, Captain Wragge opened his pocketbook and wrote down the address from Noel Vanstone's dictation, as follows: "Admiral Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, near Ossory, Essex."

"Good!" cried the captain, closing his pocketbook again. "The only difficulty that stood in our way is now cleared out of it. Patience, Mr. Vanstone--patience! Let us take up my instructions again at the point where we dropped them. Give me five minutes' more attention, and you will see your way to your marriage as plainly as I see it. On the day after to-morrow you declare you are tired of Aldborough, and Mrs. Lecount suggests St. Crux. You don't say yes or no on the spot; you take the next day to consider it, and you make up your mind the last thing at night to go to St. Crux the first thing in the morning. Are you in the habit of superintending your own packing up, or do you usually shift all the trouble of it on Mrs. Lecount's shoulders?"

"Lecount has all the trouble, of course; Lecount is paid for it! But I don't really go, do I?"

"You go as fast as horses can take you to the railway without having held any previous communication with this house, either personally or by letter. You leave Mrs. Lecount behind to pack up your curiosities, to settle with the tradespeople, and to follow you to St. Crux the next morning. The next morning is the tenth morning. On the tenth morning she receives the letter from Zurich; and if you only carry out my instructions, Mr. Vanstone, as sure as you sit there, to Zurich she goes."

Noel Vanstone's color began to rise again, as the captain's stratagem dawned on him at last in its true light.

"And what am I to do at St. Crux?" he inquired.

"Wait there till I call for you," replied the captain. "As soon as Mrs. Lecount's back is turned, I will go to the church here and give the necessary notice of the marriage. The same day or the next, I will travel to the address written down in my pocketbook, pick you up at the admiral's, and take you on to London with me to get the license. With that document in our possession, we shall be on our way back to Aldborough while Mrs. Lecount is on her way out to Zurich; and before she starts on her return journey, you and my niece will be man and wife! There are your future prospects for you. What do you think of them?"

"What a head you have got!" cried Noel Vanstone, in a sudden outburst of enthusiasm. "You're the most extraordinary man I ever met with. One would think you had done nothing all your life but take people in."

Captain Wragge received that unconscious tribute to his native genius with the complacency of a man who felt that he thoroughly deserved it.

"I have told you already, my dear sir," he said, modestly, "that I never do things by halves. Pardon me for reminding you that we have no time for exchanging mutual civilities. Are you quite sure about your instructions? I dare not write them down for fear of accidents. Try the system of artificial memory; count your instructions off after me, on your thumb and your four fingers. To-day you tell Mrs. Lecount I have tried to take you in with my relative's works of Art. To-morrow you cut me on the Parade. The day after you refuse to go out, you get tired of Aldborough, and you allow Mrs. Lecount to make her suggestion. The next day you accept the suggestion. And the next day to that you go to St. Crux. Once more, my dear sir! Thumb--works of Art. Forefinger--cut me on the Parade. Middle finger--tired of Aldborough. Third finger--take Lecount's advice. Little finger--off to St. Crux. Nothing can be clearer--nothing can be easier to do. Is there anything

you don't understand? Anything that I can explain over again before you go?"

"Only one thing," said Noel Vanstone. "Is it settled that I am not to come here again before I go to St. Crux?"

"Most decidedly!" answered the captain. "The whole success of the enterprise depends on your keeping away. Mrs. Lecount will try the credibility of everything you say to her by one test--the test of your communicating, or not, with this house. She will watch you night and day! Don't call here, don't send messages, don't write letters; don't even go out by yourself. Let her see you start for St. Crux on her suggestion, with the absolute certainty in her own mind that you have followed her advice without communicating it in any form whatever to me or to my niece. Do that, and she must believe you, on the best of all evidence for our interests, and the worst for hers--the evidence of her own senses."

With those last words of caution, he shook the little man warmly by the hand and sent him home on the spot.

CHAPTER X.

ON returning to Sea View, Noel Vanstone executed the instructions which prescribed his line of conduct for the first of the five days with unimpeachable accuracy. A faint smile of contempt hovered about Mrs. Lecount's lips while the story of Mr. Bygrave's attempt to pass off his spurious pictures as originals was in progress, but she did not trouble herself to utter a single word of remark when it had come to an end. "Just what I said!" thought Noel Vanstone, cunningly watching her face; "she doesn't believe a word of it!"

The next day the meeting occurred on the Parade. Mr. Bygrave took off his hat, and Noel Vanstone looked the other way. The captain's start of surprise and scowl of indignation were executed to perfection, but they plainly failed to impose on Mrs. Lecount. "I am afraid, sir, you have offended Mr. Bygrave to-day," she ironically remarked. "Happily for you, he is an excellent Christian! and I venture to predict that he will forgive you to-morrow."

Noel Vanstone wisely refrained from committing himself to an answer. Once more he privately applauded his own penetration; once more he triumphed over his ingenious friend.

Thus far the captain's instructions had been too clear and simple to be mistaken by any one. But they advanced in complication with the advance of time, and on the third day Noel Vanstone fell confusedly into the commission of a slight error. After expressing the necessary weariness of Aldborough, and the consequent anxiety for change of scene, he was met (as he had anticipated) by an immediate suggestion from the housekeeper, recommending a visit to St. Crux. In giving his answer to the advice thus tendered, he made his first mistake. Instead of deferring his decision until the next day, he accepted Mrs. Lecount's suggestion on the day when it was offered to him.

The consequences of this error were of no great importance. The housekeeper merely set herself to watch her master one day earlier than had been calculated on--a result which had been already provided for by the wise precautionary measure of forbidding Noel Vanstone all communication with North Shingles. Doubting, as Captain Wragge had foreseen, the sincerity of her master's desire to break off his connection with the Bygraves by going to St. Crux, Mrs. Lecount tested the truth or falsehood of the impression produced on her own mind by vigilantly watching for sign s of

secret communication on one side or on the other. The close attention with which she had hitherto observed the out-goings and in-comings at North Shingles was now entirely transferred to her master. For the rest of that third day she never let him out of her sight; she never allowed any third person who came to the house, on any pretense whatever, a minute's chance of private communication with him. At intervals through the night she stole to the door of his room, to listen and assure herself that he was in bed; and before sunrise the next morning, the coast-guardsman going his rounds was surprised to see a lady who had risen as early as himself engaged over her work at one of the upper windows of Sea View.

On the fourth morning Noel Vanstone came down to breakfast conscious of the mistake that he had committed on the previous day. The obvious course to take, for the purpose of gaining time, was to declare that his mind was still undecided. He made the assertion boldly when the housekeeper asked him if he meant to move that day. Again Mrs. Lecount offered no remark, and again the signs and tokens of incredulity showed themselves in her face. Vacillation of purpose was not at all unusual in her experience of her master. But on this occasion she believed that his caprice of conduct was assumed for the purpose of gaining time to communicate with North Shingles, and she accordingly set her watch on him once more with doubled and trebled vigilance.

No letters came that morning. Toward noon the weather changed for the worse, and all idea of walking out as usual was abandoned. Hour after hour, while her master sat in one of the parlors, Mrs. Lecount kept watch in the other, with the door into the passage open, and with a full view of North Shingles through the convenient side-window at which she had established herself. Not a sign that was suspicious appeared, not a sound that was suspicious caught her ear. As the evening closed in, her master's hesitation came to an end. He was disgusted with the weather; he hated the place; he foresaw the annoyance of more meetings with Mr. Bygrave, and he was determined to go to St. Crux the first thing the next morning. Lecount could stay behind to pack up the curiosities and settle with the trades-people, and could follow him to the admiral's on the next day. The housekeeper was a little staggered by the tone and manner in which he gave these orders. He had, to her own certain knowledge, effected no communication of any sort with North Shingles, and yet he seemed determined to leave Aldborough at the earliest possible opportunity. For the first time she hesitated in her adherence to her own conclusions. She remembered that her master had complained of the Bygraves before they returned to Aldborough; and she was conscious that her own incredulity had once already misled her when the appearance of the traveling-carriage at the door had proved even Mr.

Bygrave himself to be as good as his word.

Still Mrs. Lecount determined to act with unrelenting caution to the last. That night, when the doors were closed, she privately removed the keys from the door in front and the door at the back. She then softly opened her bedroom window and sat down by it, with her bonnet and cloak on, to prevent her taking cold. Noel Vanstone's window was on the same side of the house as her own. If any one came in the dark to speak to him from the garden beneath, they would speak to his housekeeper as well. Prepared at all points to intercept every form of clandestine communication which stratagem could invent, Mrs. Lecount watched through the quiet night. When morning came, she stole downstairs before the servant was up, restored the keys to their places, and re-occupied her position in the parlor until Noel Vanstone made his appearance at the breakfast-table. Had he altered his mind? No. He declined posting to the railway on account of the expense, but he was as firm as ever in his resolution to go to St. Crux. He desired that an inside place might be secured for him in the early coach. Suspicious to the last, Mrs. Lecount sent the baker's man to take the place. He was a public servant, and Mr. Bygrave would not suspect him of performing a private errand.

The coach called at Sea View. Mrs. Lecount saw her master established in his place, and ascertained that the other three inside seats were already occupied by strangers. She inquired of the coachman if the outside places (all of which were not yet filled up) had their full complement of passengers also. The man replied in the affirmative. He had two gentlemen to call for in the town, and the others would take their places at the inn. Mrs. Lecount forthwith turned her steps toward the inn, and took up her position on the Parade opposite from a point of view which would enable her to see the last of the coach on its departure. In ten minutes more it rattled away, full outside and in; and the housekeeper's own eyes assured her that neither Mr. Bygrave himself, nor any one belonging to North Shingles, was among the passengers.

There was only one more precaution to take, and Mrs. Lecount did not neglect it. Mr. Bygrave had doubtless seen the coach call at Sea View. He might hire a carriage and follow it to the railway on pure speculation. Mrs. Lecount remained within view of the inn (the only place at which a carriage could be obtained) for nearly an hour longer, waiting for events. Nothing happened; no carriage made its appearance; no pursuit of Noel Vanstone was now within the range of human possibility. The long strain on Mrs. Lecount's mind relaxed at last. She left her seat on the Parade, and returned in higher spirits than usual, to perform the closing household ceremonies at

Sea View.

She sat down alone in the parlor and drew a long breath of relief. Captain Wragge's calculations had not deceived him. The evidence of her own senses had at last conquered the housekeeper's incredulity, and had literally forced her into the opposite extreme of belief.

Estimating the events of the last three days from her own experience of them; knowing (as she certainly knew) that the first idea of going to St. Crux had been started by herself, and that her master had found no opportunity and shown no inclination to inform the family at North Shingles that he had accepted her proposal, Mrs. Lecount was fairly compelled to acknowledge that not a fragment of foundation remained to justify the continued suspicion of treachery in her own mind. Looking at the succession of circumstances under the new light thrown on them by results, she could see nothing unaccountable, nothing contradictory anywhere. The attempt to pass off the forged pictures as originals was in perfect harmony with the character of such a man as Mr. Bygrave. Her master's indignation at the attempt to impose on him; his plainly-expressed suspicion that Miss Bygrave was privy to it; his disappointment in the niece; his contemptuous treatment of the uncle on the Parade; his weariness of the place which had been the scene of his rash intimacy with strangers, and his readiness to quit it that morning, all commended themselves as genuine realities to the housekeeper's mind, for one sufficient reason. Her own eyes had seen Noel Vanstone take his departure from Aldborough without leaving, or attempting to leave, a single trace behind him for the Bygraves to follow.

Thus far the housekeeper's conclusions led her, but no further. She was too shrewd a woman to trust the future to chance and fortune. Her master's variable temper might relent. Accident might at any time give Mr. Bygrave an opportunity of repairing the error that he had committed, and of artfully regaining his lost place in Noel Vanstone's estimation. Admitting that circumstances had at last declared themselves unmistakably in her favor, Mrs. Lecount was not the less convinced that nothing would permanently assure her master's security for the future but the plain exposure of the conspiracy which she had striven to accomplish from the first--which she was resolved to accomplish still.

"I always enjoy myself at St. Crux," thought Mrs. Lecount, opening her account-books, and sorting the tradesmen's bills. "The admiral is a gentleman, the house is noble, the table is excellent. No matter! Here at Sea View I stay by myself till I have seen the inside of Miss Bygrave's wardrobe."

She packed her master's collection of curiosities in their various cases, settled the claims of the trades-people, and superintended the covering of the furniture in the course of the day. Toward nightfall she went out, bent on investigation, and ventured into the garden at North Shingles under cover of the darkness. She saw the light in the parlor window, and the lights in the windows of the rooms upstairs, as usual. After an instant's hesitation she stole to the house door, and noiselessly tried the handle from the outside. It turned the lock as she had expected, from her experience of houses at Aldborough and at other watering-places, but the door resisted her; the door was distrustfully bolted on the inside. After making that discovery, she went round to the back of the house, and ascertained that the door on that side was secured in the same manner. "Bolt your doors, Mr. Bygrave, as fast as you like," said the housekeeper, stealing back again to the Parade. "You can't bolt the entrance to your servant's pocket. The best lock you have may be opened by a golden key."

She went back to bed. The ceaseless watching, the unrelaxing excitement of the last two days, had worn her out.

The next morning she rose at seven o'clock. In half an hour more she saw the punctual Mr. Bygrave--as she had seen him on many previous mornings at the same time--issue from the gate of North Shingles, with his towels under his arm, and make his way to a boat that was waiting for him on the beach. Swimming was one among the many personal accomplishments of which the captain was master. He was rowed out to sea every morning, and took his bath luxuriously in the deep blue water. Mrs. Lecount had already computed the time consumed in this recreation by her watch, and had discovered that a full hour usually elapsed from the moment when he embarked on the beach to the moment when he returned.

During that period she had never seen any other inhabitant of North Shingles leave the house. The servant was no doubt at her work in the kitchen; Mrs. Bygrave was probably still in her bed; and Miss Bygrave (if she was up at that early hour) had perhaps received directions not to venture out in her uncle's absence. The difficulty of meeting the obstacle of Magdalen's presence in the house had been, for some days past, the one difficulty which all Mrs. Lecount's ingenuity had thus far proved unable to overcome.

She sat at the window for a quarter of an hour after the captain's boat had left the beach with her mind hard at work, and her eyes fixed mechanically on North Shingles--she sat considering what written excuse she could send to her master for delaying her departure from Aldborough for some days to

come--when the door of the house she was watching suddenly opened, and Magdalen herself appeared in the garden. There was no mistaking her figure and her dress. She took a few steps hastily toward the gate, stopped and pulled down the veil of her garden hat as if she felt the clear morning light too much for her, then hurried out on the Parade and walked away northward, in such haste, or in such pre-occupation of mind, that she went through the garden gate without closing it after her.

Mrs. Lecount started up from her chair with a moment's doubt of the evidence of her own eyes. Had the opportunity which she had been vainly plotting to produce actually offered itself to her of its own accord? Had the chances declared themselves at last in her favor, after steadily acting against her for so long? There was no doubt of it: in the popular phrase, "her luck had turned." She snatched up her bonnet and mantilla, and made for North Shingles without an instant's hesitation. Mr. Bygrave out at sea; Miss Bygrave away for a walk; Mrs. Bygrave and the servant both at home, and both easily dealt with--the opportunity was not to be lost; the risk was well worth running!

This time the house door was easily opened: no one had bolted it again after Magdalen's departure. Mrs. Lecount closed the door softly, listened for a moment in the passage, and heard the servant noisily occupied in the kitchen with her pots and pans. "If my lucky star leads me straight into Miss Bygrave's room," thought the housekeeper, stealing noiselessly up the stairs, "I may find my way to her wardrobe without disturbing anybody."

She tried the door nearest to the front of the house on the right-hand side of the landing. Capricious chance had deserted her already. The lock was turned. She tried the door opposite, on her left hand. The boots ranged symmetrically in a row, and the razors on the dressing-table, told her at once that she had not found the right room yet. She returned to the right-hand side of the landing, walked down a little passage leading to the back of the house, and tried a third door. The door opened, and the two opposite extremes of female humanity, Mrs. Wragge and Mrs. Lecount, stood face to face in an instant!

"I beg ten thousand pardons!" said Mrs. Lecount, with the most consummate self-possession.

"Lord bless us and save us!" cried Mrs. Wragge, with the most helpless amazement.

The two exclamations were uttered in a moment, and in that moment Mrs.

Lecount took the measure of her victim. Nothing of the least importance escaped her. She noticed the Oriental Cashmere Robe lying half made, and half unpicked again, on the table; she noticed the imbecile foot of Mrs. Wragge searching blindly in the neighborhood of her chair for a lost shoe; she noticed that there was a second door in the room besides the door by which she had entered, and a second chair within easy reach, on which she might do well to seat herself in a friendly and confidential way. "Pray don't resent my intrusion," pleaded Mrs. Lecount, taking the chair. "Pray allow me to explain myself!"

Speaking in her softest voice, surveying Mrs. Wragge with a sweet smile on her insinuating lips, and a melting interest in her handsome black eyes, the housekeeper told her little introductory series of falsehoods with an artless truthfulness of manner which the Father of Lies himself might have envied. She had heard from Mr. Bygrave that Mrs. Bygrave was a great invalid; she had constantly reproached herself, in her idle half-hours at Sea View (where she filled the situation of Mr. Noel Vanstone's housekeeper), for not having offered her friendly services to Mrs. Bygrave; she had been directed by her master (doubtless well known to Mrs. Bygrave, as one of her husband's friends, and, naturally, one of her charming niece's admirers), to join him that day at the residence to which he had removed from Aldborough; she was obliged to leave early, but she could not reconcile it to her conscience to go without calling to apologize for her apparent want of neighborly consideration; she had found nobody in the house; she had not been able to make the servant hear; she had presumed (not discovering that apartment downstairs) that Mrs. Bygrave's boudoir might be on the upper story; she had thoughtlessly committed an intrusion of which she was sincerely ashamed, and she could now only trust to Mrs. Bygrave's indulgence to excuse and forgive her.

A less elaborate apology might have served Mrs. Lecount's purpose. As soon as Mrs. Wragge's struggling perceptions had grasped the fact that her unexpected visitor was a neighbor well known to her by repute, her whole being became absorbed in admiration of Mrs. Lecount's lady-like manners, and Mrs. Lecount's perfectly-fitting gown! "What a noble way she has of talking!" thought poor Mrs. Wragge, as the housekeeper reached her closing sentence. "And, oh my heart alive, how nicely she's dressed!"

"I see I disturb you," pursued Mrs. Lecount, artfully availing herself of the Oriental Cashmere Robe as a means ready at hand of reaching the end she had in view--"I see I disturb you, ma'am, over an occupation which, I know by experience, requires the closest attention. Dear, dear me, you are un picking the dress again, I see, after it has been made! This is my own

experience again, Mrs. Bygrave. Some dresses are so obstinate! Some dresses seem to say to one, in so many words, 'No! you may do what you like with me; I won't fit!'"

Mrs. Wragge was greatly struck by this happy remark. She burst out laughing, and clapped her great hands in hearty approval.

"That's what this gown has been saying to me ever since I first put the scissors into it," she exclaimed, cheerfully. "I know I've got an awful big back, but that's no reason. Why should a gown be weeks on hand, and then not meet behind you after all? It hangs over my Boasom like a sack--it does. Look here, ma'am, at the skirt. It won't come right. It draggles in front, and cocks up behind. It shows my heels--and, Lord knows, I get into scrapes enough about my heels, without showing them into the bargain!"

"May I ask a favor?" inquired Mrs. Lecount, confidentially. "May I try, Mrs. Bygrave, if I can make my experience of any use to you? I think our bosoms, ma'am, are our great difficulty. Now, this bosom of yours?--Shall I say in plain words what I think? This bosom of yours is an Enormous Mistake!"

"Don't say that!" cried Mrs. Wragge, imploringly. "Don't please, there's a good soul! It's an awful big one, I know; but it's modeled, for all that, from one of Magdalen's own."

She was far too deeply interested on the subject of the dress to notice that she had forgotten herself already, and that she had referred to Magdalen by her own name. Mrs. Lecount's sharp ears detected the mistake the instant it was committed. "So! so!" she thought. "One discovery already. If I had ever doubted my own suspicions, here is an estimable lady who would now have set me right.--I beg your pardon," she proceeded, aloud, "did you say this was modeled from one of your niece's dresses?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Wragge. "It's as like as two peas."

"Then," replied Mrs. Lecount, adroitly, "there must be some serious mistake in the making of your niece's dress. Can you show it to me?"

"Bless your heart--yes!" cried Mrs. Wragge. "Step this way, ma'am; and bring the gown along with you, please. It keeps sliding off, out of pure aggravation, if you lay it out on the table. There's lots of room on the bed in here."

She opened the door of communication and led the way eagerly into Magdalen's room. As Mrs. Lecount followed, she stole a look at her watch.

Never before had time flown as it flew that morning! In twenty minutes more Mr. Bygrave would be back from his bath.

"There!" said Mrs. Wragge, throwing open the wardrobe, and taking a dress down from one of the pegs. "Look there! There's plaits on her Boasom, and plaits on mine. Six of one and half a dozen of the other; and mine are the biggest--that's all!"

Mrs. Lecount shook her head gravely, and entered forthwith into subtleties of disquisition on the art of dressmaking which had the desired effect of utterly bewildering the proprietor of the Oriental Cashmere Robe in less than three minutes.

"Don't!" cried Mrs. Wragge, imploringly. "Don't go on like that! I'm miles behind you; and my head's Buzzing already. Tell us, like a good soul, what's to be done. You said something about the pattern just now. Perhaps I'm too big for the pattern? I can't help it if I am. Many's the good cry I had, when I was a growing girl, over my own size! There's half too much of me, ma'am--measure me along or measure me across, I don't deny it--there's half too much of me, anyway."

"My dear madam," protested Mrs. Lecount, "you do yourself a wrong! Permit me to assure you that you possess a commanding figure--a figure of Minerva. A majestic simplicity in the form of a woman imperatively demands a majestic simplicity in the form of that woman's dress. The laws of costume are classical; the laws of costume must not be trifled with! Plaits for Venus, puffs for Juno, folds for Minerva. I venture to suggest a total change of pattern. Your niece has other dresses in her collection. Why may we not find a Minerva pattern among them?"

As she said those words, she led the way back to the wardrobe.

Mrs. Wragge followed, and took the dresses out one by one, shaking her head despondently. Silk dresses appeared, muslin dresses appeared. The one dress which remained invisible was the dress of which Mrs. Lecount was in search.

"There's the lot of 'em," said Mrs. Wragge. "They may do for Venus and the two other Ones (I've seen 'em in picters without a morsel of decent linen among the three), but they won't do for Me."

"Surely there is another dress left?" said Mrs. Lecount, pointing to the wardrobe, but touching nothing in it. "Surely I see something hanging in the

corner behind that dark shawl?"

Mrs. Wragge removed the shawl; Mrs. Lecount opened the door of the wardrobe a little wider. There--hitched carelessly on the innermost peg--there, with its white spots, and its double flounce, was the brown Alpaca dress!

The suddenness and completeness of the discovery threw the housekeeper, practiced dissembler as she was, completely off her guard. She started at the sight of the dress. The instant afterward her eyes turned uneasily toward Mrs. Wragge. Had the start been observed? It had passed entirely unnoticed. Mrs. Wragge's whole attention was fixed on the Alpaca dress: she was staring at it incomprehensibly, with an expression of the utmost dismay.

"You seem alarmed, ma'am," said Mrs. Lecount. "What is there in the wardrobe to frighten you?"

"I'd have given a crown piece out of my pocket," said Mrs. Wragge, "not to have set my eyes on that gown. It had gone clean out of my head, and now it's come back again. Cover it up!" cried Mrs. Wragge, throwing the shawl over the dress in a sudden fit of desperation. "If I look at it much longer, I shall think I'm back again in Vauxhall Walk!"

Vauxhall Walk! Those two words told Mrs. Lecount she was on the brink of another discovery. She stole a second look at her watch. There was barely ten minutes to spare before the time when Mr. Bygrave might return; there was not one of those ten minutes which might not bring his niece back to the house. Caution counseled Mrs. Lecount to go, without running any more risks. Curiosity rooted her to the spot, and gave the courage to stay at all hazards until the time was up. Her amiable smile began to harden a little as she probed her way tenderly into Mrs. Wragge's feeble mind.

"You have some unpleasant remembrances of Vauxhall Walk?" she said, with the gentlest possible tone of inquiry in her voice. "Or perhaps I should say, unpleasant remembrances of that dress belonging to your niece?"

"The last time I saw her with that gown on," said Mrs. Wragge, dropping into a chair and beginning to tremble, "was the time when I came back from shopping and saw the Ghost."

"The Ghost?" repeated Mrs. Lecount, clasping her hands in graceful astonishment. "Dear madam, pardon me! Is there such a thing in the world? Where did you see it? In Vauxhall Walk? Tell me--you are the first lady I ever

met with who has seen a ghost--pray tell me!"

Flattered by the position of importance which she had suddenly assumed in the housekeeper's eyes, Mrs. Wragge entered at full length into the narrative of her supernatural adventure. The breathless eagerness with which Mrs. Lecount listened to her description of the specter's costume, the specter's hurry on the stairs, and the specter's disappearance in the bedroom; the extraordinary interest which Mrs. Lecount displayed on hearing that the dress in the wardrobe was the very dress in which Magdalen happened to be attired at the awful moment when the ghost vanished, encouraged Mrs. Wragge to wade deeper and deeper into details, and to involve herself in a confusion of collateral circumstances out of which there seemed to be no prospect of her emerging for hours to come. Faster and faster the inexorable minutes flew by; nearer and nearer came the fatal moment of Mr. Bygrave's return. Mrs. Lecount looked at her watch for the third time, without an attempt on this occasion to conceal the action from her companion's notice. There were literally two minutes left for her to get clear of North Shingles. Two minutes would be enough, if no accident happened. She had discovered the Alpaca dress; she had heard the whole story of the adventure in Vauxhall Walk; and, more than that, she had even informed herself of the number of the house--which Mrs. Wragge happened to remember, because it answered to the number of years in her own age. All that was necessary to her master's complete enlightenment she had now accomplished. Even if there had been time to stay longer, there was nothing worth staying for. "I'll strike this worthy idiot dumb with a coup d'etat," thought the housekeeper, "and vanish before she recovers herself."

"Horrible!" cried Mrs. Lecount, interrupting the ghostly narrative by a shrill little scream and making for the door, to Mrs. Wragge's unutterable astonishment, without the least ceremony. "You freeze the very marrow of my bones. Good-morning!" She coolly tossed the Oriental Cashmere Robe into Mrs. Wragge's expansive lap and left the room in an instant.

As she swiftly descended the stairs, she heard the door of the bedroom open.

"Where are your manners?" cried a voice from above, hailing her feebly over the banisters. "What do you mean by pitching my gown at me in that way? You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" pursued Mrs. Wragge, turning from a lamb to a lioness, as she gradually realized the indignity offered to the Cashmere Robe. "You nasty foreigner, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Pursued by this valedictory address, Mrs. Lecount reached the house door, and opened it without interruption. She glided rapidly along the garden

path, passed through the gate, and finding herself safe on the Parade, stopped, and looked toward the sea.

The first object which her eyes encountered was the figure of Mr. Bygrave standing motionless on the beach--a petrified bather, with his towels in his hand! One glance at him was enough to show that he had seen the housekeeper passing out through his garden gate.

Rightly conjecturing that Mr. Bygrave's first impulse would lead him to make instant inquiries in his own house, Mrs. Lecount pursued her way back to Sea View as composedly as if nothing had happened. When she entered the parlor where her solitary breakfast was waiting for her, she was surprised to see a letter lying on the table. She approached to take it up with an expression of impatience, thinking it might be some tradesman's bill which she had forgotten.

It was the forged letter from Zurich.

CHAPTER XI.

THE postmark and the handwriting on the address (admirably imitated from the original) warned Mrs. Lecount of the contents of the letter before she opened it.

After waiting a moment to compose herself, she read the announcement of her brother's relapse.

There was nothing in the handwriting, there was no expression in any part of the letter which could suggest to her mind the faintest suspicion of foul play. Not the shadow of a doubt occurred to her that the summons to her brother's bedside was genuine. The hand that held the letter dropped heavily into her lap; she became pale, and old, and haggard in a moment. Thoughts, far removed from her present aims and interests; remembrances that carried her back to other lands than England, to other times than the time of her life in service, prolonged their inner shadows to the surface, and showed the traces of their mysterious passage darkly on her face. The minutes followed each other, and still the servant below stairs waited vainly for the parlor bell. The minutes followed each other, and still she sat, tearless and quiet, dead to the present and the future, living in the past.

The entrance of the servant, uncalled, roused her. With a heavy sigh, the cold and secret woman folded the letter up again and addressed herself to the interests and the duties of the passing time.

She decided the question of going or not going to Zurich, after a very brief consideration of it. Before she had drawn her chair to the breakfast-table she had resolved to go.

Admirably as Captain Wragge's stratagem had worked, it might have failed--unassisted by the occurrence of the morning--to achieve this result. The very accident against which it had been the captain's chief anxiety to guard--the accident which had just taken place in spite of him--was, of all the events that could have happened, the one event which falsified every previous calculation, by directly forwarding the main purpose of the conspiracy! If Mrs. Lecount had not obtained the information of which she was in search before the receipt of the letter from Zurich, the letter might have addressed her in vain. She would have hesitated before deciding to leave England, and that hesitation might have proved fatal to the captain's scheme.

As it was, with the plain proofs in her possession, with the gown discovered in Magdalen's wardrobe, with the piece cut out of it in her own pocketbook, and with the knowledge, obtained from Mrs. Wragge, of the very house in which the disguise had been put on, Mrs. Lecount had now at her command the means of warning Noel Vanstone as she had never been able to warn him yet, or, in other words, the means of guarding against any dangerous tendencies toward reconciliation with the Bygraves which might otherwise have entered his mind during her absence at Zurich. The only difficulty which now perplexed her was the difficulty of deciding whether she should communicate with her master personally or by writing, before her departure from England.

She looked again at the doctor's letter. The word "instantly," in the sentence which summoned her to her dying brother, was twice underlined. Admiral Bartram's house was at some distance from the railway; the time consumed in driving to St. Crux, and driving back again, might be time fatally lost on the journey to Zurich. Although she would infinitely have preferred a personal interview with Noel Vanstone, there was no choice on a matter of life and death but to save the precious hours by writing to him.

After sending to secure a place at once in the early coach, she sat down to write to her master.

Her first thought was to tell him all that had happened at North Shingles that morning. On reflection, however, she rejected the idea. Once already (in copying the personal description from Miss Garth's letter) she had trusted her weapons in her master's hands, and Mr. Bygrave had contrived to turn them against her. She resolved this time to keep them strictly in her own possession. The secret of the missing fragment of the Alpaca dress was known to no living creature but herself; and, until her return to England, she determined to keep it to herself. The necessary impression might be produced on Noel Vanstone's mind without venturing into details. She knew by experience the form of letter which might be trusted to produce an effect on him, and she now wrote it in these words:

"DEAR MR. NOEL--Sad news has reached me from Switzerland. My beloved brother is dying and his medical attendant summons me instantly to Zurich. The serious necessity of availing myself of the earliest means of conveyance to the Continent leaves me but one alternative. I must profit by the permission to leave England, if necessary, which you kindly granted to me at the beginning of my brother's illness, and I must avoid all delay by going straight to London, instead of turning aside, as I should have liked, to see

you first at St. Crux.

"Painfully as I am affected by the family calamity which has fallen on me, I cannot let this opportunity pass without adverting to another subject which seriously concerns your welfare, and in which (on that account) your old housekeeper feels the deepest interest.

"I am going to surprise and shock you, Mr. Noel. Pray don't be agitated! pray compose yourself!

"The impudent attempt to cheat you, which has happily opened your eyes to the true character of our neighbors at North Shingles, was not the only object which Mr. Bygrave had in forcing himself on your acquaintance. The infamous conspiracy with which you were threatened in London has been in full progress against you under Mr. Bygrave's direction, at Aldborough. Accident--I will tell you what accident when we meet--has put me in possession of information precious to your future security. I have discovered, to an absolute certainty, that the person calling herself Miss Bygrave is no other than the woman who visited us in disguise at Vauxhall Walk.

"I suspected this from the first, but I had no evidence to support my suspicions; I had no means of combating the false impression produced on you. My hands, I thank Heaven, are tied no longer. I possess absolute proof of the assertion that I have just made--proof that your own eyes can see--proof that would satisfy you, if you were judge in a Court of Justice.

"Perhaps even yet, Mr. Noel, you will refuse to believe me? Be it so. Believe me or not, I have one last favor to ask, which your English sense of fair play will not deny me.

"This melancholy journey of mine will keep me away from England for a fortnight, or, at most, for three weeks. You will oblige me--and you will certainly not sacrifice your own convenience and pleasure--by staying through that interval with your friends at St. Crux. If, before my return, some unexpected circumstance throws you once more into the company of the Bygraves, and if your natural kindness of heart inclines you to receive the excuses which they will, in that case, certainly address to you, place one trifling restraint on yourself, for your own sake, if not for mine. Suspend your flirtation with the young lady (I beg pardon of all other young ladies for calling her so!) until my return. If, when I come back, I fail to prove to you that Miss Bygrave is the woman who wore that disguise, and used those threatening words, in Vauxhall Wall, I will engage to leave your service at a

day's notice; and I will atone for the sin of bearing false witness against my neighbor by resigning every claim I have to your grateful remembrance, on your father's account as well as on your own. I make this engagement without reserves of any kind; and I promise to abide by it--if my proofs fail--on the faith of a good Catholic, and the word of an honest woman. Your faithful servant,

"VIRGINIE LECOUNT."

The closing sentences of this letter--as the housekeeper well knew when she wrote them--embodied the one appeal to Noel Vanstone which could be certainly trusted to produce a deep and lasting effect. She might have staked her oath, her life, or her reputation, on proving the assertion which she had made, and have failed to leave a permanent impression on his mind. But when she staked not only her position in his service, but her pecuniary claims on him as well, she at once absorbed the ruling passion of his life in expectation of the result. There was not a doubt of it, in the strongest of all his interests--the interest of saving his money--he would wait.

"Checkmate for Mr. Bygrave!" thought Mrs. Lecount, as she sealed and directed the letter. "The battle is over--the game is played out."

While Mrs. Lecount was providing for her master's future security at Sea View, events were in full progress at North Shingles.

As soon as Captain Wragge recovered his astonishment at the housekeeper's appearance on his own premises, he hurried into the house, and, guided by his own forebodings of the disaster that had happened, made straight for his wife's room.

Never, in all her former experience, had poor Mrs. Wragge felt the full weight of the captain's indignation as she felt it now. All the little intelligence she naturally possessed vanished at once in the whirlwind of her husband's rage. The only plain facts which he could extract from her were two in number. In the first place, Magdalen's rash desertion of her post proved to have no better reason to excuse it than Magdalen's incorrigible impatience: she had passed a sleepless night; she had risen feverish and wretched; and she had gone out, reckless of all consequences, to cool her burning head in the fresh air. In the second place, Mrs. Wragge had, on her own confession, seen Mrs. Lecount, had talked with Mrs. Lecount, and had ended by telling Mrs. Lecount the story of the ghost. Having made these discoveries, Captain Wragge wasted no time in contending with his wife's terror and confusion. He withdrew at once to a window which commanded an uninterrupted

prospect of Noel Vanstone's house, and there established himself on the watch for events at Sea View, precisely as Mrs. Lecount had established herself on the watch for events at North Shingles.

Not a word of comment on the disaster of the morning escaped him when Magdalen returned and found him at his post. His flow of language seemed at last to have run dry. "I told you what Mrs. Wragge would do," he said, "and Mrs. Wragge has done it." He sat unflinchingly at the window with a patience which Mrs. Lecount herself could not have surpassed. The one active proceeding in which he seemed to think it necessary to engage was performed by deputy. He sent the servant to the inn to hire a chaise and a fast horse, and to say that he would call himself before noon that day and tell the hostler when the vehicle would be wanted. Not a sign of impatience escaped him until the time drew near for the departure of the early coach. Then the captain's curly lips began to twitch with anxiety, and the captain's restless fingers beat the devil's tattoo unremittingly on the window-pane.

The coach appeared at last, and drew up at Sea View. In a minute more, Captain Wragge's own observation informed him that one among the passengers who left Aldborough that morning was--Mrs. Lecount.

The main uncertainty disposed of, a serious question--suggested by the events of the morning--still remained to be solved. Which was the destined end of Mrs. Lecount's journey--Zurich or St. Crux? That she would certainly inform her master of Mrs. Wragge's ghost story, and of every other disclosure in relation to names and places which might have escaped Mrs. Wragge's lips, was beyond all doubt. But of the two ways at her disposal of doing the mischief--either personally or by letter--it was vitally important to the captain to know which she had chosen. If she had gone to the admiral's, no choice would be left him but to follow the coach, to catch the train by which she traveled, and to outstrip her afterward on the drive from the station in Essex to St. Crux. If, on the contrary, she had been contented with writing to her master, it would only be necessary to devise measures for intercepting the letter. The captain decided on going to the post-office, in the first place. Assuming that the housekeeper had written, she would not have left the letter at the mercy of the servant--she would have seen it safely in the letter-box before leaving Aldborough.

"Good-morning," said the captain, cheerfully addressing the postmaster. "I am Mr. Bygrave of North Shingles. I think you have a letter in the box, addressed to Mr.--?"

The postmaster was a short man, and consequently a man with a proper

idea of his own importance. He solemnly checked Captain Wragge in full career.

"When a letter is once posted, sir," he said, "nobody out of the office has any business with it until it reaches its address."

The captain was not a man to be daunted, even by a postmaster. A bright idea struck him. He took out his pocketbook, in which Admiral Bartram's address was written, and returned to the charge.

"Suppose a letter has been wrongly directed by mistake?" he began. "And suppose the writer wants to correct the error after the letter is put into the box?"

"When a letter is once posted, sir," reiterated the impenetrable local authority, "nobody out of the office touches it on any pretense whatever."

"Granted, with all my heart," persisted the captain. "I don't want to touch it--I only want to explain myself. A lady has posted a letter here, addressed to 'Noel Vanstone, Esq., Admiral Bartram's, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, Essex.' She wrote in a great hurry, and she is not quite certain whether she added the name of the post-town, 'Ossory.' It is of the last importance that the delivery of the letter should not be delayed. What is to hinder your facilitating the post-office work, and obliging a lady, by adding the name of the post-town (if it happens to be left out), with your own hand? I put it to you as a zealous officer, what possible objection can there be to granting my request?"

The postmaster was compelled to acknowledge that there could be no objection, provided nothing but a necessary line was added to the address, provided nobody touched the letter but himself, and provided the precious time of the post-office was not suffered to run to waste. As there happened to be nothing particular to do at that moment, he would readily oblige the lady at Mr. Bygrave's request.

Captain Wragge watched the postmaster's hands, as they sorted the letters in the box, with breathless eagerness. Was the letter there? Would the hands of the zealous public servant suddenly stop? Yes! They stopped, and picked out a letter from the rest.

"'Noel Vanstone, Esquire,' did you say?" asked the postmaster, keeping the letter in his own hand.

"'Noel Vanstone, Esquire,'" replied the captain, "'Admiral Bartram's, St.

Crux-in-the-Marsh.'"

"Ossory, Essex," chimed in the postmaster, throwing the letter back into the box. "The lady has made no mistake, sir. The address is quite right."

Nothing but a timely consideration of the heavy debt he owed to appearances prevented Captain Wragge from throwing his tall white hat up in the air as soon as he found the street once more. All further doubt was now at an end. Mrs. Lecount had written to her master--therefore Mrs. Lecount was on her way to Zurich!

With his head higher than ever, with the tails of his respectable frock-coat floating behind him in the breeze, with his bosom's native impudence sitting lightly on its throne, the captain strutted to the inn and called for the railway time-table. After making certain calculations (in black and white, as a matter of course), he ordered his chaise to be ready in an hour--so as to reach the railway in time for the second train running to London--with which there happened to be no communication from Aldborough by coach.

His next proceeding was of a far more serious kind; his next proceeding implied a terrible certainty of success. The day of the week was Thursday. From the inn he went to the church, saw the clerk, and gave the necessary notice for a marriage by license on the following Monday.

Bold as he was, his nerves were a little shaken by this last achievement; his hand trembled as it lifted the latch of the garden gate. He doctored his nerves with brandy and water before he sent for Magdalen to inform her of the proceedings of the morning. Another outbreak might reasonably be expected when she heard that the last irrevocable step had been taken, and that notice had been given of the wedding-day.

The captain's watch warned him to lose no time in emptying his glass. In a few minutes he sent the necessary message upstairs. While waiting for Magdalen's appearance, he provided himself with certain materials which were now necessary to carry the enterprise to its crowning point. In the first place, he wrote his assumed name (by no means in so fine a hand as usual) on a blank visiting-card, and added underneath these words: "Not a moment is to be lost. I am waiting for you at the door--come down to me directly." His next proceeding was to take some half-dozen envelopes out of the case, and to direct them all alike to the following address: "Thomas Bygrave, Esq., Mussared's Hotel, Salisbury Street, Strand, London." After carefully placing the envelopes and the card in his breast-pocket, he shut up the desk. As he rose from the writing-table, Magdalen came into the room.

The captain took a moment to decide on the best method of opening the interview, and determined, in his own phrase, to dash at it. In two words he told Magdalen what had happened, and informed her that Monday was to be her wedding-day.

He was prepared to quiet her, if she burst into a frenzy of passion; to reason with her, if she begged for time; to sympathize with her, if she melted into tears. To his inexpressible surprise, results falsified all his calculations. She heard him without uttering a word, without shedding a tear. When he had done, she dropped into a chair. Her large gray eyes stared at him vacantly. In one mysterious instant all her beauty left her; her face stiffened awfully, like the face of a corpse. For the first time in the captain's experience of her, fear--all-mastering fear--had taken possession of her, body and soul.

"You are not flinching," he said, trying to rouse her. "Surely you are not flinching at the last moment?"

No light of intelligence came into her eyes, no change passed over her face. But she heard him--for she moved a little in the chair, and slowly shook her head.

"You planned this marriage of your own freewill," pursued the captain, with the furtive look and the faltering voice of a man ill at ease. "It was your own idea--not mine. I won't have the responsibility laid on my shoulders--no! not for twice two hundred pounds. If your resolution fails you; if you think better of it--?"

He stopped. Her face was changing; her lips were moving at last. She slowly raised her left hand, with the fingers outspread; she looked at it as if it was a hand that was strange to her; she counted the days on it, the days before the marriage.

"Friday, one," she whispered to herself; "Saturday, two; Sunday, three; Monday--" Her hands dropped into her lap, her face stiffened again; the deadly fear fastened its paralyzing hold on her once more, and the next words died away on her lips.

Captain Wragge took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"Damn the two hundred pounds!" he said. "Two thousand wouldn't pay me for this!"

He put the handkerchief back, took the envelopes which he had addressed to himself out of his pocket, and, approaching her closely for the first time, laid his hand on her arm.

"Rouse yourself," he said, "I have a last word to say to you. Can you listen?"

She struggled, and roused herself--a faint tinge of color stole over her white cheeks--she bowed her head.

"Look at these," pursued Captain Wragge, holding up the envelopes. "If I turn these to the use for which they have been written, Mrs. Lecount's master will never receive Mrs. Lecount's letter. If I tear them up, he will know by to-morrow's post that you are the woman who visited him in Vauxhall Walk. Say the word! Shall I tear the envelopes up, or shall I put them back in my pocket?"

There was a pause of dead silence. The murmur of the summer waves on the shingle of the beach and the voices of the summer idlers on the Parade floated through the open window, and filled the empty stillness of the room.

She raised her head; she lifted her hand and pointed steadily to the envelopes.

"Put them back," she said.

"Do you mean it?" he asked.

"I mean it."

As she gave that answer, there was a sound of wheels on the road outside.

"You hear those wheels?" said Captain Wragge.

"I hear them."

"You see the chaise?" said the captain, pointing through the window as the chaise which had been ordered from the inn made its appearance at the garden gate.

"I see it."

"And, of your own free-will, you tell me to go?"

"Yes. Go!"

Without another word he left her. The servant was waiting at the door with his traveling bag. "Miss Bygrave is not well," he said. "Tell your mistress to go to her in the parlor."

He stepped into the chaise, and started on the first stage of the journey to St. Crux.

CHAPTER XII.

TOWARD three o'clock in the afternoon Captain Wragge stopped at the nearest station to Ossory which the railway passed in its course through Essex. Inquiries made on the spot informed him that he might drive to St. Crux, remain there for a quarter of an hour, and return to the station in time for an evening train to London. In ten minutes more the captain was on the road again, driving rapidly in the direction of the coast.

After proceeding some miles on the highway, the carriage turned off, and the coachman involved himself in an intricate network of cross-roads.

"Are we far from St. Crux?" asked the captain, growing impatient, after mile on mile had been passed without a sign of reaching the journey's end.

"You'll see the house, sir, at the next turn in the road," said the man.

The next turn in the road brought them within view of the open country again. Ahead of the carriage, Captain Wragge saw a long dark line against the sky--the line of the sea-wall which protects the low coast of Essex from inundation. The flat intermediate country was intersected by a labyrinth of tidal streams, winding up from the invisible sea in strange fantastic curves--rivers at high water, and channels of mud at low. On his right hand was a quaint little village, mostly composed of wooden houses, straggling down to the brink of one of the tidal streams. On his left hand, further away, rose the gloomy ruins of an abbey, with a desolate pile of buildings, which covered two sides of a square attached to it. One of the streams from the sea (called, in Essex, "backwaters") curled almost entirely round the house. Another, from an opposite quarter, appeared to run straight through the grounds, and to separate one side of the shapeless mass of buildings, which was in moderate repair, from another, which was little better than a ruin. Bridges of wood and bridges of brick crossed the stream, and gave access to the house from all points of the compass. No human creature appeared in the neighborhood, and no sound was heard but the hoarse barking of a house-dog from an invisible courtyard.

"Which door shall I drive to, sir?" asked the coachman. "The front or the back?"

"The back," said Captain Wragge, feeling that the less notice he attracted in his present position, the safer that position might be.

The carriage twice crossed the stream before the coachman made his way through the grounds into a dreary inclosure of stone. At an open door on the inhabited side of the place sat a weather-beaten old man, busily at work on a half-finished model of a ship. He rose and came to the carriage door, lifting up his spectacles on his forehead, and looking disconcerted at the appearance of a stranger.

"Is Mr. Noel Vanstone staying here?" asked Captain Wragge.

"Yes, sir," replied the old man. "Mr. Noel came yesterday."

"Take that card to Mr. Vanstone, if you please," said the captain, "and say I am waiting here to see him."

In a few minutes Noel Vanstone made his appearance, breathless and eager--absorbed in anxiety for news from Aldborough. Captain Wragge opened the carriage door, seized his outstretched hand, and pulled him in without ceremony.

"Your housekeeper has gone," whispered the captain, "and you are to be married on Monday. Don't agitate yourself, and don't express your feelings--there isn't time for it. Get the first active servant you can find in the house to pack your bag in ten minutes, take leave of the admiral, and come back at once with me to the London train."

Noel Vanstone faintly attempted to ask a question. The captain declined to hear it.

"As much talk as you like on the road," he said. "Time is too precious for talking here. How do we know Lecount may not think better of it? How do we know she may not turn back before she gets to Zurich?"

That startling consideration terrified Noel Vanstone into instant submission.

"What shall I say to the admiral?" he asked, helplessly.

"Tell him you are going to be married, to be sure! What does it matter, now Lecount's back is turned? If he wonders you didn't tell him before, say it's a runaway match, and the bride is waiting for you. Stop! Any letters addressed to you in your absence will be sent to this place, of course? Give the admiral these envelopes, and tell him to forward your letters under cover to me. I am an old customer at the hotel we are going to; and if we find the

place full, the landlord may be depended on to take care of any letters with my name on them. A safe address in London for your correspondence may be of the greatest importance. How do we know Lecount may not write to you on her way to Zurich?"

"What a head you have got!" cried Noel Vanstone, eagerly taking the envelopes. "You think of everything."

He left the carriage in high excitement, and ran back into the house. In ten minutes more Captain Wragge had him in safe custody, and the horses started on their return journey.

The travelers reached London in good time that evening, and found accommodation at the hotel.

Knowing the restless, inquisitive nature of the man he had to deal with, Captain Wragge had anticipated some little difficulty and embarrassment in meeting the questions which Noel Vanstone might put to him on the way to London. To his great relief, a startling domestic discovery absorbed his traveling companion's whole attention at the outset of the journey. By some extraordinary oversight, Miss Bygrave had been left, on the eve of her marriage, unprovided with a maid. Noel Vanstone declared that he would take the whole responsibility of correcting this deficiency in the arrangements, on his own shoulders; he would not trouble Mr. Bygrave to give him any assistance; he would confer, when they got to their journey's end, with the landlady of the hotel, and would examine the candidates for the vacant office himself. All the way to London, he returned again and again to the same subject; all the evening, at the hotel, he was in and out of the landlady's sitting-room, until he fairly obliged her to lock the door. In every other proceeding which related to his marriage, he had been kept in the background; he had been compelled to follow in the footsteps of his ingenious friend. In the matter of the lady's maid he claimed his fitting position at last--he followed nobody; he took the lead!

The forenoon of the next day was devoted to obtaining the license--the personal distinction of making the declaration on oath being eagerly accepted by Noel Vanstone, who swore, in perfect good faith (on information previously obtained from the captain) that the lady was of age. The document procured, the bridegroom returned to examine the characters and qualifications of the women-servants out of the place whom the landlady had engaged to summon to the hotel, while Captain Wragge turned his steps, "on business personal to himself," toward the residence of a friend in a distant quarter of London.

The captain's friend was connected with the law, and the captain's business was of a twofold nature. His first object was to inform himself of the legal bearings of the approaching marriage on the future of the husband and the wife. His second object was to provide beforehand for destroying all traces of the destination to which he might betake himself when he left Aldborough on the wedding-day. Having reached his end successfully in both these cases, he returned to the hotel, and found Noel Vanstone nursing his offended dignity in the landlady's sitting-room. Three ladies' maids had appeared to pass their examination, and had all, on coming to the question of wages, impudently declined accepting the place. A fourth candidate was expected to present herself on the next day; and, until she made her appearance, Noel Vanstone positively declined removing from the metropolis. Captain Wragge showed his annoyance openly at the unnecessary delay thus occasioned in the return to Aldborough, but without producing any effect. Noel Vanstone shook his obstinate little head, and solemnly refused to trifle with his responsibilities.

The first event which occurred on Saturday morning was the arrival of Mrs. Lecount's letter to her master, inclosed in one of the envelopes which the captain had addressed to himself. He received it (by previous arrangement with the waiter) in his bedroom--read it with the closest attention--and put it away carefully in his pocketbook. The letter was ominous of serious events to come when the housekeeper returned to England; and it was due to Magdalen--who was the person threatened--to place the warning of danger in her own possession.

Later in the day the fourth candidate appeared for the maid's situation--a young woman of small expectations and subdued manners, who looked (as the landlady remarked) like a person overtaken by misfortune. She passed the ordeal of examination successfully, and accepted the wages offered with out a murmur. The engagement having been ratified on both sides, fresh delays ensued, of which Noel Vanstone was once more the cause. He had not yet made up his mind whether he would, or would not, give more than a guinea for the wedding-ring; and he wasted the rest of the day to such disastrous purpose in one jeweler's shop after another, that he and the captain, and the new lady's maid (who traveled with them), were barely in time to catch the last train from London that evening. It was late at night when they left the railway at the nearest station to Aldborough. Captain Wragge had been strangely silent all through the journey. His mind was ill at ease. He had left Magdalen, under very critical circumstances, with no fit person to control her, and he was wholly ignorant of the progress of events in his absence at North Shingles.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT had happened at Aldborough in Captain Wragge's absence? Events had occurred which the captain's utmost dexterity might have found it hard to remedy.

As soon as the chaise had left North Shingles, Mrs. Wragge received the message which her husband had charged the servant to deliver. She hastened into the parlor, bewildered by her stormy interview with the captain, and penitently conscious that she had done wrong, without knowing what the wrong was. If Magdalen's mind had been unoccupied by the one idea of the marriage which now filled it--if she had possessed composure enough to listen to Mrs. Wragge's rambling narrative of what had happened during her interview with the housekeeper--Mrs. Lecount's visit to the wardrobe must, sooner or later, have formed part of the disclosure; and Magdalen, although she might never have guessed the truth, must at least have been warned that there was some element of danger lurking treacherously in the Alpaca dress. As it was, no such consequence as this followed Mrs. Wragge's appearance in the parlor; for no such consequence was now possible.

Events which had happened earlier in the morning, events which had happened for days and weeks past, had vanished as completely from Magdalen's mind as if they had never taken place. The horror of the coming Monday--the merciless certainty implied in the appointment of the day and hour--petrified all feeling in her, and annihilated all thought. Mrs. Wragge made three separate attempts to enter on the subject of the housekeeper's visit. The first time she might as well have addressed herself to the wind, or to the sea. The second attempt seemed likely to be more successful. Magdalen sighed, listened for a moment indifferently, and then dismissed the subject. "It doesn't matter," she said. "The end has come all the same. I'm not angry with you. Say no more." Later in the day, from not knowing what else to talk about, Mrs. Wragge tried again. This time Magdalen turned on her impatiently. "For God's sake, don't worry me about trifles! I can't bear it." Mrs. Wragge closed her lips on the spot, and returned to the subject no more. Magdalen, who had been kind to her at all other times, had angrily forbidden it. The captain--utterly ignorant of Mrs. Lecount's interest in the secrets of the wardrobe--had never so much as approached it. All the information that he had extracted from his wife's mental confusion, he had extracted by putting direct questions, derived purely from the resources of his own knowledge. He had insisted on plain answers, without excuses of

any kind; he had carried his point as usual; and his departure the same morning had left him no chance of re-opening the question, even if his irritation against his wife had permitted him to do so. There the Alpaca dress hung, neglected in the dark--the unnoticed, unsuspected center of dangers that were still to come.

Toward the afternoon Mrs. Wragge took courage to start a suggestion of her own--she pleaded for a little turn in the fresh air.

Magdalen passively put on her hat; passively accompanied her companion along the public walk, until they reached its northward extremity. Here the beach was left solitary, and here they sat down, side by side, on the shingle. It was a bright, exhilarating day; pleasure-boats were sailing on the calm blue water; Aldborough was idling happily afloat and ashore. Mrs. Wragge recovered her spirits in the gayety of the prospect--she amused herself like a child, by tossing pebbles into the sea. From time to time she stole a questioning glance at Magdalen, and saw no encouragement in her manner, no change to cordiality in her face. She sat silent on the slope of the shingle, with her elbow on her knee, and her head resting on her hand, looking out over the sea--looking with rapt attention, and yet with eyes that seemed to notice nothing. Mrs. Wragge wearied of the pebbles, and lost her interest in looking at the pleasure-boats. Her great head began to nod heavily, and she dozed in the warm, drowsy air. When she woke, the pleasure-boats were far off; their sails were white specks in the distance. The idlers on the beach were thinned in number; the sun was low in the heaven; the blue sea was darker, and rippled by a breeze. Changes on sky and earth and ocean told of the waning day; change was everywhere--except close at her side. There Magdalen sat, in the same position, with weary eyes that still looked over the sea, and still saw nothing.

"Oh, do speak to me!" said Mrs. Wragge.

Magdalen started, and looked about her vacantly.

"It's late," she said, shivering under the first sensation that reached her of the rising breeze. "Come home; you want your tea." They walked home in silence.

"Don't be angry with me for asking," said Mrs. Wragge, as they sat together at the tea-table. "Are you troubled, my dear, in your mind?"

"Yes," replied Magdalen. "Don't notice me. My trouble will soon be over."

She waited patiently until Mrs. Wragge had made an end of the meal, and then went upstairs to her own room.

"Monday!" she said, as she sat down at her toilet-table. "Something may happen before Monday comes!"

Her fingers wandered mechanically among the brushes and combs, the tiny bottles and cases placed on the table. She set them in order, now in one way, and now in another--then on a sudden pushed them away from her in a heap. For a minute or two her hands remained idle. That interval passed, they grew restless again, and pulled the two little drawers backward and forward in their grooves. Among the objects laid in one of them was a Prayer-book which had belonged to her at Combe-Raven, and which she had saved with her other relics of the past, when she and her sister had taken their farewell of home. She opened the Prayer-book, after a long hesitation, at the Marriage Service, shut it again before she had read a line, and put it back hurriedly in one of the drawers. After turning the key in the locks, she rose and walked to the window. "The horrible sea!" she said, turning from it with a shudder of disgust--"the lonely, dreary, horrible sea!"

She went back to the drawer, and took the Prayer-book out for the second time, half opened it again at the Marriage Service, and impatiently threw it back into the drawer. This time, after turning the lock, she took the key away, walked with it in her hand to the open window, and threw it violently from her into the garden. It fell on a bed thickly planted with flowers. It was invisible; it was lost. The sense of its loss seemed to relieve her.

"Something may happen on Friday; something may happen on Saturday; something may happen on Sunday. Three days still!"

She closed the green shutters outside the window and drew the curtains to darken the room still more. Her head felt heavy; her eyes were burning hot. She threw herself on her bed, with a sullen impulse to sleep away the time. The quiet of the house helped her; the darkness of the room helped her; the stupor of mind into which she had fallen had its effect on her senses; she dropped into a broken sleep. Her restless hands moved incessantly, her head tossed from side to side of the pillow, but still she slept. Ere long words fell by ones and twos from her lips; words whispered in her sleep, growing more and more continuous, more and more articulate, the longer the sleep lasted--words which seemed to calm her restlessness and to hush her into deeper repose. She smiled; she was in the happy land of dreams; Frank's name escaped her. "Do you love me, Frank?" she whispered. "Oh, my darling, say it again! say it again!"

The time passed, the room grew darker; and still she slumbered and dreamed. Toward sunset--without any noise inside the house or out to account for it--she started up on the bed, awake again in an instant. The drowsy obscurity of the room struck her with terror. She ran to the window, pushed open the shutters, and leaned far out into the evening air and the evening light. Her eyes devoured the trivial sights on the beach; her ears drank in the welcome murmur of the sea. Anything to deliver her from the waking impression which her dreams had left! No more darkness, no more repose. Sleep that came mercifully to others came treacherously to her. Sleep had only closed her eyes on the future, to open them on the past.

She went down again into the parlor, eager to talk--no matter how idly, no matter on what trifles. The room was empty. Perhaps Mrs. Wragge had gone to her work--perhaps she was too tired to talk. Magdalen took her hat from the table and went out. The sea that she had shrunk from, a few hours since, looked friendly now. How lovely it was in its cool evening blue! What a god-like joy in the happy multitude of waves leaping up to the light of heaven!

She stayed out until the night fell and the stars appeared. The night steadied her.

By slow degrees her mind recovered its balance and she looked her position unflinchingly in the face. The vain hope that accident might defeat the very end for which, of her own free-will, she had ceaselessly plotted and toiled, vanished and left her; self-dissipated in its own weakness. She knew the true alternative, and faced it. On one side was the revolting ordeal of the marriage; on the other, the abandonment of her purpose. Was it too late to choose between the sacrifice of the purpose and the sacrifice of herself? Yes! too late. The backward path had closed behind her. Time that no wish could change, Time that no prayers could recall, had made her purpose a part of herself: once she had governed it; now it governed her. The more she shrank, the harder she struggled, the more mercilessly it drove her on. No other feeling in her was strong enough to master it--not even the horror that was maddening her--the horror of her marriage.

Toward nine o'clock she went back to the house.

"Walking again!" said Mrs. Wragge, meeting her at the door. "Come in and sit down, my dear. How tired you must be!"

Magdalen smiled, and patted Mrs. Wragge kindly on the shoulder.

"You forget how strong I am," she said. "Nothing hurts me."

She lit her candle and went upstairs again into her room. As she returned to the old place by her toilet-table, the vain hope in the three days of delay, the vain hope of deliverance by accident, came back to her--this time in a form more tangible than the form which it had hitherto worn.

"Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Something may happen to him; something may happen to me. Something serious; something fatal. One of us may die."

A sudden change came over her face. She shivered, though there was no cold in the air. She started, though there was no noise to alarm her.

"One of us may die. I may be the one."

She fell into deep thought, roused herself after a while, and, opening the door, called to Mrs. Wragge to come and speak to her.

"You were right in thinking I should fatigue myself," she said. "My walk has been a little too much for me. I feel tired, and I am going to bed. Good-night." She kissed Mrs. Wragge and softly closed the door again.

After a few turns backward and forward in the room, she abruptly opened her writing-case and began a letter to her sister. The letter grew and grew under her hands; she filled sheet after sheet of note-paper. Her heart was full of her subject: it was her own story addressed to Norah. She shed no tears; she was composed to a quiet sadness. Her pen ran smoothly on. After writing for more than two hours, she left off while the letter was still unfinished. There was no signature attached to it--there was a blank space reserved, to be filled up at some other time. After putting away the case, with the sheets of writing secured inside it, she walked to the window for air, and stood there looking out.

The moon was waning over the sea. The breeze of the earlier hours had died out. On earth and ocean, the spirit of the Night brooded in a deep and awful calm.

Her head drooped low on her bosom, and all the view waned before her eyes with the waning moon. She saw no sea, no sky. Death, the Tempter, was busy at her heart. Death, the Tempter, pointed homeward, to the grave of her dead parents in Combe-Raven churchyard.

"Nineteen last birthday," she thought. "Only nineteen!" She moved away from the window, hesitated, and then looked out again at the view. "The beautiful night!" she said, gratefully. "Oh, the beautiful night!"

She left the window and lay down on her bed. Sleep, that had come treacherously before, came mercifully now; came deep and dreamless, the image of her last waking thought--the image of Death.

Early the next morning Mrs. Wragge went into Magdalen's room, and found that she had risen betimes. She was sitting before the glass, drawing the comb slowly through and through her hair--thoughtful and quiet.

"How do you feel this morning, my dear?" asked Mrs. Wragge. "Quite well again?"

"Yes."

After replying in the affirmative, she stopped, considered for a moment, and suddenly contradicted herself.

"No," she said, "not quite well. I am suffering a little from toothache."

As she altered her first answer in those words she gave a twist to her hair with the comb, so that it fell forward and hid her face.

At breakfast she was very silent, and she took nothing but a cup of tea.

"Let me go to the chemist's and get something," said Mrs. Wragge.

"No, thank you."

"Do let me!"

"No!"

She refused for the second time, sharply and angrily. As usual, Mrs. Wragge submitted, and let her have her own way. When breakfast was over, she rose, without a word of explanation, and went out. Mrs. Wragge watched her from the window and saw that she took the direction of the chemist's shop.

On reaching the chemist's door she stopped--paused before entering the shop, and looked in at the window--hesitated, and walked away a little--hesitated again, and took the first turning which led back to the beach.

Without looking about her, without caring what place she chose, she seated herself on the shingle. The only persons who were near to her, in the position she now occupied, were a nursemaid and two little boys. The youngest of the two had a tiny toy-ship in his hand. After looking at Magdalen for a little while with the quaintest gravity and attention, the boy suddenly approached her, and opened the way to an acquaintance by putting his toy composedly on her lap.

"Look at my ship," said the child, crossing his hands on Magdalen's knee.

She was not usually patient with children. In happier days she would not have met the boy's advance toward her as she met it now. The hard despair in her eyes left them suddenly; her fast-closed lips parted and trembled. She put the ship back into the child's hands and lifted him on her lap.

"Will you give me a kiss?" she said, faintly. The boy looked at his ship as if he would rather have kissed the ship.

She repeated the question--repeated it almost humbly. The child put his hand up to her neck and kissed her.

"If I was your sister, would you love me?" All the misery of her friendless position, all the wasted tenderness of her heart, poured from her in those words.

"Would you love me?" she repeated, hiding her face on the bosom of the child's frock.

"Yes," said the boy. "Look at my ship."

She looked at the ship through her gathering tears.

"What do you call it?" she asked, trying ha rd to find her way even to the interest of a child.

"I call it Uncle Kirke's ship," said the boy. "Uncle Kirke has gone away."

The name recalled nothing to her memory. No remembrances but old remembrances lived in her now. "Gone?" she repeated absently, thinking what she should say to her little friend next.

"Yes," said the boy. "Gone to China."

Even from the lips of a child that word struck her to the heart. She put Kirke's little nephew off her lap, and instantly left the beach.

As she turned back to the house, the struggle of the past night renewed itself in her mind. But the sense of relief which the child had brought to her, the reviving tenderness which she had felt while he sat on her knee, influenced her still. She was conscious of a dawning hope, opening freshly on her thoughts, as the boy's innocent eyes had opened on her face when he came to her on the beach. Was it too late to turn back? Once more she asked herself that question, and now, for the first time, she asked it in doubt.

She ran up to her own room with a lurking distrust in her changed self which warned her to act, and not to think. Without waiting to remove her shawl or to take off her hat, she opened her writing-case and addressed these lines to Captain Wragge as fast as her pen could trace them:

"You will find the money I promised you inclosed in this. My resolution has failed me. The horror of marrying him is more than I can face. I have left Aldborough. Pity my weakness, and forget me. Let us never meet again."

With throbbing heart, with eager, trembling fingers, she drew her little white silk bag from her bosom and took out the banknotes to inclose them in the letter. Her hand searched impetuously; her hand had lost its discrimination of touch. She grasped the whole contents of the bag in one handful of papers, and drew them out violently, tearing some and disarranging the folds of others. As she threw them down before her on the table, the first object that met her eye was her own handwriting, faded already with time. She looked closer, and saw the words she had copied from her dead father's letter--saw the lawyer's brief and terrible commentary on them confronting her at the bottom of the page:

Mr. Vanstone's daughters are Nobody's Children, and the law leaves them helpless at their uncle's mercy.

Her throbbing heart stopped; her trembling hands grew icily quiet. All the Past rose before her in mute, overwhelming reproach. She took up the lines which her own hand had written hardly a minute since, and looked at the ink, still wet on the letters, with a vacant incredulity.

The color that had risen on her cheeks faded from them once more. The hard despair looked out again, cold and glittering, in her tearless eyes. She

folded the banknotes carefully, and put them back in her bag. She pressed the copy of her father's letter to her lips, and returned it to its place with the banknotes. When the bag was in her bosom again, she waited a little, with her face hidden in her hands, then deliberately tore up the lines addressed to Captain Wragge. Before the ink was dry, the letter lay in fragments on the floor.

"No!" she said, as the last morsel of the torn paper dropped from her hand. "On the way I go there is no turning back."

She rose composedly and left the room. While descending the stairs, she met Mrs. Wragge coming up. "Going out again, my dear?" asked Mrs. Wragge. "May I go with you?"

Magdalen's attention wandered. Instead of answering the question, she absently answered her own thoughts.

"Thousands of women marry for money," she said. "Why shouldn't I?"

The helpless perplexity of Mrs. Wragge's face as she spoke those words roused her to a sense of present things. "My poor dear!" she said; "I puzzle you, don't I? Never mind what I say--all girls talk nonsense, and I'm no better than the rest of them. Come! I'll give you a treat. You shall enjoy yourself while the captain is away. We will have a long drive by ourselves. Put on your smart bonnet, and come with me to the hotel. I'll tell the landlady to put a nice cold dinner into a basket. You shall have all the things you like, and I'll wait on you. When you are an old, old woman, you will remember me kindly, won't you? You will say: 'She wasn't a bad girl; hundreds worse than she was live and prosper, and nobody blames them.' There! there! go and put your bonnet on. Oh, my God, what is my heart made of! How it lives and lives, when other girls' hearts would have died in them long ago!"

In half an hour more she and Mrs. Wragge were seated together in the carriage. One of the horses was restive at starting. "Flog him," she cried angrily to the driver. "What are you frightened about? Flog him! Suppose the carriage was upset," she said, turning suddenly to her companion; "and suppose I was thrown out and killed on the spot? Nonsense! don't look at me in that way. I'm like your husband; I have a dash of humor, and I'm only joking."

They were out the whole day. When they reached home again, it was after dark. The long succession of hours passed in the fresh air left them both

with the same sense of fatigue. Again that night Magdalen slept the deep dreamless sleep of the night before. And so the Friday closed.

Her last thought at night had been the thought which had sustained her throughout the day. She had laid her head on the pillow with the same reckless resolution to submit to the coming trial which had already expressed itself in words when she and Mrs. Wragge met by accident on the stairs. When she woke on the morning of Saturday, the resolution was gone. The Friday's thoughts--the Friday's events even--were blotted out of her mind. Once again, creeping chill through the flow of her young blood, she felt the slow and deadly prompting of despair which had come to her in the waning moonlight, which had whispered to her in the awful calm.

"I saw the end as the end must be," she said to herself, "on Thursday night. I have been wrong ever since."

When she and her companion met that morning, she reiterated her complaint of suffering from the toothache; she repeated her refusal to allow Mrs. Wragge to procure a remedy; she left the house after breakfast, in the direction of the chemist's shop, exactly as she had left it on the morning before.

This time she entered the shop without an instant's hesitation.

"I have got an attack of toothache," she said, abruptly, to an elderly man who stood behind the counter.

"May I look at the tooth, miss?"

"There is no necessity to look. It is a hollow tooth. I think I have caught cold in it."

The chemist recommended various remedies which were in vogue fifteen years since. She declined purchasing any of them.

"I have always found Laudanum relieve the pain better than anything else," she said, trifling with the bottles on the counter, and looking at them while she spoke, instead of looking at the chemist. "Let me have some Laudanum."

"Certainly, miss. Excuse my asking the question--it is only a matter of form. You are staying at Aldborough, I think?"

"Yes. I am Miss Bygrave, of North Shingles."

The chemist bowed; and, turning to his shelves, filled an ordinary half-ounce bottle with laudanum immediately. In ascertaining his customer's name and address beforehand, the owner of the shop had taken a precaution which was natural to a careful man, but which was by no means universal, under similar circumstances, in the state of the law at that time.

"Shall I put you up a little cotton wool with the laudanum?" he asked, after he had placed a label on the bottle, and had written a word on it in large letters.

"If you please. What have you just written on the bottle?" She put the question sharply, with something of distrust as well as curiosity in her manner.

The chemist answered the question by turning the label toward her. She saw written on it, in large letters--POISON.

"I like to be on the safe side, miss," said the old man, smiling. "Very worthy people in other respects are often sadly careless where poisons are concerned."

She began trifling again with the bottles on the counter, and put another question, with an ill-concealed anxiety to hear the answer.

"Is there danger," she asked, "in such a little drop of Laudanum as that?"

"There is Death in it, miss," replied the chemist, quietly.

"Death to a child, or to a person in delicate health?"

"Death to the strongest man in England, let him be who he may."

With that answer, the chemist sealed up the bottle in its wrapping of white paper and handed the laudanum to Magdalen across the counter. She laughed as she took it from him, and paid for it.

"There will be no fear of accidents at North Shingles," she said. "I shall keep the bottle locked up in my dressing-case. If it doesn't relieve the pain, I must come to you again, and try some other remedy. Good-morning."

"Good-morning, miss."

She went straight back to the house without once looking up, without noticing any one who passed her. She brushed by Mrs. Wragge in the passage as she might have brushed by a piece of furniture. She ascended the stairs, and caught her foot twice in her dress, from sheer inattention to the common precaution of holding it up. The trivial daily interests of life had lost their hold on her already.

In the privacy of her own room, she took the bottle from its wrapping, and threw the paper and the cotton wool into the fire-place. At the moment when she did this there was a knock at the door. She hid the little bottle, and looked up impatiently. Mrs. Wragge came into the room.

"Have you got something for your toothache, my dear?"

"Yes."

"Can I do anything to help you?"

"No."

Mrs. Wragge still lingered uneasily near the door. Her manner showed plainly that she had something more to say.

"What is it?" asked Magdalen, sharply.

"Don't be angry," said Mrs. Wragge. "I'm not settled in my mind about the captain. He's a great writer, and he hasn't written. He's as quick as lightning, and he hasn't come back. Here's Saturday, and no signs of him. Has he run away, do you think? Has anything happened to him?"

"I should think not. Go downstairs; I'll come and speak to you about it directly."

As soon as she was alone again, Magdalen rose from her chair, advanced toward a cupboard in the room which locked, and paused for a moment, with her hand on the key, in doubt. Mrs. Wragge's appearance had disturbed the whole current of her thoughts. Mrs. Wragge's last question, trifling as it was, had checked her on the verge of the precipice--had roused the old vain hope in her once more of release by accident.

"Why not?" she said. "Why may something not have happened to one of them?"

She placed the laudanum in the cupboard, locked it, and put the key in her packet. "Time enough still," she thought, "before Monday. I'll wait till the captain comes back."

After some consultation downstairs, it was agreed that the servant should sit up that night, in expectation of her master's return. The day passed quietly, without events of any kind. Magdalen dreamed away the hours over a book. A weary patience of expectation was all she felt now--the poignant torment of thought was dulled and blunted at last. She passed the day and the evening in the parlor, vaguely conscious of a strange feeling of aversion to going back to her own room. As the night advanced, as the noises ceased indoors and out, her restlessness began to return. She endeavored to quiet herself by reading. Books failed to fix her attention. The newspaper was lying in a corner of the room: she tried the newspaper next.

She looked mechanically at the headings of the articles; she listlessly turned over page after page, until her wandering attention was arrested by the narrative of an Execution in a distant part of England. There was nothing to strike her in the story of the crime, and yet she read it. It was a common, horribly common, act of bloodshed--the murder of a woman in farm-service by a man in the same employment who was jealous of her. He had been convicted on no extraordinary evidence, he had been hanged under no unusual circumstances. He had made his confession, when he knew there was no hope for him, like other criminals of his class, and the newspaper had printed it at the end of the article, in these terms:

"I kept company with the deceased for a year or thereabouts. I said I would marry her when I had money enough. She said I had money enough now. We had a quarrel. She refused to walk out with me any more; she wouldn't draw me my beer; she took up with my fellow-servant, David Crouch. I went to her on the Saturday, and said I would marry her as soon as we could be asked in church if she would give up Crouch. She laughed at me. She turned me out of the wash-house, and the rest of them saw her turn me out. I was not easy in my mind. I went and sat on the gate--the gate in the meadow they call Pettit's Piece. I thought I would shoot her. I went and fetched my gun and loaded it. I went out into Pettit's Piece again. I was hard put to it to make up my mind. I thought I would try my luck--I mean try whether to kill her or not---by throwing up the Spud of the plow into the air. I said to myself, if it falls flat, I'll spare her; if it falls point in the earth, I'll kill her. I took a good swing with it, and shied it up. It fell point in the earth. I went and shot her. It was a bad job, but I did it. I did it, as they said I did it at the trial. I hope the Lord will have mercy on me. I wish my mother to have my old clothes. I have no more to say."

In the happier days of her life, Magdalen would have passed over the narrative of the execution, and the printed confession which accompanied it unread; the subject would have failed to attract her. She read the horrible story now--read it with an interest unintelligible to herself. Her attention, which had wandered over higher and better things, followed every sentence of the murderer's hideously direct confession from beginning to end. If the man or the woman had been known to her, if the place had been familiar to her memory, she could hardly have followed the narrative more closely, or have felt a more distinct impression of it left on her mind. She laid down the paper, wondering at herself; she took it up once more, and tried to read some other portion of the contents. The effort was useless; her attention wandered again. She threw the paper away, and went out into the garden. The night was dark; the stars were few and faint. She could just see the gravel-walk--she could just pace backward and forward between the house door and the gate.

The confession in the newspaper had taken a fearful hold on her mind. As she paced the walk, the black night opened over the sea, and showed her the murderer in the field hurling the Spud of the plow into the air. She ran, shuddering, back to the house. The murderer followed her into the parlor. She seized the candle and went up into her room. The vision of her own distempered fancy followed her to the place where the laudanum was hidden, and vanished there.

It was midnight, and there was no sign yet of the captain's return.

She took from the writing-case the long letter which she had written to Norah, and slowly read it through. The letter quieted her. When she reached the blank space left at the end, she hurriedly turned back and began it over again.

One o'clock struck from the church clock, and still the captain never appeared.

She read the letter for the second time; she turned back obstinately, despairingly, and began it for the third time. As she once more reached the last page, she looked at her watch. It was a quarter to two. She had just put the watch back in the belt of her dress, when there came to her--far off in the stillness of the morning--a sound of wheels.

She dropped the letter and clasped her cold hands in her lap and listened. The sound came on, faster and faster, nearer and nearer--the trivial sound

to all other ears; the sound of Doom to hers. It passed the side of the house; it traveled a little further on; it stopped. She heard a loud knocking--then the opening of a window--then voices--then a long silence--than the wheels again coming back--then the opening of the door below, and the sound of the captain's voice in the passage.

She could endure it no longer. She opened her door a little way and called to him.

He ran upstairs instantly, astonish ed that she was not in bed. She spoke to him through the narrow opening of the door, keeping herself hidden behind it, for she was afraid to let him see her face.

"Has anything gone wrong?" she asked.

"Make your mind easy," he answered. "Nothing has gone wrong."

"Is no accident likely to happen between this and Monday?"

"None whatever. The marriage is a certainty."

"A certainty?"

"Yes."

"Good-night."

She put her hand out through the door. He took it with some little surprise; it was not often in his experience that she gave him her hand of her own accord.

"You have sat up too long," he said, as he felt the clasp of her cold fingers. "I am afraid you will have a bad night--I'm afraid you will not sleep."

She softly closed the door.

"I shall sleep," she said, "sounder than you think for."

It was past two o'clock when she shut herself up alone in her room. Her chair stood in its customary place by the toilet-table. She sat down for a few minutes thoughtfully, then opened her letter to Norah, and turned to the end where the blank space was left. The last lines written above the space ran thus: "... I have laid my whole heart bare to you; I have hidden nothing.

It has come to this. The end I have toiled for, at such terrible cost to myself, is an end which I must reach or die. It is wickedness, madness, what you will--but it is so. There are now two journeys before me to choose between. If I can marry him--the journey to the church. If the profanation of myself is more than I can bear--the journey to the grave!"

Under that last sentence, she wrote these lines:

"My choice is made. If the cruel law will let you, lay me with my father and mother in the churchyard at home. Farewell, my love! Be always innocent; be always happy. If Frank ever asks about me, say I died forgiving him. Don't grieve long for me, Norah--I am not worth it."

She sealed the letter, and addressed it to her sister. The tears gathered in her eyes as she laid it on the table. She waited until her sight was clear again, and then took the banknotes once more from the little bag in her bosom. After wrapping them in a sheet of note paper, she wrote Captain Wragge's name on the inclosure, and added these words below it: "Lock the door of my room, and leave me till my sister comes. The money I promised you is in this. You are not to blame; it is my fault, and mine only. If you have any friendly remembrance of me, be kind to your wife for my sake."

After placing the inclosure by the letter to Norah, she rose and looked round the room. Some few little things in it were not in their places. She set them in order, and drew the curtains on either side at the head of her bed. Her own dress was the next object of her scrutiny. It was all as neat, as pure, as prettily arranged as ever. Nothing about her was disordered but her hair. Some tresses had fallen loose on one side of her head; she carefully put them back in their places with the help of her glass. "How pale I look!" she thought, with a faint smile. "Shall I be paler still when they find me in the morning?"

She went straight to the place where the laudanum was hidden, and took it out. The bottle was so small that it lay easily in the palm of her hand. She let it remain there for a little while, and stood looking at it.

"DEATH!" she said. "In this drop of brown drink--DEATH!"

As the words passed her lips, an agony of unutterable horror seized on her in an instant. She crossed the room unsteadily, with a maddening confusion in her head, with a suffocating anguish at her heart. She caught at the table to support herself. The faint clink of the bottle, as it fell harmlessly from her loosened grasp and rolled against some porcelain object on the table, struck

through her brain like the stroke of a knife. The sound of her own voice, sunk to a whisper--her voice only uttering that one word, Death--rushed in her ears like the rushing of a wind. She dragged herself to the bedside, and rested her head against it, sitting on the floor. "Oh, my life! my life!" she thought; "what is my life worth, that I cling to it like this?"

An interval passed, and she felt her strength returning. She raised herself on her knees and hid her face on the bed. She tried to pray--to pray to be forgiven for seeking the refuge of death. Frantic words burst from her lips--words which would have risen to cries, if she had not stifled them in the bed-clothes. She started to her feet; despair strengthened her with a headlong fury against herself. In one moment she was back at the table; in another, the poison was once more in her hand.

She removed the cork and lifted the bottle to her mouth.

At the first cold touch of the glass on her lips, her strong young life leaped up in her leaping blood, and fought with the whole frenzy of its loathing against the close terror of Death. Every active power in the exuberant vital force that was in her rose in revolt against the destruction which her own will would fain have wreaked on her own life. She paused: for the second time, she paused in spite of herself. There, in the glorious perfection of her youth and health--there, trembling on the verge of human existence, she stood; with the kiss of the Destroyer close at her lips, and Nature, faithful to its sacred trust, fighting for the salvation of her to the last.

No word passed her lips. Her cheeks flushed deep; her breath came thick and fast. With the poison still in her hand, with the sense that she might faint in another moment, she made for the window, and threw back the curtain that covered it.

The new day had risen. The broad gray dawn flowed in on her, over the quiet eastern sea.

She saw the waters heaving, large and silent, in the misty calm; she felt the fresh breath of the morning flutter cool on her face. Her strength returned; her mind cleared a little. At the sight of the sea, her memory recalled the walk in the garden overnight, and the picture which her distempered fancy had painted on the black void. In thought, she saw the picture again--the murderer hurling the Spud of the plow into the air, and setting the life or death of the woman who had deserted him on the hazard of the falling point. The infection of that terrible superstition seized on her mind as suddenly as the new day had burst on her view. The premise of release which she saw in

it from the horror of her own hesitation roused the last energies of her despair. She resolved to end the struggle by setting her life or death on the hazard of a chance.

On what chance?

The sea showed it to her. Dimly distinguishable through the mist, she saw a little fleet of coasting-vessels slowly drifting toward the house, all following the same direction with the favoring set of the tide. In half an hour--perhaps in less--the fleet would have passed her window. The hands of her watch pointed to four o'clock. She seated herself close at the side of the window, with her back toward the quarter from which the vessels were drifting down on her--with the poison placed on the window-sill and the watch on her lap. For one half-hour to come she determined to wait there and count the vessels as they went by. If in that time an even number passed her, the sign given should be a sign to live. If the uneven number prevailed, the end should be Death.

With that final resolution, she rested her head against the window and waited for the ships to pass.

The first came, high, dark and near in the mist, gliding silently over the silent sea. An interval--and the second followed, with the third close after it. Another interval, longer and longer drawn out--and nothing passed. She looked at her watch. Twelve minutes, and three ships. Three.

The fourth came, slower than the rest, larger than the rest, further off in the mist than the rest. The interval followed; a long interval once more. Then the next vessel passed, darkest and nearest of all. Five. The next uneven number--

Five.

She looked at her watch again. Nineteen minutes, and five ships. Twenty minutes. Twenty-one, two, three--and no sixth vessel. Twenty-four, and the sixth came by. Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, and the next uneven number--the fatal Seven--glided into view. Two minutes to the end of the half-hour. And seven ships.

Twenty-nine, and nothing followed in the wake of the seventh ship. The minute-hand of the watch moved on half-way to thirty, and still the white heaving sea was a misty blank. Without moving her head from the window, she took the poison in one hand, and raised the watch in the other. As the

quick seconds counted each other out, her eyes, as quick as they, looked from the watch to the sea, from the sea to the watch--looked for the last time at the sea--and saw the EIGHTH ship.

She never moved, she never spoke. The death of thought, the death of feeling, seemed to have come to her already. She put back the poison mechanically on the ledge of the window and watched, as in a dream, the ship gliding smoothly on its silent way--gliding till it melted dimly into shadow--gliding till it was lost in the mist.

The strain on her mind relaxed when the Messenger of Life had passed from her sight.

"Providence?" she whispered faintly to herself. "Or chance?"

Her eyes closed, and her head fell back. When the sense of life returned to her, the morning sun was warm on her face--the blue heaven looked down on her--and the sea was a sea of gold.

She fell on her knees at the window and burst into tears.

* * * * *

Toward noon that day, the captain, waiting below stairs, and hearing no movement in Magdalen's room, felt uneasy at the long silence. He desired the new maid to follow him upstairs, and, pointing to the door, told her to go in softly and see whether her mistress was awake.

The maid entered the room, remained there a moment, and came out again, closing the door gently.

"She looks beautiful, sir," said the girl; "and she's sleeping as quietly as a new-born child."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE morning of her husband's return to North Shingles was a morning memorable forever in the domestic calendar of Mrs. Wragge. She dated from that occasion the first announcement which reached her of Magdalen's marriage.

It had been Mrs. Wragge's earthly lot to pass her life in a state of perpetual surprise. Never yet, however, had she wandered in such a maze of astonishment as the maze in which she lost herself when the captain coolly told her the truth. She had been sharp enough to suspect Mr. Noel Vanstone of coming to the house in the character of a sweetheart on approval; and she had dimly interpreted certain expressions of impatience which had fallen from Magdalen's lips as boding ill for the success of his suit, but her utmost penetration had never reached as far as a suspicion of the impending marriage. She rose from one climax of amazement to another, as her husband proceeded with his disclosure. A wedding in the family at a day's notice! and that wedding Magdalen's! and not a single new dress ordered for anybody, the bride included! and the Oriental Cashmere Robe totally unavailable on the occasion when she might have worn it to the greatest advantage! Mrs. Wragge dropped crookedly into a chair, and beat her disorderly hands on her unsymmetrical knees, in utter forgetfulness of the captain's presence and the captain's terrible eye. It would not have surprised her to hear that the world had come to an end, and that the only mortal whom Destiny had overlooked, in winding up the affairs of this earthly planet, was herself!

Leaving his wife to recover her composure by her own unaided efforts, Captain Wragge withdrew to wait for Magdalen's appearance in the lower regions of the house. It was close on one o'clock before the sound of footsteps in the room above warned him that she was awake and stirring. He called at once for the maid (whose name he had ascertained to be Louisa), and sent her upstairs to her mistress for the second time.

Magdalen was standing by her dressing-table when a faint tap at the door suddenly roused her. The tap was followed by the sound of a meek voice, which announced itself as the voice of "her maid," and inquired if Miss Bygrave needed any assistance that morning.

"Not at present," said Magdalen, as soon as she had recovered the surprise of finding herself unexpectedly provided with an attendant. "I will ring when

I want you."

After dismissing the woman with that answer, she accidentally looked from the door to the window. Any speculations on the subject of the new servant in which she might otherwise have engaged were instantly suspended by the sight of the bottle of laudanum, still standing on the ledge of the window, where she had left it at sunrise. She took it once more in her hand, with a strange confusion of feeling--with a vague doubt even yet, whether the sight of it reminded her of a terrible reality or a terrible dream. Her first impulse was to rid herself of it on the spot. She raised the bottle to throw the contents out of the window, and paused, in sudden distrust of the impulse that had come to her. "I have accepted my new life," she thought. "How do I know what that life may have in store for me?" She turned from the window and went back to the table. "I may be forced to drink it yet," she said, and put the laudanum into her dressing-case.

Her mind was not at ease when she had done this: there seemed to be some indefinable ingratitude in the act. Still she made no attempt to remove the bottle from its hiding-place. She hurried on her toilet; she hastened the time when she could ring for the maid, and forget herself and her waking thoughts in a new subject. After touching the bell, she took from the table her letter to Norah and her letter to the captain, put them both into her dressing-case with the laudanum, and locked it securely with the key which she kept attached to her watch-chain.

Magdalen's first impression of her attendant was not an agreeable one. She could not investigate the girl with the experienced eye of the landlady at the London hotel, who had characterized the stranger as a young person overtaken by misfortune, and who had showed plainly, by her look and manner, of what nature she suspected that misfortune to be. But with this drawback, Magdalen was perfectly competent to detect the tokens of sickness and sorrow lurking under the surface of the new maid's activity and politeness. She suspected the girl was ill-tempered; she disliked her name; and she was indisposed to welcome any servant who had been engaged by Noel Vanstone. But after the first few minutes, "Louisa" grew on her liking. She answered all the questions put to her with perfect directness; she appeared to understand her duties thoroughly; and she never spoke until she was spoken to first. After making all the inquiries that occurred to her at the time, and after determining to give the maid a fair trial, Magdalen rose to leave the room. The very air in it was still heavy to her with the oppression of the past night.

"Have you anything more to say to me?" she asked, turning to the servant,

with her hand on the door.

"I beg your pardon, miss," said Louisa, very respectfully and very quietly. "I think my master told me that the marriage was to be to-morrow?"

Magdalen repressed the shudder that stole over her at that reference to the marriage on the lips of a stranger, and answered in the affirmative.

"It's a very short time, miss, to prepare in. If you would be so kind as to give me my orders about the packing before you go downstairs--?"

"There are no such preparations to make as you suppose," said Magdalen, hastily. "The few things I have here can be all packed at once, if you like. I shall wear the same dress to-morrow which I have on to-day. Leave out the straw bonnet and the light shawl, and put everything else into my boxes. I have no new dresses to pack; I have nothing ordered for the occasion of any sort." She tried to add some commonplace phrases of explanation, accounting as probably as might be for the absence of the usual wedding outfit and wedding-dress. But no further reference to the marriage would pass her lips, and without an other word she abruptly left the room.

The meek and melancholy Louisa stood lost in astonishment. "Something wrong here," she thought. "I'm half afraid of my new place already." She sighed resignedly, shook her head, and went to the wardrobe. She first examined the drawers underneath, took out the various articles of linen laid inside, and placed them on chairs. Opening the upper part of the wardrobe next, she ranged the dresses in it side by side on the bed. Her last proceeding was to push the empty boxes into the middle of the room, and to compare the space at her disposal with the articles of dress which she had to pack. She completed her preliminary calculations with the ready self-reliance of a woman who thoroughly understood her business, and began the packing forthwith. Just as she had placed the first article of linen in the smaller box, the door of the room opened, and the house-servant, eager for gossip, came in.

"What do you want?" asked Louisa, quietly.

"Did you ever hear of anything like this!" said the house-servant, entering on her subject immediately.

"Like what?"

"Like this marriage, to be sure. You're London bred, they tell me. Did you

ever hear of a young lady being married without a single new thing to her back? No wedding veil, and no wedding breakfast, and no wedding favors for the servants. It's flying in the face of Providence--that's what I say. I'm only a poor servant, I know. But it's wicked, downright wicked--and I don't care who hears me!"

Louisa went on with the packing.

"Look at her dresses!" persisted the house-servant, waving her hand indignantly at the bed. "I'm only a poor girl, but I wouldn't marry the best man alive without a new gown to my back. Look here! look at this dowdy brown thing here. Alpaca! You're not going to pack this Alpaca thing, are you? Why, it's hardly fit for a servant! I don't know that I'd take a gift of it if it was offered me. It would do for me if I took it up in the skirt, and let it out in the waist--and it wouldn't look so bad with a bit of bright trimming, would it?"

"Let that dress alone, if you please," said Louisa, as quietly as ever.

"What did you say?" inquired the other, doubting whether her ears had not deceived her.

"I said, let that dress alone. It belongs to my mistress, and I have my mistress's orders to pack up everything in the room. You are not helping me by coming here--you are very much in my way."

"Well!" said the house-servant, "you may be London bred, as they say. But if these are your London manners, give me Suffolk!" She opened the door with an angry snatch at the handle, shut it violently, opened it again, and looked in. "Give me Suffolk!" said the house-servant, with a parting nod of her head to point the edge of her sarcasm.

Louisa proceeded impenetrably with her packing up.

Having neatly disposed of the linen in the smaller box, she turned her attention to the dresses next. After passing them carefully in review, to ascertain which was the least valuable of the collection, and to place that one at the bottom of the trunk for the rest to lie on, she made her choice with very little difficulty. The first gown which she put into the box was--the brown Alpaca dress.

Meanwhile Magdalen had joined the captain downstairs. Although he could not fail to notice the languor in her face and the listlessness of all her

movements, he was relieved to find that she met him with perfect composure. She was even self-possessed enough to ask him for news of his journey, with no other signs of agitation than a passing change of color and a little trembling of the lips.

"So much for the past," said Captain Wragge, when his narrative of the expedition to London by way of St. Crux had come to an end. "Now for the present. The bridegroom--"

"If it makes no difference," she interposed, "call him Mr. Noel Vanstone."

"With all my heart. Mr. Noel Vanstone is coming here this afternoon to dine and spend the evening. He will be tiresome in the last degree; but, like all tiresome people, he is not to be got rid of on any terms. Before he comes, I have a last word or two of caution for your private ear. By this time to-morrow we shall have parted--without any certain knowledge, on either side, of our ever meeting again. I am anxious to serve your interests faithfully to the last; I am anxious you should feel that I have done all I could for your future security when we say good-by."

Magdalen looked at him in surprise. He spoke in altered tones. He was agitated; he was strangely in earnest. Something in his look and manner took her memory back to the first night at Aldborough, when she had opened her mind to him in the darkening solitude--when they two had sat together alone on the slope of the martello tower. "I have no reason to think otherwise than kindly of you," she said.

Captain Wragge suddenly left his chair, and took a turn backward and forward in the room. Magdalen's last words seemed to have produced some extraordinary disturbance in him.

"Damn it!" he broke out; "I can't let you say that. You have reason to think ill of me. I have cheated you. You never got your fair share of profit from the Entertainment, from first to last. There! now the murder's out!"

Magdalen smiled, and signed to him to come back to his chair.

"I know you cheated me," she said, quietly. "You were in the exercise of your profession, Captain Wragge. I expected it when I joined you. I made no complaint at the time, and I make none now. If the money you took is any recompense for all the trouble I have given you, you are heartily welcome to it."

"Will you shake hands on that?" asked the captain, with an awkwardness and hesitation strongly at variance with his customary ease of manner.

Magdalen gave him her hand. He wrung it hard. "You are a strange girl," he said, trying to speak lightly. "You have laid a hold on me that I don't quite understand. I'm half uncomfortable at taking the money from you now; and yet you don't want it, do you?" He hesitated. "I almost wish," he said, "I had never met you on the Walls of York."

"It is too late to wish that, Captain Wragge. Say no more. You only distress me--say no more. We have other subjects to talk about. What were those words of caution which you had for my private ear?"

The captain took another turn in the room, and struggled back again into his every-day character. He produced from his pocketbook Mrs. Lecount's letter to her master, and handed it to Magdalen.

"There is the letter that might have ruined us if it had ever reached its address," he said. "Read it carefully. I have a question to ask you when you have done."

Magdalen read the letter. "What is this proof," she inquired, "which Mrs. Lecount relies on so confidently!"

"The very question I was going to ask you," said Captain Wragge. "Consult your memory of what happened when you tried that experiment in Vauxhall Walk. Did Mrs. Lecount get no other chance against you than the chances you have told me of already?"

"She discovered that my face was disguised, and she heard me speak in my own voice."

"And nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

"Very good. Then my interpretation of the letter is clearly the right one. The proof Mrs. Lecount relies on is my wife's infernal ghost story--which is, in plain English, the story of Miss Bygrave having been seen in Miss Vanstone's disguise; the witness being the very person who is afterward presented at Aldborough in the character of Miss Bygrave's aunt. An excellent chance for Mrs. Lecount, if she can only lay her hand at the right time on Mrs. Wragge, and no chance at all, if she can't. Make your mind

easy on that point. Mrs. Lecount and my wife have seen the last of each other. In the meantime, don't neglect the warning I give you, in giving you this letter. Tear it up, for fear of accidents, but don't forget it."

"Trust me to remember it," replied Magdalen, destroying the letter while she spoke. "Have you anything more to tell me?"

"I have some information to give you," said Captain Wragge, "which may be useful, because it relates to your future security. Mind, I want to know nothing about your proceedings when to-morrow is over; we settled that when we first discussed this matter. I ask no questions, and I make no guesses. All I want to do now is to warn you of your legal position after your marriage, and to leave you to make what use you please of your knowledge, at your own sole discretion. I took a lawyer's opinion on the point when I was in London, thinking it might be useful to you."

"It is sure to be useful. What did the lawyer say?"

"To put it plainly, this is what he said. If Mr. Noel Vanstone ever discovers that you have knowingly married him under a false name, he can apply to the Ecclesiastical Court to have his marriage declared null and void. The issue of the application would rest with the judges. But if he could prove that he had been intentionally deceived, the legal opinion is that his case would be a strong one."

"Suppose I chose to apply on my side?" said Magdalen, eagerly. "What then?"

"You might make the application," replied the captain. "But remember one thing--you would come into Court with the acknowledgment of your own deception. I leave you to imagine what the judges would think of that."

"Did the lawyer tell you anything else?"

"One thing besides," said Captain Wragge. "Whatever the law might do with the marriage in the lifetime of both the parties to it--on the death of either one of them, no application made by the survivor would avail; and, as to the case of that survivor, the marriage would remain valid. You understand? If he dies, or if you die--and if no application has been made to the Court--he the survivor, or you the survivor, would have no power of disputing the marriage. But in the lifetime of both of you, if he claimed to have the marriage dissolved, the chances are all in favor of his carrying his point."

He looked at Magdalen with a furtive curiosity as he said those words. She turned her head aside, absently tying her watch-chain into a loop and untying it again, evidently thinking with the closest attention over what he had last said to her. Captain Wragge walked uneasily to the window and looked out. The first object that caught his eye was Mr. Noel Vanstone approaching from Sea View. He returned instantly to his former place in the room, and addressed himself to Magdalen once more.

"Here is Mr. Noel Vanstone," he said. "One last caution before he comes in. Be on your guard with him about your age. He put the question to me before he got the License. I took the shortest way out of the difficulty, and told him you were twenty-one, and he made the declaration accordingly. Never mind about me; after to-morrow I am invisible. But, in your own interests, don't forget, if the subject turns up, that you were of age when you were married. There is nothing more. You are provided with every necessary warning that I can give you. Whatever happens in the future, remember I have done my best."

He hurried to the door without waiting for an answer, and went out into the garden to receive his guest.

Noel Vanstone made his appearance at the gate, solemnly carrying his bridal offering to North Shingles with both hands. The object in question was an ancient casket (one of his father's bargains); inside the casket reposed an old-fashioned carbuncle brooch, set in silver (another of his father's bargains)--bridal presents both, possessing the inestimable merit of leaving his money undisturbed in his pocket. He shook his head portentously when the captain inquired after his health and spirits. He had passed a wakeful night; ungovernable apprehensions of Lecount's sudden re-appearance had beset him as soon as he found himself alone at Sea View. Sea View was redolent of Lecount: Sea View (though built on piles, and the strongest house in England) was henceforth odious to him. He had felt this all night; he had also felt his responsibilities. There was the lady's maid, to begin with. Now he had hired her, he began to think she wouldn't do. She might fall sick on his hands; she might have deceived him by a false character; she and the landlady of the hotel might have been in league together. Horrible! Really horrible to think of. Then there was the other responsibility--perhaps the heavier of the two--the responsibility of deciding where he was to go and spend his honeymoon to-morrow. He would have preferred one of his father's empty houses: But except at Vauxhall Walk (which he supposed would be objected to), and at Aldborough (which was of course out of the question) all the houses were let. He would put himself in Mr. Bygrave's hands. Where had Mr. Bygrave spent his own honeymoon? Given the British

Islands to choose from, where would Mr. Bygrave pitch his tent, on a careful review of all the circumstances?

At this point the bridegroom's questions suddenly came to an end, and the bridegroom's face exhibited an expression of ungovernable astonishment. His judicious friend, whose advice had been at his disposal in every other emergency, suddenly turned round on him, in the emergency of the honeymoon, and flatly declined discussing the subject.

"No!" said the captain, as Noel Vanstone opened his lips to plead for a hearing, "you must really excuse me. My point of view in this matter is, as usual, a peculiar one. For some time past I have been living in an atmosphere of deception, to suit your convenience. That atmosphere, my good sir, is getting close; my Moral Being requires ventilation. Settle the choice of a locality with my niece, and leave me, at my particular request, in total ignorance of the subject. Mrs. Lecount is certain to come here on her return from Zurich, and is certain to ask me where you are gone. You may think it strange, Mr. Vanstone; but when I tell her I don't know, I wish to enjoy the unaccustomed luxury of feeling, for once in a way, that I am speaking the truth!"

With those words, he opened the sitting-room door, introduced Noel Vanstone to Magdalen's presence, bowed himself out of the room again, and set forth alone to while away the rest of the afternoon by taking a walk. His face showed plain tokens of anxiety, and his party-colored eyes looked hither and thither distrustfully, as he sauntered along the shore. "The time hangs heavy on our hands," thought the captain. "I wish to-morrow was come and gone."

The day passed and nothing happened; the evening and the night followed, placidly and uneventfully. Monday came, a cloudless, lovely day; Monday confirmed the captain's assertion that the marriage was a certainty. Toward ten o'clock, the clerk, ascending the church steps quoted the old proverb to the pew-opener, meeting him under the porch: "Happy the bride on whom the sun shines!"

In a quarter of an hour more the wedding-party was in the vestry, and the clergyman led the way to the altar. Carefully as the secret of the marriage had been kept, the opening of the church in the morning had been enough to betray it. A small congregation, almost entirely composed of women, were scattered here and there among the pews. Kirke's sister and her children were staying with a friend at Aldborough, and Kirke's sister was one of the congregation.

As the wedding-party entered the church, the haunting terror of Mrs. Lecount spread from Noel Vanstone to the captain. For the first few minutes, the eyes of both of them looked among the women in the pews with the same searching scrutiny, and looked away again with the same sense of relief. The clergyman noticed that look, and investigated the License more closely than usual. The clerk began to doubt privately whether the old proverb about the bride was a proverb to be always depended on. The female members of the congregation murmured among themselves at the inexcusable disregard of appearances implied in the bride's dress. Kirke's sister whispered venomously in her friend's ear, "Thank God for to-day for Robert's sake." Mrs. Wragge cried silently, with the dread of some threatening calamity she knew not what. The one person present who remained outwardly undisturbed was Magdalen herself. She stood, with tearless resignation, in her place before the altar--stood, as if all the sources of human emotion were frozen up within her.

The clergyman opened the Book.

* * * * *

It was done. The awful words which speak from earth to Heaven were pronounced. The children of the two dead brothers--inheritors of the implacable enmity which had parted their parents--were Man and Wife.

From that moment events hurried with a headlong rapidity to the parting scene. They were back at the house while the words of the Marriage Service seemed still ringing in their ears. Before they had been five minutes indoors the carriage drew up at the garden gate. In a minute more the opportunity came for which Magdalen and the captain had been on the watch--the opportunity of speaking together in private for the last time. She still preserved her icy resignation; she seemed beyond all reach now of the fear that had once mastered her, of the remorse that had once tortured her soul. With a firm hand she gave him the promised money. With a firm face she looked her last at him. "I'm not to blame," he whispered, eagerly; "I have only done what you asked me." She bowed her head; she bent it toward him kindly and let him touch her fore-head with his lips. "Take care!" he said. "My last words are--for God's sake take care when I'm gone!" She turned from him with a smile, and spoke her farewell words to his wife. Mrs. Wragge tried hard to face her loss bravely--the loss of the friend whose presence had fallen like light from Heaven over the dim pathway of her life. "You have been very good to me, my dear; I thank you kindly; I thank you with all my heart." She could say no more; she clung to Magdalen in a

passion of tears, as her mother might have clung to her, if her mother had lived to see that horrible day. "I'm frightened for you!" cried the poor creature, in a wild, wailing voice. "Oh, my darling, I'm frightened for you!" Magdalen desperately drew herself free--kissed her--and hurried out to the door. The expression of that artless gratitude, the cry of that guileless love, shook her as nothing else had shaken her that day. It was a refuge to get to the carriage--a refuge, though the man she had married stood there waiting for her at the door.

Mrs. Wragge tried to follow her into the garden. But the captain had seen Magdalen's face as she ran out, and he steadily held his wife back in the passage. From that distance the last farewells were exchanged. As long as the carriage was in sight, Magdalen looked back at them; she waved her handkerchief as she turned the corner. In a moment more the last thread which bound her to them was broken; the familiar companionship of many months was a thing of the past already!

Captain Wragge closed the house door on the idlers who were looking in from the Parade. He led his wife back into the sitting-room, and spoke to her with a forbearance which she had never yet experienced from him.

"She has gone her way," he said, "and in another hour we shall have gone ours. Cry your cry out--I don't deny she's worth crying for."

Even then--even when the dread of Magdalen's future was at its darkest in his mind--the ruling habit of the man's life clung to him. Mechanically he unlocked his dispatch-box. Mechanically he opened his Book of Accounts, and made the closing entry--the entry of his last transaction with Magdalen--in black and white. "By Rec'd from Miss Vanstone," wrote the captain, with a gloomy brow, "Two hundred pounds."

"You won't be angry with me?" said Mrs. Wragge, looking timidly at her husband through her tears. "I want a word of comfort, captain. Oh, do tell me, when shall I see her again?"

The captain closed the book, and answered in one inexorable word: "Never!"

Between eleven and twelve o'clock that night Mrs. Lecount drove into Zurich.

Her brother's house, when she stopped before it, was shut up. With some difficulty and delay the servant was aroused. She held up her hands in speechless amazement when she opened the door and saw who the visitor

was.

"Is my brother alive?" asked Mrs. Lecount, entering the house.

"Alive!" echoed the servant. "He has gone holiday-making into the country, to finish his recovery in the fine fresh air."

The housekeeper staggered back against the wall of the passage. The coachman and the servant put her into a chair. Her face was livid, and her teeth chattered in her head.

"Send for my brother's doctor," she said, as soon as she could speak.

The doctor came. She handed him a letter before he could say a word.

"Did you write that letter?"

He looked it over rapidly, and answered her without hesitation,

"Certainly not!"

"It is your handwriting."

"It is a forgery of my handwriting."

She rose from the chair with a new strength in her.

"When does the return mail start for Paris?" she asked.

"In half an hour."

"Send instantly and take me a place in it!"

The servant hesitated, the doctor protested. She turned a deaf ear to them both.

"Send!" she reiterated, "or I will go myself."

They obeyed. The servant went to take the place: the doctor remained and held a conversation with Mrs. Lecount. When the half-hour had passed, he helped her into her place in the mail, and charged the conductor privately to take care of his passenger.

"She has traveled from England without stopping," said the doctor; "and she is traveling back again without rest. Be careful of her, or she will break down under the double journey."

The mail started. Before the first hour of the new day was at an end Mrs. Lecount was on her way back to England.

THE END OF THE FOURTH SCENE.