THE FIFTH SCENE - BALIOL COTTAGE, DUMFRIES.

CHAPTER I.

TOWARD eleven o'clock, on the morning of the third of November, the breakfast-table at Baliol Cottage presented that essentially comfortless appearance which is caused by a meal in a state of transition--that is to say, by a meal prepared for two persons, which has been already eaten by one, and which has not yet been approached by the other. It must be a hardy appetite which can contemplate without a momentary discouragement the battered egg-shell, the fish half stripped to a skeleton, the crumbs in the plate, and the dregs in the cup. There is surely a wise submission to those weaknesses in human nature which must be respected and not reproved, in the sympathizing rapidity with which servants in places of public refreshment clear away all signs of the customer in the past, from the eyes of the customer in the present. Although his predecessor may have been the wife of his bosom or the child of his loins, no man can find himself confronted at table by the traces of a vanished eater, without a passing sense of injury in connection with the idea of his own meal.

Some such impression as this found its way into the mind of Mr. Noel Vanstone when he entered the lonely breakfast-parlor at Baliol Cottage shortly after eleven o'clock. He looked at the table with a frown, and rang the bell with an expression of disgust.

"Clear away this mess," he said, when the servant appeared. "Has your mistress gone?"

"Yes, sir--nearly an hour ago."

"Is Louisa downstairs?"

"Yes, sir."

"When you have put the table right, send Louisa up to me."

He walked away to the window. The momentary irritation passed away from his face; but it left an expression there which remained--an expression of pining discontent. Personally, his marriage had altered him for the worse.

His wizen little cheeks were beginning to shrink into hollows, his frail little figure had already contracted a slight stoop. The former delicacy of his complexion had gone--the sickly paleness of it was all that remained. His thin flaxen mustaches were no longer pragmatically waxed and twisted into a curl: their weak feathery ends hung meekly pendent over the querulous corners of his mouth. If the ten or twelve weeks since his marriage had been counted by his locks, they might have reckoned as ten or twelve years. He stood at the window mechanically picking leaves from a pot of heath placed in front of it, and drearily humming the forlorn fragment of a tune.

The prospect from the window overlooked the course of the Nith at a bend of the river a few miles above Dumfries. Here and there, through wintry gaps in the wooded bank, broad tracts of the level cultivated valley met the eye. Boats passed on the river, and carts plodded along the high-road on their way to Dumfries. The sky was clear; the November sun shone as pleasantly as if the year had been younger by two good months; and the view, noted in Scotland for its bright and peaceful charm, was presented at the best which its wintry aspect could assume. If it had been hidden in mist or drenched with rain, Mr. Noel Vanstone would, to all appearance, have found it as attractive as he found it now. He waited at the window until he heard Louisa's knock at the door, then turned back sullenly to the breakfast-table and told her to come in.

"Make the tea," he said. "I know nothing about it. I'm left here neglected. Nobody helps me."

The discreet Louisa silently and submissively obeyed.

"Did your mistress leave any message for me," he asked, "before she went away?"

"No message in particular, sir. My mistress only said she should be too late if she waited breakfast any longer."

"Did she say nothing else?"

"She told me at the carriage door, sir, that she would most likely be back in a week."

"Was she in good spirits at the carriage door?"

"No, sir. I thought my mistress seemed very anxious and uneasy. Is there anything more I can do, sir?"

"I don't know. Wait a minute."

He proceeded discontentedly with his breakfast. Louisa waited resignedly at the door.

"I think your mistress has been in bad spirits lately," he resumed, with a sudden outbreak of petulance.

"My mistress has not been very cheerful, sir."

"What do you mean by not very cheerful? Do you mean to prevaricate? Am I nobody in the house? Am I to be kept in the dark about everything? Is your mistress to go away on her own affairs, and leave me at home like a child--and am I not even to ask a question about her? Am I to be prevaricated with by a servant? I won't be prevaricated with! Not very cheerful? What do you mean by not very cheerful?"

"I only meant that my mistress was not in good spirits, sir."

"Why couldn't you say it, then? Don't you know the value of words? The most dreadful consequences sometimes happen from not knowing the value of words. Did your mistress tell you she was going to London?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you think when your mistress told you she was going to London? Did you think it odd she was going without me?"

"I did not presume to think it odd, sir.--Is there anything more I can do for you, if you please, sir?"

"What sort of a morning is it out? Is it warm? Is the sun on the garden?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen the sun yourself on the garden?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get me my great-coat; I'll take a little turn. Has the man brushed it? Did you see the man brush it yourself? What do you mean by saying he has brushed it, when you didn't see him? Let me look at the tails. If there's a

speck of dust on the tails, I'll turn the man off!--Help me on with it."

Louisa helped him on with his coat, and gave him his hat. He went out irritably. The coat was a large one (it had belonged to his father); the hat was a large one (it was a misfit purchased as a bargain by himself). He was submerged in his hat and coat; he looked singularly small, and frail, and miserable, as he slowly wended his way, in the wintry sunlight, down the garden walk. The path sloped gently from the back of the house to the water side, from which it was parted by a low wooden fence. After pacing backward and forward slowly for some little time, he stopped at the lower extremity of the garden, and, leaning on the fen ce, looked down listlessly at the smooth flow of the river.

His thoughts still ran on the subject of his first fretful question to Louisa--he was still brooding over the circumstances under which his wife had left the cottage that morning, and over the want of consideration toward himself implied in the manner of her departure. The longer he thought of his grievance, the more acutely he resented it. He was capable of great tenderness of feeling where any injury to his sense of his own importance was concerned. His head drooped little by little on his arms, as they rested on the fence, and, in the deep sincerity of his mortification, he sighed bitterly.

The sigh was answered by a voice close at his side.

"You were happier with me, sir," said the voice, in accents of tender regret.

He looked up with a scream--literally, with a scream--and confronted Mrs. Lecount.

Was it the specter of the woman, or the woman herself? Her hair was white; her face had fallen away; her eyes looked out large, bright, and haggard over her hollow cheeks. She was withered and old. Her dress hung loose round her wasted figure; not a trace of its buxom autumnal beauty remained. The quietly impenetrable resolution, the smoothly insinuating voice--these were the only relics of the past which sickness and suffering had left in Mrs. Lecount.

"Compose yourself, Mr. Noel," she said, gently. "You have no cause to be alarmed at seeing me. Your servant, when I inquired, said you were in the garden, and I came here to find you. I have traced you out, sir, with no resentment against yourself, with no wish to distress you by so much as the shadow of a reproach. I come here on what has been, and is still, the

business of my life--your service."

He recovered himself a little, but he was still incapable of speech. He held fast by the fence, and stared at her.

"Try to possess your mind, sir, of what I say," proceeded Mrs. Lecount. "I have come here not as your enemy, but as your friend. I have been tried by sickness, I have been tried by distress. Nothing remains of me but my heart. My heart forgives you; my heart, in your sore need--need which you have yet to feel-places me at your service. Take my arm, Mr. Noel. A little turn in the sun will help you to recover yourself."

She put his hand through her arm and marched him slowly up the garden walk. Before she had been five minutes in his company, she had resumed full possession of him in her own right.

"Now down again, Mr. Noel," she said. "Gently down again, in this fine sunlight. I have much to say to you, sir, which you never expected to hear from me. Let me ask a little domestic question first. They told me at the house door Mrs. Noel Vanstone was gone away on a journey. Has she gone for long?"

Her master's hand trembled on her arm as she put that question. Instead of answering it, he tried faintly to plead for himself. The first words that escaped him were prompted by his first returning sense--the sense that his housekeeper had taken him into custody. He tried to make his peace with Mrs. Lecount.

"I always meant to do something for you," he said, coaxingly. "You would have heard from me before long. Upon my word and honor, Lecount, you would have heard from me before long!"

"I don't doubt it, sir," replied Mrs. Lecount. "But for the present, never mind about Me. You and your interests first."

"How did you come here?" he asked, looking at her in astonishment. "How came you to find me out?"

"It is a long story, sir; I will tell it you some other time. Let it be enough to say now that I have found you. Will Mrs. Noel be back again at the house to-day? A little louder, sir; I can hardly hear you. So! so! Not back again for a week! And where has she gone? To London, did you say? And what for?--I am not inquisitive, Mr. Noel; I am asking serious questions, under serious

necessity. Why has your wife left you here, and gone to London by herself?"

They were down at the fence again as she made that last inquiry, and they waited, leaning against it, while Noel Vanstone answered. Her reiterated assurances that she bore him no malice were producing their effect; he was beginning to recover himself. The old helpless habit of addressing all his complaints to his housekeeper was returning already with the re-appearance of Mrs. Lecount--returning insidiously, in company with that besetting anxiety to talk about his grievances, which had got the better of him at the breakfast-table, and which had shown the wound inflicted on his vanity to his wife's maid.

"I can't answer for Mrs. Noel Vanstone," he said, spitefully. "Mrs. Noel Vanstone has not treated me with the consideration which is my due. She has taken my permission for granted, and she has only thought proper to tell me that the object of her journey is to see her friends in London. She went away this morning without bidding me good-by. She takes her own way as if I was nobody; she treats me like a child. You may not believe it, Lecount, but I don't even know who her friends are. I am left quite in the dark; I am left to guess for myself that her friends in London are her uncle and aunt."

Mrs. Lecount privately considered the question by the help of her own knowledge obtained in London. She soon reached the obvious conclusion. After writing to her sister in the first instance, Magdalen had now, in all probability, followed the letter in person. There was little doubt that the friends she had gone to visit in London were her sister and Miss Garth.

"Not her uncle and aunt, sir," resumed Mrs. Lecount, composedly. "A secret for your private ear! She has no uncle and aunt. Another little turn before I explain myself--another little turn to compose your spirits."

She took him into custody once more, and marched him back toward the house.

"Mr. Noel!" she said, suddenly stopping in the middle of the walk. "Do you know what was the worst mischief you ever did yourself in your life? I will tell you. That worst mischief was sending me to Zurich."

His hand began to tremble on her arm once more.

"I didn't do it!" he cried piteously. "It was all Mr. Bygrave."

"You acknowledge, sir, that Mr. Bygrave deceived me?" proceeded Mrs. Lecount. "I am glad to hear that. You will be all the readier to make the next discovery which is waiting for you--the discovery that Mr. Bygrave has deceived you. He is not here to slip through my fingers now, and I am not the helpless woman in this place that I was at Aldborough. Thank God!"

She uttered that devout exclamation through her set teeth. All her hatred of Captain Wragge hissed out of her lips in those two words.

"Oblige me, sir, by holding one side of my traveling-bag," she resumed, "while I open it and take something out."

The interior of the bag disclosed a series of neatly-folded papers, all laid together in order, and numbered outside. Mrs. Lecount took out one of the papers, and shut up the bag again with a loud snap of the spring that closed it.

"At Aldborough, Mr. Noel, I had only my own opinion to support me," she remarked. "My own opinion was nothing against Miss Bygrave's youth and beauty, and Mr. Bygrave's ready wit. I could only hope to attack your infatuation with proofs, and at that time I had not got them. I have got them now! I am armed at all points with proofs; I bristle from head to foot with proofs; I break my forced silence, and speak with the emphasis of my proofs. Do you know this writing, sir?"

He shrank back from the paper which she offered to him.

"I don't understand this," he said, nervously. "I don't know what you want, or what you mean."

Mrs. Lecount forced the paper into his hand. "You shall know what I mean, sir, if you will give me a moment's attention," she said. "On the day after you went away to St. Crux, I obtained admission to Mr. Bygrave's house, and I had some talk in private with Mr. Bygrave's wife. That talk supplied me with the means to convince you which I had wanted to find for weeks and weeks past. I wrote you a letter to say so--I wrote to tell you that I would forfeit my place in your service, and my expectations from your generosity, if I did not prove to you when I came back from Switzerland that my own private suspicion of Miss Bygrave was the truth. I directed that letter to you at St. Crux, and I posted it myself. Now, Mr. Noel, read the paper which I have forced into your hand. It is Admiral Bartram's written affirmation that my letter came to St. Crux, and that he inclosed it to you, under cover to Mr. Bygrave, at your own request. Did Mr. Bygrave ever give you that letter?

Don't agitate yourself, sir! One word of reply will do--Yes or No."

He read the paper, and looked up at her with growing bewilderment and fear. She obstinately waited until he spoke. "No," he said, faintly; "I never got the letter."

"First proof!" said Mrs. Lecount, taking the paper from him, and putting it back in the bag. "One more, with your kind permission, before we come to things more serious still. I gave you a written description, sir, at Aldborough, of a person not named, and I asked you to compare it with Miss Bygrave the next time you were in her company. After having first shown the description to Mr. Bygrave--it is useless to deny it now, Mr. Noel; your friend at North Shingles is not here to help you!--after having first shown my note to Mr. Bygrave, you made the comparison, and you found it fail in the most important particular. There were two little moles placed close together on the left side of the neck, in my description of the unknown lady, and there were no little moles at all when you looked at Miss Bygrave's neck. I am old enough to be your mother, Mr. Noel. If the question is not indelicate, may I ask what the present state of your knowledge is on the subject of your wife's neck?"

She looked at him with a merciless steadiness. He drew back a few steps, cowering under her eye. "I can't say," he stammered. "I don't know. What do you mean by these questions? I never thought about the moles afterward; I never looked. She wears her hair low--"

"She has excellent reasons to wear it low, sir," remarked Mrs. Lecount. "We will try and lift that hair before we have done with the subject. When I came out here to find you in the garden, I saw a neat young person through the kitchen window, with her work in her hand, who looked to my eyes like a lady's maid. Is this young person your wife's maid? I beg your pardon, sir, did you say yes? In that case, another question, if you please. Did you engage her, or did your wife?"

"I engaged her--"

"While I was away? While I was in total ignorance that you meant to have a wife, or a wife's maid?"

"Yes."

"Under those circumstances, Mr. Noel, you cannot possibly suspect me of conspiring to deceive you, with the maid for my instrument. Go into the

house, sir, while I wait here. Ask the woman who dresses Mrs. Noel Vanstone's hair morning and night whether her mistress has a mark on the left side of her neck, and (if so) what that mark is?"

He walked a few steps toward the house without uttering a word, then stopped, and looked back at Mrs. Lecount. His blinking eyes were steady, and his wizen face had become suddenly composed. Mrs. Lecount advanced a little and joined him. She saw the change; but, with all her experience of him, she failed to interpret the true meaning of it.

"Are you in want of a pretense, sir?" she asked. "Are you at a loss to account to your wife's maid for such a question as I wish you to put to her? Pretenses are easily found which will do for persons in her station of life. Say I have come here with news of a legacy for Mrs. Noel Vanstone, and that there is a question of her identity to settle before she can receive the money."

She pointed to the house. He paid no attention to the sign. His face grew paler and paler. Without moving or speaking he stood and looked at her.

"Are you afraid?" asked Mrs. Lecount.

Those words roused him; those words lit a spark of the fire of manhood in him at last. He turned on her like a sheep on a dog.

"I won't be questioned and ordered!" he broke out, trembling violently under the new sensation of his own courage. "I won't be threatened and mystified any longer! How did you find me out at this place? What do you mean by coming here with your hints and your mysteries? What have you got to say against my wife?"

Mrs. Lecount composedly opened the traveling-bag and took out her smelling bottle, in case of emergency.

"You have spoken to me in plain words," she said. "In plain words, sir, you shall have your answer. Are you too angry to listen?"

Her looks and tones alarmed him, in spite of himself. His courage began to sink again; and, desperately as he tried to steady it, his voice trembled when he answered her.

"Give me my answer," he said, "and give it at once."

"Your commands shall be obeyed, sir, to the letter," replied Mrs. Lecount. "I have come here with two objects. To open your eyes to your own situation, and to save your fortune--perhaps your life. Your situation is this. Miss Bygrave has married you under a false character and a false name. Can you rouse your memory? Can you call to mind the disguised woman who threatened you in Vauxhall Walk? That woman--as certainly as I stand here--is now your wife."

He looked at her in breathless silence, his lips falling apart, his eyes fixed in vacant inquiry. The suddenness of the disclosure had overreached its own end. It had stupefied him.

"My wife?" he repeated, and burst into an imbecile laugh.

"Your wife," reiterated Mrs. Lecount.

At the repetition of those two words the strain on his faculties relaxed. A thought dawned on him for the first time. His eyes fixed on her with a furtive alarm, and he drew back hastily. "Mad!" he said to himself, with a sudden remembrance of what his friend Mr. Bygrave had told him at Aldborough, sharpened by his own sense of the haggard change that he saw in her face.

He spoke in a whisper, but Mrs. Lecount heard him. She was close at his side again in an instant. For the first time, her self-possession failed her, and she caught him angrily by the arm.

"Will you put my madness to the proof, sir?" she asked.

He shook off her hold; he began to gather courage again, in the intense sincerity of his disbelief, courage to face the assertion which she persisted in forcing on him.

"Yes," he answered. "What must I do?"

"Do what I told you," said Mrs. Lecount. "Ask the maid that question about her mistress on the spot. And if she tells you the mark is there, do one thing more. Take me up into your wife's room, and open her wardrobe in my presence with your own hands."

"What do you want with her wardrobe?" he asked.

"You shall know when you open it."

"Very strange!" he said to himself, vacantly. "It's like a scene in a novel--it's like nothing in real life." He went slowly into the house, and Mrs. Lecount waited for him in the garden.

After an absence of a few minutes only he appeared again, on the top of the flight of steps which led into the garden from the house. He held by the iron rail with one hand, while with the other he beckoned to Mrs. Lecount to join him on the steps.

"What does the maid say?" she asked, as she approached him. "Is the mark there?"

He answered in a whisper, "Yes." What he had heard from the maid had produced a marked change in him. The horror of the coming discovery had laid its paralyzing hold on his mind. He moved mechanically; he looked and spoke like a man in a dream.

"Will you take my arm, sir?"

He shook his head, and, preceding her along the passage and up the stairs, led the way into his wife's room. When she joined him and locked the door, he stood passively waiting for his directions, without making any remark, without showing any external appearance of surprise. He had not removed either his hat or coat. Mrs. Lecount took them off for him. "Thank you," he said, with the docility of a well-trained child. "It's like a scene in a novel--it's like nothing in real life."

The bed-chamber was not very large, and the furniture was heavy and old-fashioned. But evidences of Magdalen's natural taste and refinement were visible everywhere, in the little embellishments that graced and enlivened the aspect of the room. The perfume of dried rose-leaves hung fra grant on the cool air. Mrs. Lecount sniffed the perfume with a disparaging frown and threw the window up to its full height. "Pah!" she said, with a shudder of virtuous disgust, "the atmosphere of deceit!"

She seated herself near the window. The wardrobe stood against the wall opposite, and the bed was at the side of the room on her right hand. "Open the wardrobe, Mr. Noel," she said. "I don't go near it. I touch nothing in it myself. Take out the dresses with your own hand and put them on the bed. Take them out one by one until I tell you to stop."

He obeyed her. "I'll do it as well as I can," he said. "My hands are cold, and my head feels half asleep."

The dresses to be removed were not many, for Magdalen had taken some of them away with her. After he had put two dresses on the bed, he was obliged to search in the inner recesses of the wardrobe before he could find a third. When he produced it, Mrs. Lecount made a sign to him to stop. The end was reached already; he had found the brown Alpaca dress.

"Lay it out on the bed, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "You will see a double flounce running round the bottom of it. Lift up the outer flounce, and pass the inner one through your fingers, inch by inch. If you come to a place where there is a morsel of the stuff missing, stop and look up at me."

He passed the flounce slowly through his fingers for a minute or more, then stopped and looked up. Mrs. Lecount produced her pocket-book and opened it.

"Every word I now speak, sir, is of serious consequence to you and to me," she said. "Listen with your closest attention. When the woman calling herself Miss Garth came to see us in Vauxhall Walk, I knelt down behind the chair in which she was sitting and I cut a morsel of stuff from the dress she wore, which might help me to know that dress if I ever saw it again. I did this while the woman's whole attention was absorbed in talking to you. The morsel of stuff has been kept in my pocketbook from that time to this. See for yourself, Mr. Noel, if it fits the gap in that dress which your own hands have just taken from your wife's wardrobe."

She rose and handed him the fragment of stuff across the bed. He put it into the vacant space in the flounce as well as his trembling fingers would let him.

"Does it fit, sir?" asked Mrs. Lecount.

The dress dropped from his hands, and the deadly bluish pallor--which every doctor who attended him had warned his housekeeper to dread--overspread his face slowly. Mrs. Lecount had not reckoned on such an answer to her question as she now saw in his cheeks. She hurried round to him, with the smelling-bottle in her hand. He dropped to his knees and caught at her dress with the grasp of a drowning man. "Save me!" he gasped, in a hoarse, breathless whisper. "Oh, Lecount, save me!"

"I promise to save you," said Mrs. Lecount; "I am here with the means and the resolution to save you. Come away from this place--come nearer to the air." She raised him as she spoke, and led him across the room to the

window. "Do you feel the chill pain again on your left side?" she asked, with the first signs of alarm that she had shown yet. "Has your wife got any eau-de-cologne, any sal-volatile in her room? Don't exhaust yourself by speaking--point to the place!"

He pointed to a little triangular cupboard of old worm-eaten walnut-wood fixed high in a corner of the room. Mrs. Lecount tried the door: it was locked.

As she made that discovery, she saw his head sink back gradually on the easy-chair in which she had placed him. The warning of the doctors in past years--"If you ever let him faint, you let him die"--recurred to her memory as if it had been spoken the day before. She looked at the cupboard again. In a recess under it lay some ends of cord, placed there apparently for purposes of packing. Without an instant's hesitation, she snatched up a morsel of cord, tied one end fast round the knob of the cupboard door, and seizing the other end in both hands, pulled it suddenly with the exertion of her whole strength. The rotten wood gave way, the cupboard doors flew open, and a heap of little trifles poured out noisily on the floor. Without stopping to notice the broken china and glass at her feet, she looked into the dark recesses of the cupboard and saw the gleam of two glass bottles. One was put away at the extreme back of the shelf, the other was a little in advance, almost hiding it. She snatched them both out at once, and took them, one in each hand, to the window, where she could read their labels in the clearer light.

The bottle in her right hand was the first bottle she looked at. It was marked--Sal-volatile.

She instantly laid the other bottle aside on the table without looking at it. The other bottle lay there, waiting its turn. It held a dark liquid, and it was labeled--POISON.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. LECOUNT mixed the sal-volatile with water, and administered it immediately. The stimulant had its effect. In a few minutes Noel Vanstone was able to raise himself in the chair without assistance; his color changed again for the better, and his breath came and went more freely.

"How do you feel now, sir?" asked Mrs. Lecount. "Are you warm again on your left side?"

He paid no attention to that inquiry; his eyes, wandering about the room, turned by chance toward the table. To Mrs. Lecount's surprise, instead of answering her, he bent forward in his chair, and looked with staring eyes and pointing hand at the second bottle which she had taken from the cupboard, and which she had hastily laid aside without paying attention to it. Seeing that some new alarm possessed him, she advanced to the table, and looked where he looked. The labeled side of the bottle was full in view; and there, in the plain handwriting of the chemist at Aldborough, was the one startling word confronting them both--"Poison."

Even Mrs. Lecount's self-possession was shaken by that discovery. She was not prepared to see her own darkest forebodings--the unacknowledged offspring of her hatred for Magdalen--realized as she saw them realized now. The suicide-despair in which the poison had been procured; the suicide-purpose for which, in distrust of the future, the poison had been kept, had brought with them their own retribution. There the bottle lay, in Magdalen's absence, a false witness of treason which had never entered her mind--treason against her husband's life!

With his hand still mechanically pointing at the table Noel Vanstone raised his head and looked up at Mrs. Lecount.

"I took it from the cupboard," she said, answering the look. "I took both bottles out together, not knowing which might be the bottle I wanted. I am as much shocked, as much frightened, as you are."

"Poison!" he said to himself, slowly. "Poison locked up by my wife in the cupboard in her own room." He stopped, and looked at Mrs. Lecount once more. "For me?" he asked, in a vacant, inquiring tone.

"We will not talk of it, sir, until your mind is more at ease," said Mrs.

Lecount. "In the meantime, the danger that lies waiting in this bottle shall be instantly destroyed in your presence." She took out the cork, and threw the laudanum out of window, and the empty bottle after it. "Let us try to forget this dreadful discovery for the present," she resumed; "let us go downstairs at once. All that I have now to say to you can be said in another room."

She helped him to rise from the chair, and took his arm in her own. "It is well for him; it is well for me," she thought, as they went downstairs together, "that I came when I did."

On crossing the passage, she stepped to the front door, where the carriage was waiting which had brought her from Dumfries, and instructed the coachman to put up his horses at the nearest inn, and to call again for her in two hours' time. This done, she accompanied Noel Vanstone into the sitting-room, stirred up the fire, and placed him before it comfortably in an easy-chair. He sat for a few minutes, warming his hands feebly like an old man, and staring straight into the flame. Then he spoke.

"When the woman came and threatened me in Vauxhall Walk," he began, still staring into the fire, "you came back to the parlor after she was gone, and you told me--?" He stopped, shivered a little, and lost the thread of his recollections at that point.

"I told you, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, "that the woman was, in my opinion, Miss Vanstone herself. Don't start, Mr. Noel! Your wife is away, and I am here to take care of you. Say to yourself, if you feel frightened, 'Lecount is here; Lecount will take care of me.' The truth must be told, sir, however hard to bear the truth may be. Miss Magdalen Vanstone was the woman who came to you in disguise; and the woman who came to you in disguise is the woman you have married. The conspiracy which she threatened you with in London is the conspiracy which has made her your wife. That is the plain truth. You have seen the dress upstairs. If that dress had been no longer in existence, I should still have had my proofs to convince you. Thanks to my interview with Mrs. Bygrave I have discovered the house your wife lodged at in London; it was opposite our house in Vauxhall Walk. I have laid my hand on one of the landlady's daughters, who watched your wife from an inner room, and saw her put on the disguise; who can speak to her identity, and to the identity of her companion, Mrs. Bygrave; and who has furnished me, at my own request, with a written statement of facts, which she is ready to affirm on oath if any person ventures to contradict her. You shall read the statement, Mr. Noel, if you like, when you are fitter to understand it. You shall also read a letter in the handwriting of Miss Garth--

who will repeat to you personally every word she has written to me--a letter formally denying that she was ever in Vauxhall Walk, and formally asserting that those moles on your wife's neck are marks peculiar to Miss Magdalen Vanstone, whom she has known from childhood. I say it with a just pride--you will find no weak place anywhere in the evidence which I bring you. If Mr. Bygrave had not stolen my letter, you would have had your warning before I was cruelly deceived into going to Zurich; and the proofs which I now bring you, after your marriage, I should then have offered to you before it. Don't hold me responsible, sir, for what has happened since I left England. Blame your uncle's bastard daughter, and blame that villain with the brown eye and the green!"

She spoke her last venomous words as slowly and distinctly as she had spoken all the rest. Noel Vanstone made no answer--he still sat cowering over the fire. She looked round into his face. He was crying silently. "I was so fond of her!" said the miserable little creature; "and I thought she was so fond of Me!"

Mrs. Lecount turned her back on him in disdainful silence. "Fond of her!" As she repeated those words to herself, her haggard face became almost handsome again in the magnificent intensity of its contempt.

She walked to a book-case at the lower end of the room, and began examining the volumes in it. Before she had been long engaged in this way, she was startled by the sound of his voice, affrightedly calling her back. The tears were gone from his face; it was blank again with terror when he now turned it toward her.

"Lecount!" he said, holding to her with both hands. "Can an egg be poisoned? I had an egg for breakfast this morning, and a little toast."

"Make your mind easy, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "The poison of your wife's deceit is the only poison you have taken yet. If she had resolved already on making you pay the price of your folly with your life, she would not be absent from the house while you were left living in it. Dismiss the thought from your mind. It is the middle of the day; you want refreshment. I have more to say to you in the interests of your own safety--I have something for you to do, which must be done at once. Recruit your strength, and you will do it. I will set you the example of eating, if you still distrust the food in this house. Are you composed enough to give the servant her orders, if I ring the bell? It is necessary to the object I have in view for you, that nobody should think you ill in body or troubled in mind. Try first with me before the servant comes in. Let us see how you look and speak when you say, 'Bring

up the lunch.'"

After two rehearsals, Mrs. Lecount considered him fit to give the order, without betraying himself.

The bell was answered by Louisa--Louisa looked hard at Mrs. Lecount. The luncheon was brought up by the house-maid--the house-maid looked hard at Mrs. Lecount. When luncheon was over, the table was cleared by the cook--the cook looked hard at Mrs. Lecount. The three servants were plainly suspicious that something extraordinary was going on in the house. It was hardly possible to doubt that they had arranged to share among themselves the three opportunities which the service of the table afforded them of entering the room.

The curiosity of which she was the object did not escape the penetration of Mrs. Lecount. "I did well," she thought, "to arm myself in good time with the means of reaching my end. If I let the grass grow under my feet, one or the other of those women might get in my way." Roused by this consideration, she produced her traveling-bag from a corner, as soon as the last of the servants had entered the room; and seating herself at the end of the table opposite Noel Vanstone, looked at him for a moment, with a steady, investigating attention. She had carefully regulated the quantity of wine which he had taken at luncheon--she had let him drink exactly enough to fortify, without confusing him; and she now examined his face critically, like an artist examining his picture at the end of the day's work. The result appeared to satisfy her, and she opened the serious business of the interview on the spot.

"Will you look at the written evidence I have mentioned to you, Mr. Noel, before I say any more?" she inquired. "Or are you sufficiently persuaded of the truth to proceed at once to the suggestion which I have now to make to you?"

"Let me hear your suggestion," he said, sullenly resting his elbows on the table, and leaning his head on his hands.

Mrs. Lecount took from her traveling-bag the written evidence to which she had just alluded, and carefully placed the papers on one side of him, within easy reach, if he wished to refer to them. Far from being daunted, she was visibly encouraged by the ungraciousness of his manner. Her experience of him informed her that the sign was a promising one. On those rare occasions when the little resolution that he possessed was roused in him, it invariably asserted itself--like the resolution of most other weak men--

aggressively. At such times, in proportion as he was outwardly sullen and discourteous to those about him, his resolution rose; and in proportion as he was considerate and polite, it fell. The tone of the answer he had just given, and the attitude he assumed at the table, convinced Mrs. Lecount that Spanish wine and Scotch mutton had done their duty, and had rallied his sinking courage.

"I will put the question to you for form's sake, sir, if you wish it," she proceeded. "But I am already certain, without any question at all, that you have made your will?"

He nodded his head without looking at her.

"You have made it in your wife's favor?"

He nodded again.

"You have left her everything you possess?"

"No."

Mrs. Lecount looked surprised.

"Did you exercise a reserve toward her, Mr. Noel, of your own accord?" she inquired; "or is it possible that your wife put her own limits to her interest in your will?"

He was uneasily silent--he was plainly ashamed to answer the question. Mrs. Lecount repeated it in a less direct form.

"How much have you left your widow, Mr. Noel, in the event of your death?"

"Eighty thousand pounds."

That reply answered the question. Eighty thousand pounds was exactly the fortune which Michael Vanstone had taken from his brother's orphan children at his brother's death--exactly the fortune of which Michael Vanstone's son had kept possession, in his turn, as pitilessly as his father before him. Noel Vanstone's silence was eloquent of the confession which he was ashamed to make. His doting weakness had, beyond all doubt, placed his whole property at the feet of his wife. And thi s girl, whose vindictive daring had defied all restraints--this girl, who had not shrunk from her desperate determination even at the church door--had, in the very hour of

her triumph, taken part only from the man who would willingly have given all!--had rigorously exacted her father's fortune from him to the last farthing; and had then turned her back on the hand that was tempting her with tens of thousands more! For the moment, Mrs. Lecount was fairly silenced by her own surprise; Magdalen had forced the astonishment from her which is akin to admiration, the astonishment which her enmity would fain have refused. She hated Magdalen with a tenfold hatred from that time.

"I have no doubt, sir," she resumed, after a momentary silence, "that Mrs. Noel gave you excellent reasons why the provision for her at your death should be no more, and no less, than eighty thousand pounds. And, on the other hand, I am equally sure that you, in your innocence of all suspicion, found those reasons conclusive at the time. That time has now gone by. Your eyes are opened, sir; and you will not fail to remark (as I remark) that the Combe-Raven property happens to reach the same sum exactly, as the legacy which your wife's own instructions directed you to leave her. If you are still in any doubt of the motive for which she married you, look in your own will--and there the motive is!"

He raised his head from his hands, and became closely attentive to what she was saying to him, for the first time since they had faced each other at the table. The Combe-Raven property had never been classed by itself in his estimation. It had come to him merged in his father's other possessions, at his father's death. The discovery which had now opened before him was one to which his ordinary habits of thought, as well as his innocence of suspicion, had hitherto closed his eyes. He said nothing; but he looked less sullenly at Mrs. Lecount. His manner was more ingratiating; the high tide of his courage was already on the ebb.

"Your position, sir, must be as plain by this time to you as it is to me," said Mrs. Lecount. "There is only one obstacle now left between this woman and the attainment of her end. That obstacle is your life. After the discovery we have made upstairs, I leave you to consider for yourself what your life is worth."

At those terrible words, the ebbing resolution in him ran out to the last drop. "Don't frighten me!" he pleaded; "I have been frightened enough already." He rose, and dragged his chair after him, round the table to Mrs. Lecount's side. He sat down and caressingly kissed her hand. "You good creature!" he said, in a sinking voice. "You excellent Lecount! Tell me what to do. I'm full of resolution--I'll do anything to save my life!"

"Have you got writing materials in the room, sir?" asked Mrs. Lecount. "Will

you put them on the table, if you please?"

While the writing materials were in process of collection, Mrs. Lecount made a new demand on the resources of her traveling-bag. She took two papers from it, each indorsed in the same neat commercial handwriting. One was described as "Draft for proposed Will," and the other as "Draft for proposed Letter." When she placed them before her on the table, her hand shook a little; and she applied the smelling-salts, which she had brought with her in Noel Vanstone's interests, to her own nostrils.

"I had hoped, when I came here, Mr. Noel," she proceeded, "to have given you more time for consideration than it seems safe to give you now. When you first told me of your wife's absence in London, I thought it probable that the object of her journey was to see her sister and Miss Garth. Since the horrible discovery we have made upstairs, I am inclined to alter that opinion. Your wife's determination not to tell you who the friends are whom she has gone to see, fills me with alarm. She may have accomplices in London--accomplices, for anything we know to the contrary, in this house. All three of your servants, sir, have taken the opportunity, in turn, of coming into the room and looking at me. I don't like their looks! Neither you nor I know what may happen from day to day, or even from hour to hour. If you take my advice, you will get the start at once of all possible accidents; and, when the carriage comes back, you will leave this house with me!"

"Yes, yes!" he said, eagerly; "I'll leave the house with you. I wouldn't stop here by myself for any sum of money that could be offered me. What do we want the pen and ink for? Are you to write, or am I?"

"You are to write, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "The means taken for promoting your own safety are to be means set in motion, from beginning to end, by yourself. I suggest, Mr. Noel--and you decide. Recognize your own position, sir. What is your first and foremost necessity? It is plainly this. You must destroy your wife's interest in your death by making another will."

He vehemently nodded his approval; his color rose, and his blinking eyes brightened in malicious triumph. "She shan't have a farthing," he said to himself, in a whisper--"she shan't have a farthing!"

"When your will is made, sir," proceeded Mrs. Lecount, "you must place it in the hands of a trustworthy person--not my hands, Mr. Noel; I am only your servant! Then, when the will is safe, and when you are safe, write to your wife at this house. Tell her her infamous imposture is discovered; tell her you have made a new will, which leaves her penniless at your death; tell her,

in your righteous indignation, that she enters your doors no more. Place yourself in that strong position, and it is no longer you who are at your wife's mercy, but your wife who is at yours. Assert your own power, sir, with the law to help you, and crush this woman into submission to any terms for the future that you please to impose."

He eagerly took up the pen. "Yes," he said, with a vindictive self-importance, "any terms I please to impose." He suddenly checked himself and his face became dejected and perplexed. "How can I do it now?" he asked, throwing down the pen as quickly as he had taken it up.

"Do what, sir?" inquired Mrs. Lecount.

"How can I make my will, with Mr. Loscombe away in London, and no lawyer here to help me?"

Mrs. Lecount gently tapped the papers before her on the table with her forefinger.

"All the help you need, sir, is waiting for you here," she said. "I considered this matter carefully before I came to you; and I provided myself with the confidential assistance of a friend to guide me through those difficulties which I could not penetrate for myself. The friend to whom I refer is a gentleman of Swiss extraction, but born and bred in England. He is not a lawyer by profession--but he has had his own sufficient experience of the law, nevertheless; and he has supplied me, not only with a model by which you may make your will, but with the written sketch of a letter which it is as important for us to have, as the model of the will itself. There is another necessity waiting for you, Mr. Noel, which I have not mentioned yet, but which is no less urgent in its way than the necessity of the will."

"What is it?" he asked, with roused curiosity.

"We will take it in its turn, sir," answered Mrs. Lecount. "Its turn has not come yet. The will, if you please, first. I will dictate from the model in my possession and you will write."

Noel Vanstone looked at the draft for the Will and the draft for the Letter with suspicious curiosity.

"I think I ought to see the papers myself, before you dictate," he said. "It would be more satisfactory to my own mind, Lecount."

"By all means, sir," rejoined Mrs. Lecount, handing him the papers immediately.

He read the draft for the Will first, pausing and knitting his brows distrustfully, wherever he found blank spaces left in the manuscript to be filled in with the names of persons and the enumeration of sums bequeathed to them. Two or three minutes of reading brought him to the end of the paper. He gave it back to Mrs. Lecount without making any objection to it.

The draft for the Letter was a much longer document. He obstinately read it through to the end, with an expression of perplexity and discontent which showed that it was utterly unintelligible to him. "I must have this explained," he said, with a touch of his old self-importance, "before I take any steps in the matter."

"It shall be explained, sir, as we go on," said Mrs. Lecount.

"Every word of it?"

"Every word of it, Mr. Noel, when its turn comes. You have no objection to the will? To the will, then, as I said before, let us devote ourselves first. You have seen for yourself that it is short enough and simple enough for a child to understand it. But if any doubts remain on your mind, by all means compose those doubts by showing your will to a lawyer by profession. In the meantime, let me not be considered intrusive if I remind you that we are all mortal, and that the lost opportunity can never be recalled. While your time is your own, sir, and while your enemies are unsuspicious of you, make your will!"

She opened a sheet of note-paper and smoothed it out before him; she dipped the pen in ink, and placed it in his hands. He took it from her without speaking--he was, to all appearance, suffering under some temporary uneasiness of mind. But the main point was gained. There he sat, with the paper before him, and the pen in his hand; ready at last, in right earnest, to make his will.

"The first question for you to decide, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, after a preliminary glance at her Draft, "is your choice of an executor. I have no desire to influence your decision; but I may, without impropriety, remind you that a wise choice means, in other words, the choice of an old and tried friend whom you know that you can trust."

"It means the admiral, I suppose?" said Noel Vanstone.

Mrs. Lecount bowed.

"Very well," he continued. "The admiral let it be."

There was plainly some oppression still weighing on his mind. Even under the trying circumstances in which he was placed it was not in his nature to take Mrs. Lecount's perfectly sensible and disinterested advice without a word of cavil, as he had taken it now.

"Are you ready, sir?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Lecount dictated the first paragraph from the Draft, as follows:

"This is the last Will and Testament of me, Noel Vanstone, now living at Baliol Cottage, near Dumfries. I revoke, absolutely and in every particular, my former will executed on the thirtieth of September, eighteen hundred and forty-seven; and I hereby appoint Rear-Admiral Arthur Everard Bartram, of St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, Essex, sole executor of this my will."

"Have you written those words, sir?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Lecount laid down the Draft; Noel Vanstone laid down the pen. They neither of them looked at each other. There was a long silence.

"I am waiting, Mr. Noel," said Mrs. Lecount, at last, "to hear what your wishes are in respect to the disposal of your fortune. Your large fortune," she added, with merciless emphasis.

He took up the pen again, and began picking the feathers from the quill in dead silence.

"Perhaps your existing will may help you to instruct me, sir," pursued Mrs. Lecount. "May I inquire to whom you left all your surplus money, after leaving the eighty thousand pounds to your wife?"

If he had answered that question plainly, he must have said: "I have left the whole surplus to my cousin, George Bartram"--and the implied

acknowledgment that Mrs. Lecount's name was not mentioned in the will must then have followed in Mrs. Lecount's presence. A much bolder man, in his situation, might have felt the same oppression and the same embarrassment which he was feeling now. He picked the last morsel of feather from the quill; and, desperately leaping the pitfall under his feet, advanced to meet Mrs. Lecount's claims on him of his own accord.

"I would rather not talk of any will but the will I am making now," he said uneasily. "The first thing, Lecount--" He hesitated--put the bare end of the quill into his mouth--gnawed at it thoughtfully--and said no more.

"Yes, sir?" persisted Mrs. Lecount.

"The first thing is--"

"Yes, sir?"

"The first thing is, to--to make some provision for You?"

He spoke the last words in a tone of plaintive interrogation--as if all hope of being met by a magnanimous refusal had not deserted him even yet. Mrs. Lecount enlightened his mind on this point, without a moment's loss of time.

"Thank you, Mr. Noel," she said, with the tone and manner of a woman who was not acknowledging a favor, but receiving a right.

He took another bite at the quill. The perspiration began to appear on his face.

"The difficulty is," he remarked, "to say how much."

"Your lamented father, sir," rejoined Mrs. Lecount, "met that difficulty (if you remember) at the time of his last illness?"

"I don't remember," said Noel Vanstone, doggedly.

"You were on one side of his bed, sir, and I was on the other. We were vainly trying to persuade him to make his will. After telling us he would wait and make his will when he was well again, he looked round at me, and said some kind and feeling words which my memory will treasure to my dying day. Have you forgotten those words, Mr. Noel?"

"Yes," said Mr. Noel, without hesitation.

"In my present situation, sir," retorted Mrs. Lecount, "delicacy forbids me to improve your memory."

She looked at her watch, and relapsed into silence. He clinched his hands, and writhed from side to side of his chair in an agony of indecision. Mrs. Lecount passively refused to take the slightest notice of him.

"What should you say--?" he began, and suddenly stopped again.

"Yes, sir?"

"What should you say to--a thousand pounds?"

Mrs. Lecount rose from her chair, and looked him full in the face, with the majestic indignation of an outraged woman.

"After the service I have rendered you to-day, Mr. Noel," she said, "I have at least earned a claim on your respect, if I have earned nothing more. I wish you good-morning."

"Two thousand!" cried Noel Vanstone, with the courage of despair.

Mrs. Lecount folded up her papers and hung her traveling-bag over her arm in contemptuous silence.

"Three thousand!"

Mrs. Lecount moved with impenetrable dignity from the table to the door.

"Four thousand!"

Mrs. Lecount gathered her shawl round her with a shudder, and opened the door.

"Five thousand!"

He clasped his hands, and wrung them at her in a frenzy of rage and suspense. "Five thousand" was the death-cry of his pecuniary suicide.

Mrs. Lecount softly shut the door again, and came back a step.

"Free of legacy duty, sir?" she inquired.

"No."

Mrs. Lecount turned on her heel and opened the door again.

"Yes."

Mrs. Lecount came back, and resumed her place at the table as if nothing had happened.

"Five thousand pounds, free of legacy duty, was the sum, sir, which your father's grateful regard promised me in his will," she said, quietly. "If you choose to exert your memory, as you have not chosen to exert it yet, your memory will tell you that I speak the truth. I accept your filial performance of your father's promise, Mr. Noel--and there I stop. I scorn to take a mean advantage of my position toward you; I scorn to grasp anything from your fears. You are protected by my respect for myself, and for the Illustrious Name I bear. You are welcome to all that I have done, and to all that I have suffered in your service. The widow of Professor Lecompte, sir, takes what is justly hers--and takes no more!"

As she spoke those words, the traces of sickness seemed, for the moment, to disappear from her face; her eyes shone with a steady inner light; all the woman warmed and brightened in the radiance of her own triumph--the triumph, trebly won, of carrying her point, of vindicating her integrity, and of matching Magdalen's incorruptible self-denial on Magdalen's own ground.

"When you are yourself again, sir, we will proceed. Let us wait a little first."

She gave him time to compose himself; and then, after first looking at her Draft, dictated the second paragraph of the will, in these terms:

"I give and bequeath to Madame Virginie Lecompte (widow of Professor Lecompt e, late of Zurich) the sum of Five Thousand Pounds, free of Legacy Duty. And, in making this bequest, I wi sh to place it on record that I am not only expressing my own sense of Madame Lecompte's attachment and fidelity in the capacity of my housekeeper, but that I also believe myself to be executing the intentions of my deceased father, who, but for the circumstance of his dying intestate, would have left Madame Lecompte, in his will, the same token of grateful regard for her services which I now leave her in mine."

"Have you written the last words, sir?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Lecount leaned across the table and offered Noel Vanstone her hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Noel," she said. "The five thousand pounds is the acknowledgment on your father's side of what I have done for him. The words in the will are the acknowledgment on yours."

A faint smile flickered over his face for the first time. It comforted him, on reflection, to think that matters might have been worse. There was balm for his wounded spirit in paying the debt of gratitude by a sentence not negotiable at his banker's. Whatever his father might have done, he had got Lecount a bargain, after all!

"A little more writing, sir," resumed Mrs. Lecount, "and your painful but necessary duty will be performed. The trifling matter of my legacy being settled, we may come to the important question that is left. The future direction of a large fortune is now waiting your word of command. To whom is it to go?"

He began to writhe again in his chair. Even under the all-powerful fascination of his wife the parting with his money on paper had not been accomplished without a pang. He had endured the pang; he had resigned himself to the sacrifice. And now here was the dreaded ordeal again, awaiting him mercilessly for the second time!

"Perhaps it may assist your decision, sir, if I repeat a question which I have put to you already," observed Mrs. Lecount. "In the will that you made under your wife's influence, to whom did you leave the surplus money which remained at your own disposal?"

There was no harm in answering the question now. He acknowledged that he had left the money to his cousin George.

"You could have done nothing better, Mr. Noel; and you can do nothing better now," said Mrs. Lecount. "Mr. George and his two sisters are your only relations left. One of those sisters is an incurable invalid, with more than money enough already for all the wants which her affliction allows her to feel. The other is the wife of a man even richer than yourself. To leave the money to these sisters is to waste it. To leave the money to their brother George is to give your cousin exactly the assistance which he will want when

he one day inherits his uncle's dilapidated house and his uncle's impoverished estate. A will which names the admiral your executor and Mr. George your heir is the right will for you to make. It does honor to the claims of friendship, and it does justice to the claims of blood."

She spoke warmly; for she spoke with a grateful remembrance of all that she herself owed to the hospitality of St. Crux. Noel Vanstone took up another pen and began to strip the second quill of its feathers as he had stripped the first.

"Yes," he said, reluctantly, "I suppose George must have it--I suppose George has the principal claim on me." He hesitated: he looked at the door, he looked at the window, as if he longed to make his escape by one way or the other. "Oh, Lecount," he cried, piteously, "it's such a large fortune! Let me wait a little before I leave it to anybody."

To his surprise; Mrs. Lecount at once complied with this characteristic request.

"I wish you to wait, sir," she replied. "I have something important to say, before you add another line to your will. A little while since, I told you there was a second necessity connected with your present situation, which had not been provided for yet, but which must be provided for, when the time came. The time has come now. You have a serious difficulty to meet and conquer before you can leave your fortune to your cousin George."

"What difficulty?" he asked.

Mrs. Lecount rose from her chair without answering, stole to the door, and suddenly threw it open. No one was listening outside; the passage was a solitude, from one end to the other.

"I distrust all servants," she said, returning to her place--"your servants particularly. Sit closer, Mr. Noel. What I have now to say to you must be heard by no living creature but ourselves."

CHAPTER III.

THERE was a pause of a few minutes while Mrs. Lecount opened the second of the two papers which lay before her on the table, and refreshed her memory by looking it rapidly through. This done, she once more addressed herself to Noel Vanstone, carefully lowering her voice, so as to render it inaudible to any one who might be listening in the passage outside.

"I must beg your permission, sir," she began, "to return to the subject of your wife. I do so most unwillingly; and I promise you that what I have now to say about her shall be said, for your sake and for mine, in the fewest words. What do we know of this woman, Mr. Noel--judging her by her own confession when she came to us in the character of Miss Garth, and by her own acts afterward at Aldborough? We know that, if death had not snatched your father out of her reach, she was ready with her plot to rob him of the Combe-Raven money. We know that, when you inherited the money in your turn, she was ready with her plot to rob you. We know how she carried that plot through to the end; and we know that nothing but your death is wanted, at this moment, to crown her rapacity and her deception with success. We are sure of these things. We are sure that she is young, bold, and clever--that she has neither doubts, scruples, nor pity--and that she possesses the personal qualities which men in general (quite incomprehensibly to me!) are weak enough to admire. These are not fancies, Mr. Noel, but facts; you know them as well as I do."

He made a sign in the affirmative, and Mrs. Lecount went on:

"Keep in your mind what I have said of the past, sir, and now look with me to the future. I hope and trust you have a long life still before you; but let us, for the moment only, suppose the case of your death--your death leaving this will behind you, which gives your fortune to your cousin George. I am told there is an office in London in which copies of all wills must be kept. Any curious stranger who chooses to pay a shilling for the privilege may enter that office, and may read any will in the place at his or her discretion. Do you see what I am coming to, Mr. Noel? Your disinherited widow pays her shilling, and reads your will. Your disinherited widow sees that the Combe-Raven money, which has gone from your father to you, goes next from you to Mr. George Bartram. What is the certain end of that discovery? The end is, that you leave to your cousin and your friend the legacy of this woman's vengeance and this woman's deceit-vengeance made more resolute, deceit made more devilish than ever, by her exasperation at her own failure.

What is your cousin George? He is a generous, unsuspicious man; incapable of deceit himself, and fearing no deception in others. Leave him at the mercy of your wife's unscrupulous fascinations and your wife's unfathomable deceit, and I see the end as certainly as I see you sitting there! She will blind his eyes, as she blinded yours; and, in spite of you, in spite of me, she will have the money!"

She stopped, and left her last words time to gain their hold on his mind. The circumstances had been stated so clearly, the conclusion from them had been so plainly drawn, that he seized her meaning without an effort, and seized it at once.

"I see!" he said, vindictively clinching his hands. "I understand, Lecount! She shan't have a farthing. What shall I do? Shall I leave the money to the admiral?" He paused, and considered a little. "No," he resumed; "there's the same danger in leaving it to the admiral that there is in leaving it to George."

"There is no danger, Mr. Noel, if you take my advice."

"What is your advice?"

"Follow your own idea, sir. Take the pen in hand again, and leave the money to Admiral Bartram."

He mechanically dipped the pen in the ink, and then hesitated.

"You shall know where I am leading you, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, "before you sign your will. In the meantime, let us gain every inch of ground we can, as we go on. I want the will to be all written out before we advance a single step beyond it. Begin your third paragraph, Mr. Noel, under the lines which leave me my legacy of five thousand pounds."

She dictated the last momentous sentence of the will (from the rough draft in her own possession) in these words:

"The whole residue of my estate, after payment of my burial expenses and my lawful debts, I give and bequeath to Rear-Admiral Arthur Everard Bartram, my Executor aforesaid; to be by him applied to such uses as he may think fit.

"Signed, sealed, and delivered, this third day of November, eighteen hundred and forty-seven, by Noel Vanstone, the within-named testator, as and for his last Will and Testament, in the presence of us--"

"Is that all?" asked Noel Vanstone, in astonishment.

"That is enough, sir, to bequeath your fortune to the admiral; and therefore that is all. Now let us go back to the case which we have supposed already. Your widow pays her shilling, and sees this will. There is the Combe-Raven money left to Admiral Bartram, with a declaration in plain words that it is his, to use as he likes. When she sees this, what does she do? She sets her trap for the admiral. He is a bachelor, and he is an old man. Who is to protect him against the arts of this desperate woman? Protect him yourself, sir, with a few more strokes of that pen which has done such wonders already. You have left him this legacy in your will--which your wife sees. Take the legacy away again, in a letter--which is a dead secret between the admiral and you. Put the will and the letter under one cover, and place them in the admiral's possession, with your written directions to him to break the seal on the day of your death. Let the will say what it says now; and let the letter (which is your secret and his) tell him the truth. Say that, in leaving him your fortune, you leave it with the request that he will take his legacy with one hand from you, and give it with the other to his nephew George. Tell him that your trust in this matter rests solely on your confidence in his honor, and on your belief in his affectionate remembrance of your father and yourself. You have known the admiral since you were a boy. He has his little whims and oddities; but he is a gentleman from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot; and he is utterly incapable of proving false to a trust in his honor, reposed by his dead friend. Meet the difficulty boldly, by such a stratagem as this; and you save these two helpless men from your wife's snare, one by means of the other. Here, on one side, is your will, which gives the fortune to the admiral, and sets her plotting accordingly. And there, on the other side, is your letter, which privately puts the money into the nephew's hands!"

The malicious dexterity of this combination was exactly the dexterity which Noel Vanstone was most fit to appreciate. He tried to express his approval and admiration in words. Mrs. Lecount held up her hand warningly and closed his lips.

"Wait, sir, before you express your opinion," she went on. "Half the difficulty is all that we have conquered yet. Let us say, the admiral has made the use of your legacy which you have privately requested him to make of it. Sooner or later, however well the secret may be kept, your wife will discover the truth. What follows that discovery! She lays siege to Mr. George. All you have done is to leave him the money by a roundabout way. There he is, after an interval of time, as much at her mercy as if you had openly mentioned

him in your will. What is the remedy for this? The remedy is to mislead her, if we can, for the second time--to set up an obstacle between her and the money, for the protection of your cousin George. Can you guess for yourself, Mr. Noel, what is the most promising obstacle we can put in her way?"

He shook his head. Mrs. Lecount smiled, and startled him into close attention by laying her hand on his arm.

"Put a Woman in her way, sir!" she whispered in her wiliest tones. "We don't believe in that fascinating beauty of hers--whatever you may do. Our lips don't burn to kiss those smooth cheeks. Our arms don't long to be round that supple waist. We see through her smiles and her graces, and her stays and her padding--she can't fascinate us! Put a woman in her way, Mr. Noel! Not a woman in my helpless situation, who is only a servant, but a woman with the authority and the jealousy of a Wife. Make it a condition, in your letter to the admiral, that if Mr. George is a bachelor at the time of your death, he shall marry within a certain time afterward, or he shall not have the legacy. Suppose he remains single in spite of your condition, who is to have the money then? Put a woman in your wife's way, sir, once more--and leave the fortune, in that case, to the married sister of your cousin George."

She paused. Noel Vanstone again attempted to express his opinion, and again Mrs. Lecount's hand extinguished him in silence.

"If you approve, Mr. Noel," she said, "I will take your approval for granted. If you object, I will meet your objection before it is out of your mouth. You may say: Suppose this condition is sufficient to answer the purpose, why hide it in a private letter to the admiral? Why not openly write it down, with my cousin's name, in the will? Only for one reason, sir. Only because the secret way is the sure way, with such a woman as your wife. The more secret you can keep your intentions, the more time you force her to waste in finding them out for herself. That time which she loses is time gained from her treachery by the admiral--time gained by Mr. George (if he is still a bachelor) for his undisturbed choice of a lady--time gained, for her own security, by the object of his choice, who might otherwise be the first object of your wife's suspicion and your wife's hostility. Remember the bottle we have discovered upstairs; and keep this desperate woman ignorant, and therefore harmless, as long as you can. There is my advice, Mr. Noel, in the fewest and plainest words. What do you say, sir? Am I almost as clever in my way as your friend Mr. Bygrave? Can I, too, conspire a little, when the object of my conspiracy is to assist your wishes and to protect your friends?"

Permitted the use of his tongue at last, Noel Vanstone's admiration of Mrs.

Lecount expressed itself in terms precisely similar to those which he had used on a former occasion, in paying his compliments to Captain Wragge. "What a head you have got!" were the grateful words which he had once spoken to Mrs. Lecount's bitterest enemy. "What a head you have got!" were the grateful words which he now spoke again to Mrs. Lecount herself. So do extremes meet; and such is sometimes the all-embracing capacity of the approval of a fool!

"Allow my head, sir, to deserve the compliment which you have paid to it," said Mrs. Lecount. "The letter to the admiral is not written yet. Your will there is a body without a soul--an Adam without an Eve--until the letter is completed and laid by its side. A little more dictation on my part, a little more writing on yours, and our work is done. Pardon me. The letter will be longer than the will; we must have larger paper than the note-paper this time."

The writing-case was searched, and some letter paper was found in it of the size required. Mrs. Lecount resumed her dictation; and Noel Vanstone resumed his pen.

"Baliol Cottage, Dumfries,

"November 3d, 1847.

"Private.

"DEAR ADMIRAL BARTRAM--When you open my Will (in which you are named my sole executor), you will find that I have bequeathed the whole residue of my estate--after payment of one legacy of five thousand pounds--to yourself. It is the purpose of my letter to tell you privately what the object is for which I have left you the fortune which is now placed in your hands.

"I beg you to consider this large legacy as intended, under certain conditions, to be given by you to your nephew George. If your nephew is married at the time of my death, and if his wife is living, I request you to put him at once in possession of your legacy; accompanying it by the expression of my desire (which I am sure he will consider a sacred and binding obligation on him) that he will settle the money on his wife--and on his children, if he has any. If, on the other hand, he is unmarried at the time of my death, or if he is a widower--in either of those cases, I make it a condition of his receiving the legacy, that he shall be married within the period of--"

Mrs. Lecount laid down the Draft letter from which she had been dictating thus far, and informed Noel Vanstone by a sign that his pen might rest.

"We have come to the question of time, sir," she observed. "How long will you give your cousin to marry, if he is single, or a widower, at the time of your death?"

"Shall I give him a year?" inquired Noel Vanstone.

"If we had nothing to consider but the interests of Propriety," said Mrs. Lecount, "I should say a year too, sir--especially if Mr. George should happen to be a widower. But we have your wife to consider, as well as the interests of Propriety. A year of delay, between your death and your cousin's marriage, is a dangerously long time to leave the disposal of your fortune in suspense. Give a determined woman a year to plot and contrive in, and there is no saying what she may not do."

"Six months?" suggested Noel Vanstone.

"Six months, sir," rejoined Mrs. Lecount, "is the preferable time of the two. A six months' interval from the day of your death is enough for Mr. George. You look discomposed, sir; what is the matter?"

"I wish you wouldn't talk so much about my death," he broke out, petulantly. "I don't like it! I hate the very sound of the word!"

Mrs. Lecount smiled resignedly, and referred to her Draft.

"I see the word 'decease' written here," she remarked. "Perhaps, Mr. Noel, you would prefer it?"

"Yes," he said; "I prefer 'Decease.' It doesn't sound so dreadful as 'Death.'"

"Let us go on with the letter, sir."

She resumed her dictation, as follows:

"...in either of those cases, I make it a condition of his receiving the legacy that he shall be married within the period of Six calendar months from the day of my decease; that the woman he marries shall not be a widow; and that his marriage shall be a marriage by Banns, publicly celebrated in the parish church of Ossory--where he has been known from his childhood, and where the family and circumstances of his future wife are likely to be the

subject of public interest and inquiry."

"This," said Mrs. Lecount, quietly looking up from the Draft, "is to protect Mr. George, sir, in case the same trap is set for him which was successfully set for you. She will not find her false character and her false name fit quite so easily next time--no, not even with Mr. Bygrave to help her! Another dip of ink, Mr. Noel; let us write the next paragraph. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Lecount went on.

"If your nephew fails to comply with these conditions--that is to say, if being either a bachelor or a widower at the time of my decease, he fails to marry in all respects as I have here instructed him to marry, within Six calendar months from that time--it is my desire that he shall not receive the legacy, or any part of it. I request you, in the case here supposed, to pass him over altogether; and to give the fortune left you in my will to his married sister, Mrs. Girdlestone.

"Having now put you in possession of my motives and intentions, I come to the next question which it is necessary to consider. If, when you open this letter, your nephew is an unmarried man, it is clearly indispensable that he should know of the conditions here imposed on him, as soon, if possible, as you know of them yourself. Are you, under these circumstances, freely to communicate to him what I have here written to you? Or are you to leave him under the impression that no such private expression of my wishes as this is in existence; and are you to state all the conditions relating to his marriage, as if they emanated entirely from yourself?

"If you will adopt this latter alternative, you will add one more to the many obligations under which your friendship has placed me.

"I have serious reason to believe that the possession of my money, and the discovery of any peculiar arrangements relating to the disposal of it, will be objects (after my decease) of the fraud and conspiracy of an unscrupulous person. I am therefore anxious--for your sake, in the first place--that no suspicion of the existence of this letter should be conveyed to the mind of the person to whom I allude. And I am equally desirous--for Mrs. Girdlestone's sake, in the second place--that this same person should be entirely ignorant that the legacy will pass into Mrs. Girdlestone's possession, if your nephew is not married in the given time. I know George's easy, pliable disposition; I dread the attempts that will be made to practice on it;

and I feel sure that the prudent course will be, to abstain from trusting him with secrets, the rash revelation of which might be followed by serious, and even dangerous results.

"State the conditions, therefore, to your nephew, as if they were your own. Let him think they have been suggested to your mind by the new responsibilities imposed on you as a man of property, by your position in my will, and by your consequent anxiety to provide for the perpetuation of the family name. If these reasons are not sufficient to satisfy him, there can be no objection to your referring him, for any further explanations which he may desire, to his wedding-day.

"I have done. My last wishes are now confided to you, in implicit reliance on your honor, and on your tender regard for the memory of your friend. Of the miserable circumstances which compel me to write as I have written here, I say nothing. You will hear of them, if my life is spared, from my own lips--for you will be the first friend whom I shall consult in my difficulty and distress. Keep this letter strictly secret, and strictly in your own possession, until my requests are complied with. Let no human being but yourself know where it is, on any pretense whatever.

"Believe me, dear Admiral Bartram, affectionately yours,

"NOEL VANSTONE."

"Have you signed, sir?" asked Mrs. Lecount. "Let me look the letter over, if you please, before we seal it up."

She read the letter carefully. In Noel Vanstone's close, cramped handwriting, it filled two pages of letter-paper, and ended at the top of the third page. Instead of using an envelope, Mrs. Lecount folded it, neatly and securely, in the old-fashioned way. She lit the taper in the ink-stand, and returned the letter to the writer.

"Seal it, Mr. Noel," she said, "with your own hand, and your own seal." She extinguished the taper, and handed him the pen again. "Address the letter, sir," she proceeded, "to Admiral Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, Essex. Now, add these words, and sign them, above the address: To be kept in your own possession, and to be opened by yourself only, on the day of my death--or 'Decease,' if you prefer it--Noel Vanstone. Have you done? Let me look at it again. Quite right in every particular. Accept my congratulations, sir. If your wife has not plotted her last plot for the Combe-Raven money, it is not your fault, Mr. Noel--and not mine!"

Finding his attention released by the completion of the letter, Noel Vanstone reverted at once to purely personal considerations. "There is my packing-up to be thought of now," he said. "I can't go away without my warm things."

"Excuse me, sir," rejoined Mrs. Lecount, "there is the Will to be signed first; and there must be two persons found to witness your signature." She looked out of the front window, and saw the carriage waiting at the door. "The coachman will do for one of the witnesses," she said. "He is in respectable service at Dumfries, and he can be found if he happens to be wanted. We must have one of your own servants, I suppose, for the other witness. They are all de testable women; but the cook is the least ill-looking of the three. Send for the cook, sir; while I go out and call the coachman. When we have got our witnesses here, you have only to speak to them in these words: 'I have a document here to sign, and I wish you to write your names on it, as witnesses of my signature.' Nothing more, Mr. Noel! Say those few words in your usual manner--and, when the signing is over, I will see myself to your packing-up, and your warm things."

She went to the front door, and summoned the coachman to the parlor. On her return, she found the cook already in the room. The cook looked mysteriously offended, and stared without intermission at Mrs. Lecount. In a minute more the coachman--an elderly man--came in. He was preceded by a relishing odor of whisky; but his head was Scotch; and nothing but his odor betrayed him.

"I have a document here to sign," said Noel Vanstone, repeating his lesson; "and I wish you to write your names on it, as witnesses of my signature."

The coachman looked at the will. The cook never removed her eyes from Mrs. Lecount.

"Ye'll no object, sir," said the coachman, with the national caution showing itself in every wrinkle on his face--"ye'll no object, sir, to tell me, first, what the Doecument may be?"

Mrs. Lecount interposed before Noel Vanstone's indignation could express itself in words.

"You must tell the man, sir, that this is your Will," she said. "When he witnesses your signature, he can see as much for himself if he looks at the top of the page."

"Ay, ay," said the coachman, looking at the top of the page immediately. "His last Will and Testament. Hech, sirs! there's a sair confronting of Death in a Doecument like yon! A' flesh is grass," continued the coachman, exhaling an additional puff of whisky, and looking up devoutly at the ceiling. "Tak' those words in connection with that other Screepture: Many are ca'ad, but few are chosen. Tak' that again, in connection with Rev'lations, Chapter the First, verses One to Fefteen. Lay the whole to heart; and what's your Walth, then? Dross, sirs! And your body? (Screepture again.) Clay for the potter! And your life? (Screepture once more.) The Breeth o' your Nostrils!"

The cook listened as if the cook was at church: but she never removed her eyes from Mrs. Lecount.

"You had better sign, sir. This is apparently some custom prevalent in Dumfries during the transaction of business," said Mrs. Lecount, resignedly. "The man means well, I dare say."

She added those last words in a soothing tone, for she saw that Noel Vanstone's indignation was fast merging into alarm. The coachman's outburst of exhortation seemed to have inspired him with fear, as well as disgust.

He dipped the pen in the ink, and signed the Will without uttering a word. The coachman (descending instantly from Theology to Business) watched the signature with the most scrupulous attention; and signed his own name as witness, with an implied commentary on the proceeding, in the form of another puff of whisky, exhaled through the medium of a heavy sigh. The cook looked away from Mrs. Lecount with an effort--signed her name in a violent hurry--and looked back again with a start, as if she expected to see a loaded pistol (produced in the interval) in the housekeeper's hands. "Thank you," said Mrs. Lecount, in her friendliest manner. The cook shut up her lips aggressively and looked at her master. "You may go!" said her master. The cook coughed contemptuously, and went.

"We shan't keep you long," said Mrs. Lecount, dismissing the coachman. "In half an hour, or less, we shall be ready for the journey back."

The coachman's austere countenance relaxed for the first time. He smiled mysteriously, and approached Mrs. Lecount on tiptoe.

"Ye'll no forget one thing, my leddy," he said, with the most ingratiating politeness. "Ye'll no forget the witnessing as weel as the driving, when ye pay me for my day's wark!" He laughed with guttural gravity; and, leaving his

atmosphere behind him, stalked out of the room.

"Lecount," said Noel Vanstone, as soon as the coachman closed the door, "did I hear you tell that man we should be ready in half an hour?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you blind?"

He asked the question with an angry stamp of his foot. Mrs. Lecount looked at him in astonishment.

"Can't you see the brute is drunk?" he went on, more and more irritably. "Is my life nothing? Am I to be left at the mercy of a drunken coachman? I won't trust that man to drive me, for any consideration under heaven! I'm surprised you could think of it, Lecount."

"The man has been drinking, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "It is easy to see and to smell that. But he is evidently used to drinking. If he is sober enough to walk quite straight--which he certainly does--and to sign his name in an excellent handwriting--which you may see for yourself on the Will--I venture to think he is sober enough to drive us to Dumfries."

"Nothing of the sort! You're a foreigner, Lecount; you don't understand these people. They drink whisky from morning to night. Whisky is the strongest spirit that's made; whisky is notorious for its effect on the brain. I tell you, I won't run the risk. I never was driven, and I never will be driven, by anybody but a sober man."

"Must I go back to Dumfries by myself, sir?"

"And leave me here? Leave me alone in this house after what has happened? How do I know my wife may not come back to-night? How do I know her journey is not a blind to mislead me? Have you no feeling, Lecount? Can you leave me in my miserable situation--?" He sank into a chair and burst out crying over his own idea, before he had completed the expression of it in words. "Too bad!" he said, with his handkerchief over his face--"too bad!"

It was impossible not to pity him. If ever mortal was pitiable, he was the man. He had broken down at last, under the conflict of violent emotions which had been roused in him since the morning. The effort to follow Mrs. Lecount along the mazes of intricate combination through which she had steadily led the way, had upheld him while that effort lasted: the moment it

was at an end, he dropped. The coachman had hastened a result--of which the coachman was far from being the cause.

"You surprise me--you distress me, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "I entreat you to compose yourself. I will stay here, if you wish it, with pleasure--I will stay here to-night, for your sake. You want rest and quiet after this dreadful day. The coachman shall be instantly sent away, Mr. Noel. I will give him a note to the landlord of the hotel, and the carriage shall come back for us to-morrow morning, with another man to drive it."

The prospect which those words presented cheered him. He wiped his eyes, and kissed Mrs. Lecount's hand. "Yes!" he said, faintly; "send the coachman away--and you stop here. You good creature! You excellent Lecount! Send the drunken brute away, and come back directly. We will be comfortable by the fire, Lecount--and have a nice little dinner--and try to make it like old times." His weak voice faltered; he returned to the fire side, and melted into tears again under the pathetic influence of his own idea.

Mrs. Lecount left him for a minute to dismiss the coachman. When she returned to the parlor she found him with his hand on the bell.

"What do you want, sir?" she asked.

"I want to tell the servants to get your room ready," he answered. "I wish to show you every attention, Lecount."

"You are all kindness, Mr. Noel; but wait one moment. It may be well to have these papers put out of the way before the servant comes in again. If you will place the Will and the Sealed Letter together in one envelope--and if you will direct it to the admiral--I will take care that the inclosure so addressed is safely placed in his own hands. Will you come to the table, Mr. Noel, only for one minute more?"

No! He was obstinate; he refused to move from the fire; he was sick and tired of writing: he wished he had never been born, and he loathed the sight of pen and ink. All Mrs. Lecount's patience and all Mrs. Lecount's persuasion were required to induce him to write t he admiral's address for the second time. She only succeeded by bringing the blank envelope to him upon the paper-case, and putting it coaxingly on his lap. He grumbled, he even swore, but he directed the envelope at last, in these terms: "To Admiral Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. Favored by Mrs. Lecount." With that final act of compliance his docility came to an end. He refused, in the fiercest terms, to seal the envelope. There was no need to press this proceeding on him. His

seal lay ready on the table, and it mattered nothing whether he used it, or whether a person in his confidence used it for him. Mrs. Lecount sealed the envelope, with its two important inclosures placed safely inside.

She opened her traveling-bag for the last time, and pausing for a moment before she put the sealed packet away, looked at it with a triumph too deep for words. She smiled as she dropped it into the bag. Not the shadow of a suspicion that the Will might contain superfluous phrases and expressions which no practical lawyer would have used; not the vestige of a doubt whether the Letter was quite as complete a document as a practical lawyer might have made it, troubled her mind. In blind reliance--born of her hatred for Magdalen and her hunger for revenge--in blind reliance on her own abilities and on her friend's law, she trusted the future implicitly to the promise of the morning's work.

As she locked her traveling-bag Noel Vanstone rang the bell. On this occasion, the summons was answered by Louisa.

"Get the spare room ready," said her master; "this lady will sleep here to-night. And air my warm things; this lady and I are going away to-morrow morning."

The civil and submissive Louisa received her orders in sullen silence--darted an angry look at her master's impenetrable guest--and left the room. The servants were evidently all attached to their mistress's interests, and were all of one opinion on the subject of Mrs. Lecount.

"That's done!" said Noel Vanstone, with a sigh of infinite relief. "Come and sit down, Lecount. Let's be comfortable--let's gossip over the fire."

Mrs. Lecount accepted the invitation and drew an easy-chair to his side. He took her hand with a confidential tenderness, and held it in his while the talk went on. A stranger, looking in through the window, would have taken them for mother and son, and would have thought to himself: "What a happy home!"

The gossip, led by Noel Vanstone, consisted as usual of an endless string of questions, and was devoted entirely to the subject of himself and his future prospects. Where would Lecount take him to when they went away the next morning? Why to London? Why should he be left in London, while Lecount went on to St. Crux to give the admiral the Letter and the Will? Because his wife might follow him, if he went to the admiral's? Well, there was something in that. And because he ought to be safely concealed from her, in some

comfortable lodging, near Mr. Loscombe? Why near Mr. Loscombe? Ah, yes, to be sure--to know what the law would do to help him. Would the law set him free from the Wretch who had deceived him? How tiresome of Lecount not to know! Would the law say he had gone and married himself a second time, because he had been living with the Wretch, like husband and wife, in Scotland? Anything that publicly assumed to be a marriage was a marriage (he had heard) in Scotland. How excessively tiresome of Lecount to sit there and say she knew nothing about it! Was he to stay long in London by himself, with nobody but Mr. Loscombe to speak to? Would Lecount come back to him as soon as she had put those important papers in the admiral's own hands? Would Lecount consider herself still in his service? The good Lecount! the excellent Lecount! And after all the law-business was over--what then? Why not leave this horrid England and go abroad again? Why not go to France, to some cheap place near Paris? Say Versailles? say St. Germain? In a nice little French house--cheap? With a nice French bonne to cook--who wouldn't waste his substance in the grease-pot? With a nice little garden--where he could work himself, and get health, and save the expense of keeping a gardener? It wasn't a bad idea. And it seemed to promise well for the future--didn't it, Lecount?

So he ran on--the poor weak creature! the abject, miserable little man!

As the darkness gathered at the close of the short November day he began to grow drowsy--his ceaseless questions came to an end at last--he fell asleep. The wind outside sang its mournful winter-song; the tramp of passing footsteps, the roll of passing wheels on the road ceased in dreary silence. He slept on quietly. The firelight rose and fell on his wizen little face and his nervous, drooping hands. Mrs. Lecount had not pitied him yet. She began to pity him now. Her point was gained; her interest in his will was secured; he had put his future life, of his own accord, under her fostering care--the fire was comfortable; the circumstances were favorable to the growth of Christian feeling. "Poor wretch!" said Mrs. Lecount, looking at him with a grave compassion--"poor wretch!"

The dinner-hour roused him. He was cheerful at dinner; he reverted to the idea of the cheap little house in France; he smirked and simpered; and talked French to Mrs. Lecount, while the house-maid and Louisa waited, turn and turn about, under protest. When dinner was over, he returned to his comfortable chair before the fire, and Mrs. Lecount followed him. He resumed the conversation--which meant, in his case, repeating his questions. But he was not so quick and ready with them as he had been earlier in the day. They began to flag--they continued, at longer and longer intervals--they ceased altogether. Toward nine o'clock he fell asleep again.

It was not a quiet sleep this time. He muttered, and ground his teeth, and rolled his head from side to side of the chair. Mrs. Lecount purposely made noise enough to rouse him. He woke, with a vacant eye and a flushed cheek. He walked about the room restlessly, with a new idea in his mind--the idea of writing a terrible letter; a letter of eternal farewell to his wife. How was it to be written? In what language should he express his feelings? The powers of Shakespeare himself would be unequal to the emergency! He had been the victim of an outrage entirely without parallel. A wretch had crept into his bosom! A viper had hidden herself at his fireside! Where could words be found to brand her with the infamy she deserved? He stopped, with a suffocating sense in him of his own impotent rage--he stopped, and shook his fist tremulously in the empty air.

Mrs. Lecount interfered with an energy and a resolution inspired by serious alarm. After the heavy strain that had been laid on his weakness already, such an outbreak of passionate agitation as was now bursting from him might be the destruction of his rest that night and of his strength to travel the next day. With infinite difficulty, with endless promises to return to the subject, and to advise him about it in the morning, she prevailed on him, at last, to go upstairs and compose himself for the night. She gave him her arm to assist him. On the way upstairs his attention, to her great relief, became suddenly absorbed by a new fancy. He remembered a certain warm and comfortable mixture of wine, eggs, sugar, and spices, which she had often been accustomed to make for him in former times, and which he thought he should relish exceedingly before he went to bed. Mrs. Lecount helped him on with his dressing-gown--then went down-stairs again to make his warm drink for him at the parlor fire.

She rang the bell and ordered the necessary ingredients for the mixture, in Noel Vanstone's name. The servants, with the small ingenious malice of their race, brought up the materials one by one, and kept her waiting for each of them as long as possible. She had got the saucepan, and the spoon, and the tumbler, and the nutmeg-grater, and the wine--but not the egg, the sugar, or the spices--when she heard him above, walking backward and forward noisily in his room; exciting hi mself on the old subject again, beyond all doubt.

She went upstairs once more; but he was too quick for her--he heard her outside the door; and when she opened it, she found him in his chair, with his back cunningly turned toward her. Knowing him too well to attempt any remonstrance, she merely announced the speedy arrival of the warm drink and turned to leave the room. On her way out, she noticed a table in a

corner, with an inkstand and a paper-case on it, and tried, without attracting his attention, to take the writing materials away. He was too quick for her again. He asked, angrily, if she doubted his promise. She put the writing materials back on the table, for fear of offending him, and left the room.

In half an hour more the mixture was ready. She carried it up to him, foaming and fragrant, in a large tumbler. "He will sleep after this," she thought to herself, as she opened the door; "I have made it stronger than usual on purpose."

He had changed his place. He was sitting at the table in the corner--still with his back to her, writing. This time his quick ears had not served him; this time she caught him in the fact.

"Oh, Mr. Noel! Mr. Noel!" she said, reproachfully, "what is your promise worth?"

He made no answer. He was sitting with his left elbow on the table, and with his head resting on his left hand. His right hand lay back on the paper, with the pen lying loose in it. "Your drink, Mr. Noel," she said, in a kinder tone, feeling unwilling to offend him. He took no notice of her. She went to the table to rouse him. Was he deep in thought?

He was dead!

THE END OF THE FIFTH SCENE.