

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

**I.**

From Mrs. Noel Vanstone to Mr. Loscombe.

"Park Terrace, St. John's Wood, November 5th.

"DEAR SIR--I came to London yesterday for the purpose of seeing a relative, leaving Mr. Vanstone at Baliol Cottage, and proposing to return to him in the course of the week. I reached London late last night, and drove to these lodgings, having written to secure accommodation beforehand.

"This morning's post has brought me a letter from my own maid, whom I left at Baliol Cottage, with instructions to write to me if anything extraordinary took place in my absence. You will find the girl's letter inclosed in this. I have had some experience of her; and I believe she is to be strictly depended on to tell the truth.

"I purposely abstain from troubling you by any useless allusions to myself. When you have read my maid's letter, you will understand the shock which the news contained in it has caused me. I can only repeat that I place implicit belief in her statement. I am firmly persuaded that my husband's former housekeeper has found him out, has practiced on his weakness in my absence, and has prevailed on him to make another Will. From what I know of this woman, I feel no doubt that she has used her influence over Mr. Vanstone to deprive me, if possible, of all future interests in my husband's fortune.

"Under such circumstances as these, it is in the last degree important--for more reasons than I need mention here--that I should see Mr. Vanstone, and come to an explanation with him, at the earliest possible opportunity. You will find that my maid thoughtfully kept her letter open until the last moment before post-time--without, however, having any later news to give me than that Mrs. Lecount was to sleep at the cottage last night and that she and Mr. Vanstone were to leave together this morning. But for that last piece of intelligence, I should have been on my way back to Scotland before now. As it is, I cannot decide for myself what I ought to do next. My going

back to Dumfries, after Mr. Vanstone has left it, seems like taking a journey for nothing --and my staying in London appears to be almost equally useless.

"Will you kindly advise me in this difficulty? I will come to you at Lincoln's Inn at any time this afternoon or to-morrow which you may appoint. My next few hours are engaged. As soon as this letter is dispatched, I am going to Kensington, with the object of ascertaining whether certain doubts I feel about the means by which Mrs. Lecount may have accomplished her discovery are well founded or not. If you will let me have your answer by return of post, I will not fail to get back to St. John's Wood in time to receive it. Believe me, dear sir, yours sincerely,

"MAGDALEN VANSTONE."

**II.**

From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Noel Vanstone.

"Lincoln's Inn, November 5th.

"DEAR MADAM--Your letter and its inclosure have caused me great concern and surprise. Pressure of business allows me no hope of being able to see you either to-day or to-morrow morning. But if three o'clock to-morrow afternoon will suit you, at that hour you will find me at your service.

"I cannot pretend to offer a positive opinion until I know more of the particulars connected with this extraordinary business than I find communicated either in your letter or in your maid's. But with this reserve, I venture to suggest that your remaining in London until to-morrow may possibly lead to other results besides your consultation at my chambers. There is at least a chance that you or I may hear something further in this strange matter by the morning's post. I remain, dear madam, faithfully yours,

"JOHN LOSCOMBE."

**III.**

From Mrs. Noel Vanstone to Miss Garth.

"November 5th, Two o'Clock.

"I have just returned from Westmoreland House--after purposely leaving it in secret, and purposely avoiding you under your own roof. You shall know why I came, and why I went away. It is due to my remembrance of old times not to treat you like a stranger, although I can never again treat you like a friend.

"I set forth on the third from the North to London. My only object in taking this long journey was to see Norah. I had been suffering for many weary weeks past such remorse as only miserable women like me can feel. Perhaps the suffering weakened me; perhaps it roused some old forgotten tenderness--God knows!--I can't explain it; I can only tell you that I began to think of Norah by day, and to dream of Norah by night, till I was almost heartbroken. I have no better reason than this to give for running all the risks which I ran, and coming to London to see her. I don't wish to claim more for myself than I deserve; I don't wish to tell you I was the reformed and repenting creature whom you might have approved. I had only one feeling in me that I know of. I wanted to put my arms round Norah's neck, and cry my heart out on Norah's bosom. Childish enough, I dare say. Something might have come of it; nothing might have come of it--who knows?

"I had no means of finding Norah without your assistance. However you might disapprove of what I had done, I thought you would not refuse to help me to find my sister. When I lay down last night in my strange bed, I said to myself, 'I will ask Miss Garth, for my father's sake and my mother's sake, to tell me.' You don't know what a comfort I felt in that thought. How should you? What do good women like you know of miserable sinners like me? All you know is that you pray for us at church.

"Well, I fell asleep happily that night--for the first time since my marriage. When the morning came, I paid the penalty of daring to be happy only for one night. When the morning came, a letter came with it, which told me that my bitterest enemy on earth (you have meddled sufficiently with my affairs to know what enemy I mean) had revenged herself on me in my absence. In following the impulse which led me to my sister, I had gone to my ruin.

"The mischief was beyond all present remedy, when I received the news of it. Whatever had happened, whatever might happen, I made up my mind to persist in my resolution of seeing Norah before I did anything else. I suspected you of being concerned in the disaster which had overtaken me--because I felt positively certain at Aldborough that you and Mrs. Lecount had written to each other. But I never suspected Norah. If I lay on my death-bed at this moment I could say with a safe conscience I never suspected Norah.

"So I went this morning to Westmorland House to ask you for my sister's address, and to acknowledge plainly that I suspected you of being again in correspondence with Mrs. Lecount.

"When I inquired for you at the door, they told me you had gone out, but that you were expected back before long. They asked me if I would see your sister, who was then in the school-room. I desired that your sister should on no account be disturbed: my business was not with her, but with you. I begged to be allowed to wait in a room by myself until you returned.

"They showed me into the double room on the ground-floor, divided by curtains--as it was when I last remember it. There was a fire in the outer division of the room, but none in the inner; and for that reason, I suppose, the curtains were drawn. The servant was very civil and attentive to me. I have learned to be thankful for civility and attention, and I spoke to her as cheerfully as I could. I said to her, 'I shall see Miss Garth here, as she comes up to the door, and I can beckon her in through the long window.' The servant said I could do so, if you came that way, but that you let yourself in sometimes with your own key by the back-garden gate; and if you did this, she would take care to let you know of my visit. I mention these trifles, to show you that there was no pre-meditated deceit in my mind when I came to the house.

"I waited a weary time, and you never came: I don't know whether my impatience made me think so, or whether the large fire burning made the room really as hot as I felt it to be--I only know that, after a while, I passed through the curtains into the inner room, to try the cooler atmosphere.

"I walked to the long window which leads into the back garden, to look out, and almost at the same time I heard the door opened--the door of the room I had just left, and your voice and the voice of some other woman, a stranger to me, talking. The stranger was one of the parlor-boarders, I dare say. I gathered from the first words you exchanged together, that you had met in

the passage--she on her way downstairs, and you on your way in from the back garden. Her next question and your next answer informed me that this person was a friend of my sister's, who felt a strong interest in her, and who knew that you had just returned from a visit to Norah. So far, I only hesitated to show myself, because I shrank, in my painful situation, from facing a stranger. But when I heard my own name immediately afterward on your lips and on hers, then I purposely came nearer to the curtain between us, and purposely listened.

"A mean action, you will say? Call it mean, if you like. What better can you expect from such a woman as I am?"

"You were always famous for your memory. There is no necessity for my repeating the words you spoke to your friend, and the words your friend spoke to you, hardly an hour since. When you read these lines, you will know, as well as I know, what those words told me. I ask for no particulars; I will take all your reasons and all your excuses for granted. It is enough for me to know that you and Mr. Pendril have been searching for me again, and that Norah is in the conspiracy this time, to reclaim me in spite of myself. It is enough for me to know that my letter to my sister has been turned into a trap to catch me, and that Mrs. Lecount's revenge has accomplished its object by means of information received from Norah's lips.

"Shall I tell you what I suffered when I heard these things? No; it would only be a waste of time to tell you. Whatever I suffer, I deserve it--don't I?"

"I waited in that inner room--knowing my own violent temper, and not trusting myself to see you, after what I had heard--I waited in that inner room, trembling lest the servant should tell you of my visit before I could find an opportunity of leaving the house. No such misfortune happened. The servant, no doubt, heard the voices upstairs, and supposed that we had met each other in the passage. I don't know how long or how short a time it was before you left the room to go and take off your bonnet--you went, and your friend went with you. I raised the long window softly, and stepped into the back garden. The way by which you returned to the house was the way by which I left it. No blame attaches to the servant. As usual, where I am concerned, nobody is to blame but me.

"Time enough has passed now to quiet my mind a little. You know how strong I am? You remember how I used to fight against all my illnesses when I was a child? Now I am a woman, I fight against my miseries in the same way. Don't pity me, Miss Garth! Don't pity me!"

"I have no harsh feeling against Norah. The hope I had of seeing her is a hope taken from me; the consolation I had in writing to her is a consolation denied me for the future. I am cut to the heart; but I have no angry feeling toward my sister. She means well, poor soul--I dare say she means well. It would distress her, if she knew what has happened. Don't tell her. Conceal my visit, and burn my letter.

"A last word to yourself and I have done:

"If I rightly understand my present situation, your spies are still searching for me to just as little purpose as they searched at York. Dismiss them--you are wasting your money to no purpose. If you discovered me to-morrow, what could you do? My position has altered. I am no longer the poor outcast girl, the vagabond public performer, whom you once hunted after. I have done what I told you I would do--I have made the general sense of propriety my accomplice this time. Do you know who I am? I am a respectable married woman, accountable for my actions to nobody under heaven but my husband. I have got a place in the world, and a name in the world, at last. Even the law, which is the friend of all you respectable people, has recognized my existence, and has become my friend too! The Archbishop of Canterbury gave me his license to be married, and the vicar of Aldborough performed the service. If I found your spies following me in the street, and if I chose to claim protection from them, the law would acknowledge my claim. You forget what wonders my wickedness has done for me. It has made Nobody's Child Somebody's Wife.

"If you will give these considerations their due weight; if you will exert your excellent common sense, I have no fear of being obliged to appeal to my newly-found friend and protector--the law. You will feel, by this time, that you have meddled with me at last to some purpose. I am estranged from Norah--I am discovered by my husband--I am defeated by Mrs. Lecount. You have driven me to the last extremity; you have strengthened me to fight the battle of my life with the resolution which only a lost and friendless woman can feel. Badly as your schemes have prospered, they have not proved totally useless after all!

"I have no more to say. If you ever speak about me to Norah, tell her that a day may come when she will see me again--the day when we two sisters have recovered our natural rights; the day when I put Norah's fortune into Norah's hand.

"Those are my last words. Remember them the next time you feel tempted to meddle with me again.

"MAGDALEN VANSTONE."



**IV.**

From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Noel Vanstone.

"Lincoln's Inn, November 6th.

"DEAR MADAM--This morning's post has doubtless brought you the same shocking news which it has brought to me. You must know by this time that a terrible affliction has befallen you--the affliction of your husband's sudden death.

"I am on the point of starting for the North, to make all needful inquiries, and to perform whatever duties I may with propriety undertake, as solicitor to the deceased gentleman. Let me earnestly recommend you not to follow me to Baliol Cottage, until I have had time to write to you first, and to give you such advice as I cannot, through ignorance of all the circumstances, pretend to offer now. You may rely on my writing, after my arrival in Scotland, by the first post. I remain, dear madam, faithfully yours,

"JOHN LOSCOMBE."

**V.**

From Mr. Pendril to Miss Garth.

"Serle Street, November 6th.

"DEAR MISS GARTH--I return you Mrs. Noel Vanstone's letter. I can understand your mortification at the tone in which it is written, and your distress at the manner in which this unhappy woman has interpreted the conversation that she overheard at your house. I cannot honestly add that I lament what has happened. My opinion has never altered since the Combe-Raven time. I believe Mrs. Noel Vanstone to be one of the most reckless, desperate, and perverted women living; and any circumstances that estrange her from her sister are circumstances which I welcome, for her sister's sake.

"There cannot be a moment's doubt on the course you ought to follow in this matter. Even Mrs. Noel Vanstone herself acknowledges the propriety of

sparing her sister additional and unnecessary distress. By all means, keep Miss Vanstone in ignorance of the visit to Kensington, and of the letter which has followed it. It would be not only unwise, but absolutely cruel, to enlighten her. If we had any remedy to apply, or even any hope to offer, we might feel some hesitation in keeping our secret. But there is no remedy, and no hope. Mrs. Noel Vanstone is perfectly justified in the view she takes of her own position. Neither you nor I can assert the smallest right to control her.

"I have already taken the necessary measures for putting an end to our useless inquiries. In a few days I will write to Miss Vanstone, and will do my best to tranquilize her mind on the subject of her sister. If I can find no sufficient excuse to satisfy her, it will be better she should think we have discovered nothing than that she should know the truth. Believe me most truly yours,

"WILLIAM PENDRIL."

**VI.**

From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Noel Vanstone.

"Lincoln's Inn, November 15th.

"DEAR MADAM--In compliance with your request, I now proceed to communicate to you in writing what (but for the calamity which has so recently befallen you) I should have preferred communicating by word of mouth. Be pleased to consider this letter as strictly confidential between yourself and me.

"I inclose, as you desire, a copy of the Will executed by your late husband on the third of this month. There can be no question of the genuineness of the original document. I protested, as a matter of form, against Admiral Bartram's solicitor assuming a position of authority at Baliol Cottage. But he took the position, nevertheless; acting as legal representative of the sole Executor under the second Will. I am bound to say I should have done the same myself in his place.

"The serious question follows, What can we do for the best in your interests? The Will executed under my professional superintendence, on the thirtieth of September last, is at present superseded and revoked by the second and later Will, executed on the third of November. Can we dispute this document?

"I doubt the possibility of disputing the new Will on the face of it. It is no doubt irregularly expressed; but it is dated, signed, and witnessed as the law directs; and the perfectly simple and straightforward provisions that it contains are in no respect, that I can see, technically open to attack.

"This being the case, can we dispute the Will on the ground that it has been executed when the Testator was not in a fit state to dispose of his own property? or when the Testator was subjected to undue and improper influence?

"In the first of these cases, the medical evidence would put an obstacle in our way. We cannot assert that previous illness had weakened the Testator's mind. It is clear that he died suddenly, as the doctors had all along declared he would die, of disease of the heart. He was out walking in his garden, as usual, on the day of his death; he ate a hearty dinner; none of the persons

in his service noticed any change in him; he was a little more irritable with them than usual, but that was all. It is impossible to attack the state of his faculties: there is no case to go into court with, so far.

"Can we declare that he acted under undue influence; or, in plainer terms, under the influence of Mrs. Lecount?"

"There are serious difficulties, again, in the way of taking this course. We cannot assert, for example, that Mrs. Lecount has assumed a place in the will which she has no fair claim to occupy. She has cunningly limited her own legacy, not only to what is fairly due her, but to what the late Mr. Michael Vanstone himself had the intention of leaving her. If I were examined on the subject, I should be compelled to acknowledge that I had heard him express this intention myself. It is only the truth to say that I have heard him express it more than once. There is no point of attack in Mrs. Lecount's legacy, and there is no point of attack in your late husband's choice of an executor. He has made the wise choice, and the natural choice, of the oldest and trustiest friend he had in the world.

"One more consideration remains--the most important which I have yet approached, and therefore the consideration which I have reserved to the last. On the thirtieth of September, the Testator executes a will, leaving his widow sole executrix, with a legacy of eighty thousand pounds. On the third of November following, he expressly revokes this will, and leaves another in its stead, in which his widow is never once mentioned, and in which the whole residue of his estate, after payment of one comparatively trifling legacy, is left to a friend.

"It rests entirely with you to say whether any valid reason can or can not be produced to explain such an extraordinary proceeding as this. If no reason can be assigned--and I know of none myself--I think we have a point here which deserves our careful consideration; for it may be a point which is open to attack. Pray understand that I am now appealing to you solely as a lawyer, who is obliged to look all possible eventualities in the face. I have no wish to intrude on your private affairs; I have no wish to write a word which could be construed into any indirect reflection on yourself.

"If you tell me that, so far as you know, your husband capriciously struck you out of his will, without assignable reason or motive for doing so, and without other obvious explanation of his conduct than that he acted in this matter entirely under the influence of Mrs. Lecount, I will immediately take Counsel's opinion touching the propriety of disputing the will on this ground. If, on the other hand, you tell me that there are reasons (known to

yourself, though unknown to me) for not taking the course I propose, I will accept that intimation without troubling you, unless you wish it, to explain yourself further. In this latter event, I will write to you again; for I shall then have something more to say, which may greatly surprise you, on the subject of the Will.

"Faithfully yours,

"JOHN LOSCOMBE."

## **VII.**

From Mrs. Noel Vanstone to Mr. Loscombe.

"November 16th.

"DEAR SIR--Accept my best thanks for the kindness and consideration with which you have treated me; and let the anxieties under which I am now suffering plead my excuse, if I reply to your letter without ceremony, in the fewest possible words.

"I have my own reasons for not hesitating to answer your question in the negative. It is impossible for us to go to law, as you propose, on the subject of the Will.

"Believe me, dear sir, yours gratefully,

"MAGDALEN VANSTONE."

**VIII.**

From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Noel Vanstone.

"Lincoln's Inn. November 17th.

"DEAR MADAM--I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your letter, answering my proposal in the negative, for reasons of your own. Under these circumstances--on which I offer no comment--I beg to perform my promise of again communicating with you on the subject of your late husband's Will.

"Be so kind as to look at your copy of the document. You will find that the clause which devises the whole residue of your husband's estate to Admiral Bartram ends in these terms: to be by him applied to such uses as he may think fit.

"Simple as they may seem to you, these are very remarkable words. In the first place, no practical lawyer would have used them in drawing your husband's will. In the second place, they are utterly useless to serve any plain straightforward purpose. The legacy is left unconditionally to the admiral; and in the same breath he is told that he may do what he likes with it! The phrase points clearly to one of two conclusions. It has either dropped from the writer's pen in pure ignorance, or it has been carefully set where it appears to serve the purpose of a snare. I am firmly persuaded that the latter explanation is the right one. The words are expressly intended to mislead some person--yourself in all probability--and the cunning which has put them to that use is a cunning which (as constantly happens when uninstructed persons meddle with law) has overreached itself. My thirty years' experience reads those words in a sense exactly opposite to the sense which they are intended to convey. I say that Admiral Bartram is not free to apply his legacy to such purposes as he may think fit; I believe he is privately controlled by a supplementary document in the shape of a Secret Trust.

"I can easily explain to you what I mean by a Secret Trust. It is usually contained in the form of a letter from a Testator to his Executors, privately informing them of testamentary intentions on his part which he has not thought proper openly to acknowledge in his will. I leave you a hundred pounds; and I write a private letter enjoining you, on taking the legacy, not to devote it to your own purposes, but to give it to some third person, whose name I have my own reasons for not mentioning in my will. That is a Secret

Trust.

"If I am right in my own persuasion that such a document as I here describe is at this moment in Admiral Bartram's possession--a persuasion based, in the first instance, on the extraordinary words that I have quoted to you; and, in the second instance, on purely legal considerations with which it is needless to incumber my letter--if I am right in this opinion, the discovery of the Secret Trust would be, in all probability, a most important discovery to your interests. I will not trouble you with technical reasons, or with references to my experience in these matters, which only a professional man could understand. I will merely say that I don't give up your cause as utterly lost, until the conviction now impressed on my own mind is proved to be wrong.

"I can add no more, while this important question still remains involved in doubt; neither can I suggest any means of solving that doubt. If the existence of the Trust was proved, and if the nature of the stipulations contained in it was made known to me, I could then say positively what the legal chances were of your being able to set up a Case on the strength of it: and I could also tell you whether I should or should not feel justified in personally undertaking that Case under a private arrangement with yourself.

"As things are, I can make no arrangement, and offer no advice. I can only put you confidentially in possession of my private opinion, leaving you entirely free to draw your own inferences from it, and regretting that I cannot write more confidently and more definitely than I have written here. All that I could conscientiously say on this very difficult and delicate subject, I have said.

"Believe me, dear madam, faithfully yours,

"JOHN LOSCOMBE.

"P.S.--I omitted one consideration in my last letter, which I may mention here, in order to show you that no point in connection with the case has escaped me. If it had been possible to show that Mr. Vanstone was domiciled in Scotland at the time of his death, we might have asserted your interests by means of the Scotch law, which does not allow a husband the power of absolutely disinheriting his wife. But it is impossible to assert that Mr. Vanstone was legally domiciled in Scotland. He came there as a visitor only; he occupied a furnished house for the season; and he never expressed, either by word or deed, the slightest intention of settling permanently in the

North."



**IX.**

From Mrs. Noel Vanstone to Mr. Loscombe.

"DEAR SIR--I have read your letter more than once, with the deepest interest and attention; and the oftener I read it, the more firmly I believe that there is really such a Letter as you mention in Admiral Bartram's hands.

"It is my interest that the discovery should be made, and I at once acknowledge to you that I am determined to find the means of secretly and certainly making it. My resolution rests on other motives than the motives which you might naturally suppose would influence me. I only tell you this, in case you feel inclined to remonstrate. There is good reason for what I say, when I assure you that remonstrance will be useless.

"I ask for no assistance in this matter; I will trouble nobody for advice. You shall not be involved in any rash proceedings on my part. Whatever danger there may be, I will risk it. Whatever delays may happen, I will bear them patiently. I am lonely and friendless, and surely troubled in mind, but I am strong enough to win my way through worse trials than these. My spirits will rise again, and my time will come. If that Secret Trust is in Admiral Bartram's possession--when you next see me, you shall see me with it in my own hands. Yours gratefully,

"MAGDALEN VANSTONE."