

THE SIXTH SCENE - ST. JOHN'S WOOD.

CHAPTER I.

IT wanted little more than a fortnight to Christmas; but the weather showed no signs yet of the frost and snow, conventionally associated with the coming season. The atmosphere was unnaturally warm, and the old year was dying feebly in sapping rain and enervating mist.

Toward the close of the December afternoon, Magdalen sat alone in the lodging which she had occupied since her arrival in London. The fire burned sluggishly in the narrow little grate; the view of the wet houses and soaking gardens opposite was darkening fast; and the bell of the suburban muffin-boy tinkled in the distance drearily. Sitting close over the fire, with a little money lying loose in her lap, Magdalen absently shifted the coins to and fro on the smooth surface of her dress, incessantly altering their positions toward each other, as if they were pieces of a "child's puzzle" which she was trying to put together. The dim fire-light flaming up on her faintly from time to time showed changes which would have told their own tale sadly to friends of former days. Her dress had become loose through the wasting of her figure; but she had not cared to alter it. The old restlessness in her movements, the old mobility in her expression, appeared no more. Her face passively maintained its haggard composure, its changeless unnatural calm. Mr. Pendril might have softened his hard sentence on her, if he had seen her now; and Mrs. Lecount, in the plenitude of her triumph, might have pitied her fallen enemy at last.

Hardly four months had passed since the wedding-day at Aldborough, and the penalty for that day was paid already--paid in unavailing remorse, in hopeless isolation, in irremediable defeat! Let this be said for her; let the truth which has been told of the fault be told of the expiation as well. Let it be recorded of her that she enjoyed no secret triumph on the day of her success. The horror of herself with which her own act had inspired her, had risen to its climax when the design of her marriage was achieved. She had never suffered in secret as she suffered when the Combe-Raven money was left to her in her husband's will. She had never felt the means taken to accomplish her end so unutterably degrading to herself, as she felt them on the day when the end was reached. Out of that feeling had grown the

remorse which had hurried her to seek pardon and consolation in her sister's love. Never since it had first entered her heart, never since she had first felt it sacred to her at her father's grave, had the Purpose to which she had vowed herself, so nearly lost its hold on her as at this time. Never might Norah's influence have achieved such good as on the day when that influence was lost--the day when the fatal words were overheard at Miss Garth's--the day when the fatal letter from Scotland told of Mrs. Lecount's revenge.

The harm was done; the chance was gone. Time and Hope alike had both passed her by.

Faintly and more faintly the inner voices now pleaded with her to pause on the downward way. The discovery which had poisoned her heart with its first distrust of her sister; the tidings which had followed it of her husband's death; the sting of Mrs. Lecount's triumph, felt through all, had done their work. The remorse which had embittered her married life was deadened now to a dull despair. It was too late to make the atonement of confession--too late to lay bare to the miserable husband the deeper secrets that had once lurked in the heart of the miserable wife. Innocent of all thought of the hideous treachery which Mrs. Lecount had imputed to her--she was guilty of knowing how his health was broken when she married him; guilty of knowing, when he left her the Combe-Raven money, that the accident of a moment, harmless to other men, might place his life in jeopardy, and effect her release. His death had told her this--had told her plainly what she had shrunk, in his lifetime, from openly acknowledging to herself. From the dull torment of that reproach; from the dreary wretchedness of doubting everybody, even to Norah herself; from the bitter sense of her defeated schemes; from the blank solitude of her friendless life--what refuge was left? But one refuge now. She turned to the relentless Purpose which was hurrying her to her ruin, and cried to it with the daring of her despair--Drive me on!

For days and days together she had bent her mind on the one object which occupied it since she had received the lawyer's letter. For days and days together she had toiled to meet the first necessity of her position--to find a means of discovering the Secret Trust. There was no hope, this time, of assistance from Captain Wragge. Long practice had made the old militiaman an adept in the art of vanishing. The plow of the moral agriculturist left no furrows--not a trace of him was to be found! Mr. Loscombe was too cautious to commit himself to an active course of any kind; he passively maintained his opinions and left the rest to his client--he desired to know nothing until the Trust was placed in his hands. Magdalen's interests were

now in Magdalen's own sole care. Risk or no risk, what she did next she must do by herself.

The prospect had not daunted her. Alone she had calculated the chances that might be tried. Alone she was now determined to make the attempt.

"The time has come," she said to herself, as she sat over the fire. "I must sound Louisa first."

She collected the scattered coins in her lap, and placed them in a little heap on the table, then rose and rang the bell. The landlady answered it.

"Is my servant downstairs?" inquired Magdalen.

"Yes, ma'am. She is having her tea."

"When she has done, say I want her up here. Wait a moment. You will find your money on the table--the money I owe you for last week. Can you find it? or would you like to have a candle?"

"It's rather dark, ma'am."

Magdalen lit a candle. "What notice must I give you," she asked, as she put the candle on the table, "before I leave?"

"A week is the usual notice, ma'am. I hope you have no objection to make to the house?"

"None whatever. I only ask the question, because I may be obliged to leave these lodgings rather sooner than I anticipated. Is the money right?"

"Quite right, ma'am. Here is your receipt."

"Thank you. Don't forget to send Louisa to me as soon as she has done her tea."

The landlady withdrew. As soon as she was alone again, Magdalen extinguished the candle, and drew an empty chair close to her own chair on the hearth. This done, she resumed her former place, and waited until Louisa appeared. There was doubt in her face as she sat looking mechanically into the fire. "A poor chance," she thought to herself; "but, poor as it is, a chance that I must try."

In ten minutes more, Louisa's meek knock was softly audible outside. She was surprised, on entering the room, to find no other light in it than the light of the fire.

"Will you have the candles, ma'am?" she inquired, respectfully.

"We will have candles if you wish for them yourself," replied Magdalen; "not otherwise. I have something to say to you. When I have said it, you shall decide whether we sit together in the dark or in the light."

Louisa waited near the door, and listened to those strange words in silent astonishment.

"Come here," said Magdalen, pointing to the empty chair; "come here and sit down."

Louisa advanced, and timidly removed the chair from its position at her mistress's side. Magdalen instantly drew it back again. "No!" she said. "Come closer--come close by me." After a moment's hesitation, Louisa obeyed.

"I ask you to sit near me," pursued Magdalen, "because I wish to speak to you on equal terms. Whatever distinctions there might once have been between us are now at an end. I am a lonely woman thrown helpless on my own resources, without rank or place in the world. I may or may not keep you as my friend. As mistress and maid the connection between us must come to an end."

"Oh, ma'am, don't, don't say that!" pleaded Louisa, faintly.

Magdalen sorrowfully and steadily went on.

"When you first came to me," she resumed, "I thought I should not like you. I have learned to like you--I have learned to be grateful to you. From first to last you have been faithful and good to me. The least I can do in return is not to stand in the way of your future prospects."

"Don't send me away, ma'am!" said Louisa, imploringly. "If you can only help me with a little money now and then, I'll wait for my wages--I will, indeed."

Magdalen took her hand and went on, as sorrowfully and as steadily as before.

"My future life is all darkness, all uncertainty," she said. "The next step I may take may lead me to my prosperity or may lead me to my ruin. Can I ask you to share such a prospect as this? If your future was as uncertain as mine is--if you, too, were a friendless woman thrown on the world--my conscience might be easy in letting you cast your lot with mine. I might accept your attachment, for I might feel I was not wronging you. How can I feel this in your case? You have a future to look to. You are an excellent servant; you can get another place--a far better place than mine. You can refer to me; and if the character I give is not considered sufficient, you can refer to the mistress you served before me--"

At the instant when that reference to the girl's last employer escaped Magdalen's lips, Louisa snatched her hand away and started up affrightedly from her chair. There was a moment's silence. Both mistress and maid were equally taken by surprise.

Magdalen was the first to recover herself.

"Is it getting too dark?" she asked, significantly. "Are you going to light the candles, after all?"

Louisa drew back into the dimmest corner of the room.

"You suspect me, ma'am!" she answered out of the darkness, in a breathless whisper. "Who has told you? How did you find out--?" She stopped, and burst into tears. "I deserve your suspicion," she said, struggling to compose herself. "I can't deny it to you. You have treated me so kindly; you have made me so fond of you! Forgive me, Mrs. Vanstone--I am a wretch; I have deceived you."

"Come here and sit down by me again," said Magdalen. "Come--or I will get up myself and bring you back."

Louisa slowly returned to her place. Dim as the fire-light was, she seemed to fear it. She held her handkerchief over her face, and shrank from her mistress as she seated herself again in the chair.

"You are wrong in thinking that any one has betrayed you to me," said Magdalen. "All that I know of you is, what your own looks and ways have told me. You have had some secret trouble weighing on your mind ever since you have been in my service. I confess I have spoken with the wish to find out more of you and your past life than I have found out yet--not because I am curious, but because I have my secret troubles too. Are you an unhappy

woman, like me? If you are, I will take you into my confidence. If you have nothing to tell me--if you choose to keep your secret--I don't blame you; I only say, Let us part. I won't ask how you have deceived me. I will only remember that you have been an honest and faithful and competent servant while I have employed you; and I will say as much in your favor to any new mistress you like to send to me."

She waited for the reply. For a moment, and only for a moment, Louisa hesitated. The girl's nature was weak, but not depraved. She was honestly attached to her mistress; and she spoke with a courage which Magdalen had not expected from her.

"If you send me away, ma'am," she said, "I won't take my character from you till I have told you the truth; I won't return your kindness by deceiving you a second time. Did my master ever tell you how he engaged me?"

"No. I never asked him, and he never told me."

"He engaged me, ma'am, with a written character--"

"Yes?"

"The character was a false one."

Magdalen drew back in amazement. The confession she heard was not the confession she had anticipated.

"Did your mistress refuse to give you a character?" she asked. "Why?"

Louisa dropped on her knees and hid her face in her mistress's lap. "Don't ask me!" she said. "I'm a miserable, degraded creature; I'm not fit to be in the same room with you!" Magdalen bent over her, and whispered a question in her ear. Louisa whispered back the one sad word of reply.

"Has he deserted you?" asked Magdalen, after waiting a moment, and thinking first.

"No."

"Do you love him?"

"Dearly."

The remembrance of her own loveless marriage stung Magdalen to the quick.

"For God's sake, don't kneel to me!" she cried, passionately. "If there is a degraded woman in this room, I am the woman--not you!"

She raised the girl by main force from her knees, and put her back in the chair. They both waited a little in silence. Keeping her hand on Louisa's shoulder, Magdalen seated herself again, and looked with unutterable bitterness of sorrow into the dying fire. "Oh," she thought, "what happy women there are in the world! Wives who love their husbands! Mothers who are not ashamed to own their children! Are you quieter?" she asked, gently addressing Louisa once more. "Can you answer me, if I ask you something else? Where is the child?"

"The child is out at nurse."

"Does the father help to support it?"

"He does all he can, ma'am."

"What is he? Is he in service? Is he in a trade?"

"His father is a master-carpenter--he works in his father's yard."

"If he has got work, why has he not married you?"

"It is his father's fault, ma'am--not his. His father has no pity on us. He would be turned out of house and home if he married me."

"Can he get no work elsewhere?"

"It's hard to get good work in London, ma'am. There are so many in London--they take the bread out of each other's mouths. If we had only had the money to emigrate, he would have married me long since."

"Would he marry you if you had the money now?"

"I am sure he would, ma'am. He could get plenty of work in Australia, and double and treble the wages he gets here. He is trying hard, and I am trying hard, to save a little toward it--I put by all I can spare from my child. But it is so little! If we live for years to come, there seems no hope for us. I know I have done wrong every way--I know I don't deserve to be happy. But how

could I let my child suffer?--I was obliged to go to service. My mistress was hard on me, and my health broke down in trying to live by my needle. I would never have deceived anybody by a false character, if there had been another chance for me. I was alone and helpless, ma'am; and I can only ask you to forgive me."

"Ask better women than I am," said Magdalen, sadly. "I am only fit to feel for you, and I do feel for you with all my heart. In your place I should have gone into service with a false character, too. Say no more of the past--you don't know how you hurt me in speaking of it. Talk of the future. I think I can help you, and do you no harm. I think you can help me, and do me the greatest of all services in return. Wait, and you shall hear what I mean. Suppose you were married--how much would it cost for you and your husband to emigrate?"

Louisa mentioned the cost of a steerage passage to Australia for a man and his wife. She spoke in low, hopeless tones. Moderate as the sum was, it looked like unattainable wealth in her eyes.

Magdalen started in her chair, and took the girl's hand once more.

"Louisa!" she said, earnestly; "if I gave you the money, what would you do for me in return?"

The proposal seemed to strike Louisa speechless with astonishment. She trembled violently, and said nothing. Magdalen repeated her words.

"Oh, ma'am, do you mean it?" said the girl. "Do you really mean it?"

"Yes," replied Magdalen; "I really mean it. What would you do for me in return?"

"Do?" repeated Louisa. "Oh what is there I would not do!" She tried to kiss her mistress's hand; but Magdalen would not permit it. She resolutely, almost roughly, drew her hand away.

"I am laying you under no obligation," she said. "We are serving each other--that is all. Sit quiet, and let me think."

For the next ten minutes there was silence in the room. At the end of that time Magdalen took out her watch and held it close to the grate. There was just firelight enough to show her the hour. It was close on six o'clock.

"Are you composed enough to go downstairs and deliver a message?" she asked, rising from her chair as she spoke to Louisa again. "It is a very simple message--it is only to tell the boy that I want a cab as soon as he can get me one. I must go out immediately. You shall know why later in the evening. I have much more to say to you; but there is no time to say it now. When I am gone, bring your work up here, and wait for my return. I shall be back before bed-time."

Without another word of explanation, she hurriedly lit a candle and withdrew into the bedroom to put on her bonnet and shawl.

CHAPTER II.

BETWEEN nine and ten o'clock the same evening, Louisa, waiting anxiously, heard the long-expected knock at the house door. She ran downstairs at once and let her mistress in.

Magdalen's face was flushed. She showed far more agitation on returning to the house than she had shown on leaving it. "Keep your place at the table," she said to Louisa, impatiently; "but lay aside your work. I want you to attend carefully to what I am going to say."

Louisa obeyed. Magdalen seated herself at the opposite side of the table, and moved the candles, so as to obtain a clear and uninterrupted view of her servant's face.

"Have you noticed a respectable elderly woman," she began, abruptly, "who has been here once or twice in the last fortnight to pay me a visit?"

"Yes, ma'am; I think I let her in the second time she came. An elderly person named Mrs. Attwood?"

"That is the person I mean. Mrs. Attwood is Mr. Loscombe's housekeeper; not the housekeeper at his private residence, but the housekeeper at his offices in Lincoln's Inn. I promised to go and drink tea with her some evening this week, and I have been to-night. It is strange of me, is it not, to be on these familiar terms with a woman in Mrs. Attwood's situation?"

Louisa made no answer in words. Her face spoke for her: she could hardly avoid thinking it strange.

"I had a motive for making friends with Mrs. Attwood," Magdalen went on. "She is a widow, with a large family of daughters. Her daughters are all in service. One of them is an under-housemaid in the service of Admiral Bartram, at St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. I found that out from Mrs. Attwood's master; and as soon as I arrived at the discovery, I privately determined to make Mrs. Attwood's acquaintance. Stranger still, is it not?"

Louisa began to look a little uneasy. Her mistress's manner was at variance with her mistress's words--it was plainly suggestive of something startling to come.

"What attraction Mrs. Attwood finds in my society," Magdalen continued, "I cannot presume to say. I can only tell you she has seen better days; she is an educated person; and she may like my society on that account. At any rate, she has readily met my advances toward her. What attraction I find in this good woman, on my side, is soon told. I have a great curiosity--an unaccountable curiosity, you will think--about the present course of household affairs at St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. Mrs. Attwood's daughter is a good girl, and constantly writes to her mother. Her mother is proud of the letters and proud of the girl, and is ready enough to talk about her daughter and her daughter's place. That is Mrs. Attwood's attraction to me. You understand, so far?"

Yes--Louisa understood. Magdalen went on. "Thanks to Mrs. Attwood and Mrs. Attwood's daughter," she said, "I know some curious particulars already of the household at St. Crux. Servants' tongues and servants' letters--as I need not tell you--are oftener occupied with their masters and mistresses than their masters and mistresses suppose. The only mistress at St. Crux is the housekeeper. But there is a master--Admiral Bartram. He appears to be a strange old man, whose whims and fancies amuse his servants as well as his friends. One of his fancies (the only one we need trouble ourselves to notice) is, that he had men enough about him when he was living at sea, and that now he is living on shore, he will be waited on by women-servants alone. The one man in the house is an old sailor, who has been all his life with his master--he is a kind of pensioner at St. Crux, and has little or nothing to do with the housework. The other servants, indoors, are all women; and instead of a footman to wait on him at dinner, the admiral has a parlor-maid. The parlor-maid now at St. Crux is engaged to be married, and as soon as her master can suit himself she is going away. These discoveries I made some days since. But when I saw Mrs. Attwood to-night, she had received another letter from her daughter in the interval, and that letter has helped me to find out something more. The housekeeper is at her wits' end to find a new servant. Her master insists on youth and good looks--he leaves everything else to the housekeeper--but he will have that. All the inquiries made in the neighborhood have failed to produce the sort of parlor-maid whom the admiral wants. If nothing can be done in the next fortnight or three weeks, the housekeeper will advertise in the Times, and will come to London herself to see the applicants, and to make strict personal inquiry into their characters."

Louisa looked at her mistress more attentively than ever. The expression of perplexity left her face, and a shade of disappointment appeared there in its stead. "Bear in mind what I have said," pursued Magdalen; "and wait a minute more, while I ask you some questions. Don't think you understand

me yet--I can assure you, you don't understand me. Have you always lived in service as lady's maid?"

"No, ma'am."

"Have you ever lived as parlor-maid?"

"Only in one place, ma'am, and not for long there."

"I suppose you lived long enough to learn your duties?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What were your duties besides waiting at table?"

"I had to show visitors in."

"Yes; and what else?"

"I had the plate and the glass to look after; and the table-linen was all under my care. I had to answer all the bells, except in the bedrooms. There were other little odds and ends sometimes to do--"

"But your regular duties were the duties you have just mentioned?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How long ago is it since you lived in service as a parlor-maid?"

"A little better than two years, ma'am."

"I suppose you have not forgotten how to wait at table, and clean plate, and the rest of it, in that time?"

At this question Louisa's attention, which had been wandering more and more during the progress of Magdalen's inquiries, wandered away altogether. Her gathering anxieties got the better of her discretion, and even of her timidity. Instead of answering her mistress, she suddenly and confusedly ventured on a question of her own.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," she said. "Did you mean me to offer for the parlor-maid's place at St. Crux?"

"You?" replied Magdalen. "Certainly not! Have you forgotten what I said to you in this room before I went out? I mean you to be married, and go to Australia with your husband and your child. You have not waited as I told you, to hear me explain myself. You have drawn your own conclusions, and you have drawn them wrong. I asked a question just now, which you have not answered--I asked if you had forgotten your parlor-maid's duties?"

"Oh, no, ma'am!" Louisa had replied rather unwillingly thus far. She answered readily and confidently now.

"Could you teach the duties to another servant?" asked Magdalen.

"Yes, ma'am--easily, if she was quick and attentive."

"Could you teach the duties to Me?"

Louisa started, and changed color. "You, ma'am!" she exclaimed, half in incredulity, half in alarm.

"Yes," said Magdalen. "Could you qualify me to take the parlor-maid's place at St. Crux?"

Plain as those words were, the bewilderment which they produced in Louisa's mind seemed to render her incapable of comprehending her mistress's proposal. "You, ma'am!" she repeated, vacantly.

"I shall perhaps help you to understand this extraordinary project of mine," said Magdalen, "if I tell you plainly what the object of it is. Do you remember what I said to you about Mr. Vanstone's will when you came here from Scotland to join me?"

"Yes, ma'am. You told me you had been left out of the will altogether. I'm sure my fellow-servant would never have been one of the witnesses if she had known--"

"Never mind that now. I don't blame your fellow-servant--I blame nobody but Mrs. Lecount. Let me go on with what I was saying. It is not at all certain that Mrs. Lecount can do me the mischief which Mrs. Lecount intended. There is a chance that my lawyer, Mr. Loscombe, may be able to gain me what is fairly my due, in spite of the will. The chance turns on my discovering a letter which Mr. Loscombe believes, and which I believe, to be kept privately in Admiral Bartram's possession. I have not the least hope of getting at that letter if I make the attempt in my own person. Mrs. Lecount

has poisoned the admiral's mind against me, and Mr. Vanstone has given him a secret to keep from me. If I wrote to him, he would not answer my letter. If I went to his house, the door would be closed in my face. I must find my way into St. Crux as a stranger--I must be in a position to look about the house, unsuspected--I must be there with plenty of time on my hands. All the circumstances are in my favor, if I am received into the house as a servant; and as a servant I mean to go."

"But you are a lady, ma'am," objected Louisa, in the greatest perplexity. "The servants at St. Crux would find you out."

"I am not at all afraid of their finding me out," said Magdalen. "I know how to disguise myself in other people's characters more cleverly than you suppose. Leave me to face the chances of discovery--that is my risk. Let us talk of nothing now but what concerns you. Don't decide yet whether you will, or will not, give me the help I want. Wait, and hear first what the help is. You are quick and clever at your needle. Can you make me the sort of gown which it is proper for a servant to wear--and can you alter one of my best silk dresses so as to make it fit yourself --in a week's time?"

"I think I could get them done in a week, ma'am. But why am I to wear--"

"Wait a little, and you will see. I shall give the landlady her week's notice to-morrow. In the interval, while you are making the dresses, I can be learning the parlor-maid's duties. When the house-servant here has brought up the dinner, and when you and I are alone in the room--instead of your waiting on me, as usual, I will wait on you. (I am quite serious; don't interrupt me!) Whatever I can learn besides, without hindering you, I will practice carefully at every opportunity. When the week is over, and the dresses are done, we will leave this place, and go into other lodgings--you as the mistress and I as the maid."

"I should be found out, ma'am," interposed Louisa, trembling at the prospect before her. "I am not a lady."

"And I am," said Magdalen, bitterly. "Shall I tell you what a lady is? A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance. I shall put the gown on your back, and the sense in your head. You speak good English; you are naturally quiet and self-restrained; if you can only conquer your timidity, I have not the least fear of you. There will be time enough in the new lodging for you to practice your character, and for me to practice mine. There will be time enough to make some more dresses--another gown for me, and your wedding-dress (which I mean to give you) for

yourself. I shall have the newspaper sent every day. When the advertisement appears, I shall answer it--in any name I can take on the spur of the moment; in your name, if you like to lend it to me; and when the housekeeper asks me for my character, I shall refer her to you. She will see you in the position of mistress, and me in the position of maid--no suspicion can possibly enter her mind, unless you put it there. If you only have the courage to follow my instructions, and to say what I shall tell you to say, the interview will be over in ten minutes."

"You frighten me, ma'am," said Louisa, still trembling. "You take my breath away with surprise. Courage! Where shall I find courage?"

"Where I keep it for you," said Magdalen--"in the passage-money to Australia. Look at the new prospect which gives you a husband, and restores you to your child--and you will find your courage there."

Louisa's sad face brightened; Louisa's faint heart beat quick. A spark of her mistress's spirit flew up into her eyes as she thought of the golden future.

"If you accept my proposal," pursued Magdalen, "you can be asked in church at once, if you like. I promise you the money on the day when the advertisement appears in the newspaper. The risk of the housekeeper's rejecting me is my risk--not yours. My good looks are sadly gone off, I know. But I think I can still hold my place against the other servants--I think I can still look the parlor-maid whom Admiral Bartram wants. There is nothing for you to fear in this matter; I should not have mentioned it if there had been. The only danger is the danger of my being discovered at St. Crux, and that falls entirely on me. By the time I am in the admiral's house you will be married, and the ship will be taking you to your new life."

Louisa's face, now brightening with hope, now clouding again with fear, showed plain signs of the struggle which it cost her to decide. She tried to gain time; she attempted confusedly to speak a few words of gratitude; but her mistress silenced her.

"You owe me no thanks," said Magdalen. "I tell you again, we are only helping each other. I have very little money, but it is enough for your purpose, and I give it you freely. I have led a wretched life; I have made others wretched about me. I can't even make you happy, except by tempting you to a new deceit. There! there! it's not your fault. Worse women than you are will help me, if you refuse. Decide as you like, but don't be afraid of taking the money. If I succeed, I shall not want it. If I fail--"

She stopped, rose abruptly from her chair, and hid her face from Louisa by walking away to the fire-place.

"If I fail," she resumed, warming her foot carelessly at the fender, "all the money in the world will be of no use to me. Never mind why--never mind Me--think of yourself. I won't take advantage of the confession you have made to me; I won't influence you against your will. Do as you yourself think best. But remember one thing--my mind is made up; nothing you can say or do will change it."

Her sudden removal from the table, the altered tones of her voice as she spoke the last words, appeared to renew Louisa's hesitation. She clasped her hands together in her lap, and wrung them hard. "This has come on me very suddenly, ma'am," said the girl. "I am sorely tempted to say Yes; and yet I am almost afraid--"

"Take the night to consider it," interposed Magdalen, keeping her face persistently turned toward the fire; "and tell me what you have decided to do, when you come into my room to-morrow morning. I shall want no help to-night--I can undress myself. You are not so strong as I am; you are tired, I dare say. Don't sit up on my account. Good-night, Louisa, and pleasant dreams!"

Her voice sank lower and lower as she spoke those kind words. She sighed heavily, and, leaning her arm on the mantel-piece, laid her head on it with a reckless weariness miserable to see. Louisa had not left the room, as she supposed--Louisa came softly to her side, and kissed her hand. Magdalen started; but she made no attempt, this time, to draw her hand away. The sense of her own horrible isolation subdued her, at the touch of the servant's lips. Her proud heart melted; her eyes filled with burning tears. "Don't distress me!" she said, faintly. "The time for kindness has gone by; it only overpowers me now. Good-night!"

When the morning came, the affirmative answer which Magdalen had anticipated was the answer given.

On that day the landlady received her week's notice to quit, and Louisa's needle flew fast through the stitches of the parlor-maid's dress.

THE END OF THE SIXTH SCENE.

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

I.

From Miss Garth to Mr. Pendril.

"Westmoreland House, January 3d, 1848.

"DEAR MR. PENDRIL--I write, as you kindly requested, to report how Norah is going on, and to tell you what changes I see for the better in the state of her mind on the subject of her sister.

"I cannot say that she is becoming resigned to Magdalen's continued silence--I know her faithful nature too well to say it. I can only tell you that she is beginning to find relief from the heavy pressure of sorrow and suspense in new thoughts and new hopes. I doubt if she has yet realized this in her own mind; but I see the result, although she is not conscious of it herself. I see her heart opening to the consolation of another interest and another love. She has not said a word to me on the subject, nor have I said a word to her. But as certainly as I know that Mr. George Bartram's visits have lately grown more and more frequent to the family at Portland Place--so certainly I can assure you that Norah is finding a relief under her suspense, which is not of my bringing, and a hope in the future, which I have not taught her to feel.

"It is needless for me to say that I tell you this in the strictest confidence. God knows whether the happy prospect which seems to me to be just dawning will grow brighter or not as time goes on. The oftener I see Mr. George Bartram--and he has called on me more than once--the stronger my liking for him grows. To my poor judgment he seems to be a gentleman in the highest and truest sense of the word. If I could live to see Norah his wife, I should almost feel that I had lived long enough. But who can discern the future? We have suffered so much that I am afraid to hope.

"Have you heard anything of Magdalen? I don't know why or how it is; but since I have known of her husband's death, my old tenderness for her seems to cling to me more obstinately than ever. Always yours truly,

"HARRIET GARTH."

II

From Mr. Pendril to Miss Garth.

"Serle Street, January 4th, 1848.

"DEAR MISS GARTH--Of Mrs. Noel Vanstone herself I have heard nothing. But I have learned, since I saw you, that the report of the position in which she is left by the death of her husband may be depended upon as the truth. No legacy of any kind is bequeathed to her. Her name is not once mentioned in her husband's will.

"Knowing what we know, it is not to be concealed that this circumstance threatens us with more embarrassment, and perhaps with more distress. Mrs. Noel Vanstone is not the woman to submit, without a desperate resistance, to the total overthrow of all her schemes and all her hopes. The mere fact that nothing whatever has been heard of her since her husband's death is suggestive to my mind of serious mischief to come. In her situation, and with her temper, the quieter she is now, the more inveterately I, for one, distrust her in the future. It is impossible to say to what violent measures her present extremity may not drive her. It is impossible to feel sure that she may not be the cause of some public scandal this time, which may affect her innocent sister as well as herself.

"I know you will not misinterpret the motive which has led me to write these lines; I know you will not think that I am inconsiderate enough to cause you unnecessary alarm. My sincere anxiety to see that happy prospect realized to which your letter alludes has caused me to write far less reservedly than I might otherwise have written. I strongly urge you to use your influence, on every occasion when you can fairly exert it, to strengthen that growing attachment, and to place it beyond the reach of any coming disasters, while you have the opportunity of doing so. When I tell you that the fortune of which Mrs. Noel Vanstone has been deprived is entirely bequeathed to Admiral Bartram; and when I add that Mr. George Bartram is generally understood to be his uncle's heir--you will, I think, acknowledge that I am not warning you without a cause. Yours most truly,

"WILLIAM PENDRIL."

III.

From Admiral Bartram to Mrs. Drake (housekeeper at St. Crux).

"St. Crux, January 10th, 1848.

"MRS. DRAKE--I have received your letter from London, stating that you have found me a new parlor-maid at last, and that the girl is ready to return with you to St. Crux when your other errands in town allow you to come back.

"This arrangement must be altered immediately, for a reason which I am heartily sorry to have to write.

"The illness of my niece, Mrs. Girdlestone--which appeared to be so slight as to alarm none of us, doctors included--has ended fatally. I received this morning the shocking news of her death. Her husband is said to be quite frantic with grief. Mr. George has already gone to his brother-in-law's, to superintend the last melancholy duties and I must follow him before the funeral takes place. We propose to take Mr. Girdlestone away afterward, and to try the effect on him of change of place and new scenes. Under these sad circumstances, I may be absent from St. Crux a month or six weeks at least; the house will be shut up, and the new servant will not be wanted until my return.

"You will therefore tell the girl, on receiving this letter, that a death in the family has caused a temporary change in our arrangements. If she is willing to wait, you may safely engage her to come here in six weeks' time; I shall be back then, if Mr. George is not. If she refuses, pay her what compensation is right, and so have done with her. Yours,

"ARTHUR BARTRAM."

IV.

From Mrs. Drake to Admiral Bartram.

"January 11th.

"HONORED SIR--I hope to get my errands done, and to return to St. Crux to-morrow, but write to save you anxiety, in case of delay.

"The young woman whom I have engaged (Louisa by name) is willing to wait your time; and her present mistress, taking an interest in her welfare, will provide for her during the interval. She understands that she is to enter on her new service in six weeks from the present date--namely, on the twenty-fifth of February next.

"Begging you will accept my respectful sympathy under the sad bereavement which has befallen the family,

"I remain, honored sir, your humble servant,

"SOPHIA DRAKE."