

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

I.

From George Bartram to Admiral Bartram.

"London, April 3d, 1848.

"MY DEAR UNCLE--One hasty line, to inform you of a temporary obstacle, which we neither of us anticipated when we took leave of each other at St. Crux. While I was wasting the last days of the week at the Grange, the Tyrrels must have been making their arrangements for leaving London. I have just come from Portland Place. The house is shut up, and the family (Miss Vanstone, of course, included) left England yesterday, to pass the season in Paris.

"Pray don't let yourself be annoyed by this little check at starting. It is of no serious importance whatever. I have got the address at which the Tyrrels are living, and I mean to cross the Channel after them by the mail to-night. I shall find my opportunity in Paris just as soon as I could have found it in London. The grass shall not grow under my feet, I promise you. For once in my life, I will take Time as fiercely by the forelock as if I was the most impetuous man in England; and, rely on it, the moment I know the result, you shall know the result, too. Affectionately yours,

"GEORGE BARTRAM."

II.

From George Bartram to Miss Garth.

"Paris, April 13th.

"DEAR MISS GARTH--I have just written, with a heavy heart, to my uncle, and I think I owe it to your kind interest in me not to omit writing next to you.

"You will feel for my disappointment, I am sure, when I tell you, in the fewest and plainest words, that Miss Vanstone has refused me.

"My vanity may have grievously misled me, but I confess I expected a very different result. My vanity may be misleading me still; for I must acknowledge to you privately that I think Miss Vanstone was sorry to refuse me. The reason she gave for her decision--no doubt a sufficient reason in her estimation--did not at the time, and does not now, seem sufficient to me. She spoke in the sweetest and kindest manner, but she firmly declared that 'her family misfortunes' left her no honorable alternative--but to think of my own interests as I had not thought of them myself--and gratefully to decline accepting my offer.

"She was so painfully agitated that I could not venture to plead my own cause as I might otherwise have pleaded it. At the first attempt I made to touch the personal question, she entreated me to spare her, and abruptly left the room. I am still ignorant whether I am to interpret the 'family misfortunes' which have set up this barrier between us, as meaning the misfortune for which her parents alone are to blame, or the misfortune of her having such a woman as Mrs. Noel Vanstone for her sister. In whichever of these circumstances the obstacle lies, it is no obstacle in my estimation. Can nothing remove it? Is there no hope? Forgive me for asking these questions. I cannot bear up against my bitter disappointment. Neither she, nor you, nor any one but myself, can know how I love her.

"Ever most truly yours,

"GEORGE BARTRAM.

"P. S.--I shall leave for England in a day or two, passing through London on my way to St. Crux. There are family reasons, connected with the hateful

subject of money, which make me look forward with anything but pleasure to my next interview with my uncle. If you address your letter to Long's Hotel, it will be sure to reach me."

III.

From Miss Garth to George Bartram.

"Westmoreland House, April 16th.

"DEAR MR. BARTRAM--You only did me justice in supposing that your letter would distress me. If you had supposed that it would make me excessively angry as well, you would not have been far wrong. I have no patience with the pride and perversity of the young women of the present day.

"I have heard from Norah. It is a long letter, stating the particulars in full detail. I am now going to put all the confidence in your honor and your discretion which I really feel. For your sake, and for Norah's, I am going to let you know what the scruple really is which has misled her into the pride and folly of refusing you. I am old enough to speak out; and I can tell you, if she had only been wise enough to let her own wishes guide her, she would have said Yes--and gladly, too.

"The original cause of all the mischief is no less a person than your worthy uncle--Admiral Bartram.

"It seems that the admiral took it into his head (I suppose during your absence) to go to London by himself and to satisfy some curiosity of his own about Norah by calling in Portland Place, under pretense of renewing his old friendship with the Tyrrels. He came at luncheon-time, and saw Norah; and, from all I can hear, was apparently better pleased with her than he expected or wished to be when he came into the house.

"So far, this is mere guess-work; but it is unluckily certain that he and Mrs. Tyrrel had some talk together alone when luncheon was over. Your name was not mentioned; but when their conversation fell on Norah, you were in both their minds, of course. The admiral (doing her full justice personally) declared himself smitten with pity for her hard lot in life. The scandalous conduct of her sister must always stand (he feared) in the way of her future advantage. Who could marry her, without first making it a condition that she and her sister were to be absolute strangers to each other? And even then, the objection would remain--the serious objection to the husband's family--of being connected by marriage with such a woman as Mrs. Noel Vanstone. It was very sad; it was not the poor girl's fault, but it was none the less true that her sister was her rock ahead in life. So he ran on, with no

real ill-feeling toward Norah, but with an obstinate belief in his own prejudices which bore the aspect of ill-feeling, and which people with more temper than judgment would be but too readily disposed to resent accordingly.

"Unfortunately, Mrs. Tyrrel is one of those people. She is an excellent, warm-hearted woman, with a quick temper and very little judgment; strongly attached to Norah, and heartily interested in Norah's welfare. From all I can learn, she first resented the expression of the admiral's opinion, in his presence, as worldly and selfish in the last degree; and then interpreted it, behind his back, as a hint to discourage his nephew's visits, which was a downright insult offered to a lady in her own house. This was foolish enough so far; but worse folly was to come.

"As soon as your uncle was gone, Mrs. Tyrrel, most unwisely and improperly, sent for Norah, and, repeating the conversation that had taken place, warned her of the reception she might expect from the man who stood toward you in the position of a father, if she accepted an offer of marriage on your part. When I tell you that Norah's faithful attachment to her sister still remains unshaken, and that there lies hidden under her noble submission to the unhappy circumstances of her life a proud susceptibility to slights of all kinds, which is deeply seated in her nature--you will understand the true motive of the refusal which has so naturally and so justly disappointed you. They are all three equally to blame in this matter. Your uncle was wrong to state his objections so roundly and inconsiderately as he did. Mrs. Tyrrel was wrong to let her temper get the better of her, and to suppose herself insulted where no insult was intended. And Norah was wrong to place a scruple of pride, and a hopeless belief in her sister which no strangers can be expected to share, above the higher claims of an attachment which might have secured the happiness and the prosperity of her future life.

"But the mischief has been done. The next question is, can the harm be remedied?

"I hope and believe it can. My advice is this: Don't take No for an answer. Give her time enough to reflect on what she has done, and to regret it (as I believe she will regret it) in secret; trust to my influence over her to plead your cause for you at every opportunity I can find; wait patiently for the right moment, and ask her again. Men, being accustomed to act on reflection themselves, are a great deal too apt to believe that women act on reflection, too. Women do nothing of the sort. They act on impulse; and, in nine cases out of ten, they are heartily sorry for it afterward.

"In the meanwhile, you must help your own interests by inducing your uncle to alter his opinion, or at least to make the concession of keeping his opinion to himself. Mrs. Tyrrel has rushed to the conclusion that the harm he has done he did intentionally--which is as much as to say, in so many words, that he had a prophetic conviction, when he came into the house, of what she would do when he left it. My explanation of the matter is a much simpler one. I believe that the knowledge of your attachment naturally aroused his curiosity to see the object of it, and that Mrs. Tyrrel's injudicious praises of Norah irritated his objections into openly declaring themselves. Anyway, your course lies equally plain before you. Use your influence over your uncle to persuade him into setting matters right again; trust my settled resolution to see Norah your wife before six months more are over our heads; and believe me, your friend and well-wisher,

"HARRIET GARTH."

IV.

From Mrs. Drake to George Bartram.

"St. Crux, April 17th.

"SIR--I direct these lines to the hotel you usually stay at in London, hoping that you may return soon enough from foreign parts to receive my letter without delay.

"I am sorry to say that some unpleasant events have taken place at St. Crux since you left it, and that my honored master, the admiral, is far from enjoying his usual good health. On both these accounts, I venture to write to you on my own responsibility, for I think your presence is needed in the house.

"Early in the month a most regrettable circumstance took place. Our new parlor-maid was discovered by Mr. Mazey, at a late hour of the night (with her master's basket of keys in her possession), prying into the private documents kept in the east library. The girl removed herself from the house the next morning before we were any of us astir, and she has not been heard of since. This event has annoyed and alarmed my master very seriously; and to make matters worse, on the day when the girl's treacherous conduct was discovered, the admiral was seized with the first symptoms of a severe inflammatory cold. He was not himself aware, nor was any one else, how he had caught the chill. The doctor was sent for, and kept the inflammation down until the day before yesterday, when it broke out again, under circumstances which I am sure you will be sorry to hear, as I am truly sorry to write of them.

"On the date I have just mentioned--I mean the fifteenth of the month--my master himself informed me that he had been dreadfully disappointed by a letter received from you, which had come in the morning from foreign parts, and had brought him bad news. He did not tell me what the news was--but I have never, in all the years I have passed in the admiral's service, seen him so distressingly upset, and so unlike himself, as he was on that day. At night his uneasiness seemed to increase. He was in such a state of irritation that he could not bear the sound of Mr. Mazey's hard breathing outside his door, and he laid his positive orders on the old man to go into one of the bedrooms for that night. Mr. Mazey, to his own great regret, was of course obliged to obey.

"Our only means of preventing the admiral from leaving his room in his sleep, if the fit unfortunately took him, being now removed, Mr. Mazey and I agreed to keep watch by turns through the night, sitting, with the door ajar, in one of the empty rooms near our master's bed-chamber. We could think of nothing better to do than this, knowing he would not allow us to lock him in, and not having the door key in our possession, even if we could have ventured to secure him in his room without his permission. I kept watch for the first two hours, and then Mr. Mazey took my place. After having been some little time in my own room, it occurred to me that the old man was hard of hearing, and that if his eyes grew at all heavy in the night, his ears were not to be trusted to warn him if anything happened. I slipped on my clothes again, and went back to Mr. Mazey. He was neither asleep nor awake--he was between the two. My mind misgave me, and I went on to the admiral's room. The door was open, and the bed was empty.

"Mr. Mazey and I went downstairs instantly. We looked in all the north rooms, one after another, and found no traces of him. I thought of the drawing-room next, and, being the more active of the two, went first to examine it. The moment I turned the sharp corner of the passage, I saw my master coming toward me through the open drawing-room door, asleep and dreaming, with his keys in his hands. The sliding door behind him was open also; and the fear came to me then, and has remained with me ever since, that his dream had led him through the Banqueting-Hall into the east rooms. We abstained from waking him, and followed his steps until he returned of his own accord to his bed-chamber. The next morning, I grieve to say, all the bad symptoms came back; and none of the remedies employed have succeeded in getting the better of them yet. By the doctor's advice, we refrained from telling the admiral what had happened. He is still under the impression that he passed the night as usual in his own room.

"I have been careful to enter into all the particulars of this unfortunate accident, because neither Mr. Mazey nor myself desire to screen ourselves from blame, if blame we have deserved. We both acted for the best, and we both beg and pray you will consider our responsible situation, and come as soon as possible to St. Crux. Our honored master is very hard to manage; and the doctor thinks, as we do, that your presence is wanted in the house.

"I remain, sir, with Mr. Mazey's respects and my own, your humble servant,

"SOPHIA DRAKE."

V.

From George Bartram to Miss Garth.

"St. Crux, April 22d.

"DEAR MISS GARTH--Pray excuse my not thanking you sooner for your kind and consoling letter. We are in sad trouble at St. Crux. Any little irritation I might have felt at my poor uncle's unlucky interference in Portland Place is all forgotten in the misfortune of his serious illness. He is suffering from internal inflammation, produced by cold; and symptoms have shown themselves which are dangerous at his age. A physician from London is now in the house. You shall hear more in a few days. Meantime, believe me, with sincere gratitude,

"Yours most truly,

"GEORGE BARTRAM."

VI.

From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Noel Vanstone.

"Lincoln's Inn Fields, May 6th.

"DEAR MADAM--I have unexpectedly received some information which is of the most vital importance to your interests. The news of Admiral Bartram's death has reached me this morning. He expired at his own house, on the fourth of the present month.

"This event at once disposes of the considerations which I had previously endeavored to impress on you, in relation to your discovery at St. Crux. The wisest course we can now follow is to open communications at once with the executors of the deceased gentleman; addressing them through the medium of the admiral's legal adviser, in the first instance.

"I have dispatched a letter this day to the solicitor in question. It simply warns him that we have lately become aware of the existence of a private Document, controlling the deceased gentleman in his use of the legacy devised to him by Mr. Noel Vanstone's will. My letter assumes that the document will be easily found among the admiral's papers; and it mentions that I am the solicitor appointed by Mrs. Noel Vanstone to receive communications on her behalf. My object in taking this step is to cause a search to be instituted for the Trust--in the very probable event of the executors not having met with it yet--before the usual measures are adopted for the administration of the admiral's estate. We will threaten legal proceedings, if we find that the object does not succeed. But I anticipate no such necessity. Admiral Bartram's executors must be men of high standing and position; and they will do justice to you and to themselves in this matter by looking for the Trust.

"Under these circumstances, you will naturally ask, 'What are our prospects when the document is found?' Our prospects have a bright side and a dark side. Let us take the bright side to begin with.

"What do we actually know?

"We know, first, that the Trust does really exist. Secondly, that there is a provision in it relating to the marriage of Mr. George Bartram in a given time. Thirdly, that the time (six months from the date of your husband's

death) expired on the third of this month. Fourthly, that Mr. George Bartram (as I have found out by inquiry, in the absence of any positive information on the subject possessed by yourself) is, at the present moment, a single man. The conclusion naturally follows, that the object contemplated by the Trust, in this case, is an object that has failed.

"If no other provisions have been inserted in the document--or if, being inserted, those other provisions should be discovered to have failed also--I believe it to be impossible (especially if evidence can be found that the admiral himself considered the Trust binding on him) for the executors to deal with your husband's fortune as legally forming part of Admiral Bartram's estate. The legacy is expressly declared to have been left to him, on the understanding that he applies it to certain stated objects--and those objects have failed. What is to be done with the money? It was not left to the admiral himself, on the testator's own showing; and the purposes for which it was left have not been, and cannot be, carried out. I believe (if the case here supposed really happens) that the money must revert to the testator's estate. In that event the Law, dealing with it as a matter of necessity, divides it into two equal portions. One half goes to Mr. Noel Vans tone's childless widow, and the other half is divided among Mr. Noel Vanstone's next of kin.

"You will no doubt discover the obvious objection to the case in our favor, as I have here put it. You will see that it depends for its practical realization not on one contingency, but on a series of contingencies, which must all happen exactly as we wish them to happen. I admit the force of the objection; but I can tell you, at the same time, that these said contingencies are by no means so improbable as they may look on the face of them.

"We have every reason to believe that the Trust, like the Will, was not drawn by a lawyer. That is one circumstance in our favor that is enough of itself to cast a doubt on the soundness of all, or any, of the remaining provisions which we may not be acquainted with. Another chance which we may count on is to be found, as I think, in that strange handwriting, placed under the signature on the third page of the Letter, which you saw, but which you, unhappily, omitted to read. All the probabilities point to those lines as written by Admiral Bartram: and the position which they occupy is certainly consistent with the theory that they touch the important subject of his own sense of obligation under the Trust.

"I wish to raise no false hopes in your mind. I only desire to satisfy you that we have a case worth trying.

"As for the dark side of the prospect, I need not enlarge on it. After what I

have already written, you will understand that the existence of a sound provision, unknown to us, in the Trust, which has been properly carried out by the admiral--or which can be properly carried out by his representatives--would be necessarily fatal to our hopes. The legacy would be, in this case, devoted to the purpose or purposes contemplated by your husband--and, from that moment, you would have no claim.

"I have only to add, that as soon as I hear from the late admiral's man of business, you shall know the result.

"Believe me, dear madam, faithfully yours,

"JOHN LOSCOMBE."

VII.

From George Bartram to Miss Garth.

"St. Crux, May 15th.

"DEAR MISS GARTH--I trouble you with another letter: partly to thank you for your kind expression of sympathy with me, under the loss that I have sustained; and partly to tell you of an extraordinary application made to my uncle's executors, in which you and Miss Vanstone may both feel interested, as Mrs. Noel Vanstone is directly concerned in it.

"Knowing my own ignorance of legal technicalities, I inclose a copy of the application, instead of trying to describe it. You will notice as suspicious, that no explanation is given of the manner in which the alleged discovery of one of my uncle's secrets was made, by persons who are total strangers to him.

"On being made acquainted with the circumstances, the executors at once applied to me. I could give them no positive information--for my uncle never consulted me on matters of business. But I felt in honor bound to tell them, that during the last six months of his life, the admiral had occasionally let fall expressions of impatience in my hearing, which led to the conclusion that he was annoyed by a private responsibility of some kind. I also mentioned that he had imposed a very strange condition on me--a condition which, in spite of his own assurances to the contrary, I was persuaded could not have emanated from himself--of marrying within a given time (which time has now expired), or of not receiving from him a certain sum of money, which I believed to be the same in amount as the sum bequeathed to him in my cousin's will. The executors agreed with me that these circumstances gave a color of probability to an otherwise incredible story; and they decided that a search should be instituted for the Secret Trust, nothing in the slightest degree resembling this same Trust having been discovered, up to that time, among the admiral's papers.

"The search (no trifle in such a house as this) has now been in full progress for a week. It is superintended by both the executors, and by my uncle's lawyer, who is personally, as well as professionally, known to Mr. Loscombe (Mrs. Noel Vanstone's solicitor), and who has been included in the proceedings at the express request of Mr. Loscombe himself. Up to this time, nothing whatever has been found. Thousands and thousands of letters have

been examined, and not one of them bears the remotest resemblance to the letter we are looking for.

"Another week will bring the search to an end. It is only at my express request that it will be persevered with so long. But as the admiral's generosity has made me sole heir to everything he possessed, I feel bound to do the fullest justice to the interests of others, however hostile to myself those interests may be.

"With this view, I have not hesitated to reveal to the lawyer a constitutional peculiarity of my poor uncle's, which was always kept a secret among us at his own request--I mean his tendency to somnambulism. I mentioned that he had been discovered (by the housekeeper and his old servant) walking in his sleep, about three weeks before his death, and that the part of the house in which he had been seen, and the basket of keys which he was carrying in his hand, suggested the inference that he had come from one of the rooms in the east wing, and that he might have opened some of the pieces of furniture in one of them. I surprised the lawyer (who seemed to be quite ignorant of the extraordinary actions constantly performed by somnambulists), by informing him that my uncle could find his way about the house, lock and unlock doors, and remove objects of all kinds from one place to another, as easily in his sleep as in his waking hours. And I declared that, while I felt the faintest doubt in my own mind whether he might not have been dreaming of the Trust on the night in question, and putting the dream in action in his sleep, I should not feel satisfied unless the rooms in the east wing were searched again.

"It is only right to add that there is not the least foundation in fact for this idea of mine. During the latter part of his fatal illness, my poor uncle was quite incapable of speaking on any subject whatever. From the time of my arrival at St. Crux, in the middle of last month, to the time of his death, not a word dropped from him which referred in the remotest way to the Secret Trust.

"Here then, for the present, the matter rests. If you think it right to communicate the contents of this letter to Miss Vanstone, pray tell her that it will not be my fault if her sister's assertion (however preposterous it may seem to my uncle's executors) is not fairly put to the proof.

"Believe me, dear Miss Garth, always truly yours,

"GEORGE BARTRAM.

"P. S.--As soon as all business matters are settled, I am going abroad for some months, to try the relief of change of scene. The house will be shut up, and left under the charge of Mrs. Drake. I have not forgotten your once telling me that you should like to see St. Crux, if you ever found yourself in this neighborhood. If you are at all likely to be in Essex during the time when I am abroad, I have provided against the chance of your being disappointed, by leaving instructions with Mrs. Drake to give you, and any friends of yours, the freest admission to the house and grounds."

VIII.

From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Noel Vanstone.

"Lincoln's Inn Fields, May 24th.

"DEAR MADAM--After a whole fortnight's search--conducted, I am bound to admit, with the most conscientious and unrelaxing care--no such document as the Secret Trust has been found among the papers left at St. Crux by the late Admiral Bartram.

"Under these circumstances, the executors have decided on acting under the only recognizable authority which they have to guide them--the admiral's own will. This document (executed some years since) bequeaths the whole of his estate, both real and personal (that is to say, all the lands he possesses, and all the money he possesses, at the time of his death), to his nephew. The will is plain, and the result is inevitable. Your husband's fortune is lost to you from this moment. Mr. George Bartram legally inherits it, as he legally inherits the house and estate of St. Crux.

"I make no comment upon this extraordinary close to the proceedings. The Trust may have been destroyed, or the Trust may be hidden in some place of concealment inaccessible to discovery. Either way, it is, in my opinion, impossible to found any valid legal declaration on a knowledge of the document so fragmentary and so incomplete as the knowledge which you possess. If other lawyers differ from me on this point, by all means consult them. I have devoted money enough and time enough to the unfortunate attempt to assert your interests; and my connection with the matter must, from this moment, be considered at an end.

"Your obedient servant,

"JOHN LOSCOMBE."

IX.

From Mrs. Ruddock (Lodging-house Keeper) to Mr. Loscombe.

"Park Terrace, St. John's Wood, June 2d.

"SIR--Having, by Mrs. Noel Vanstone's directions, taken letters for her to the post, addressed to you--and knowing no one else to apply to--I beg to inquire whether you are acquainted with any of her friends; for I think it right that they should be stirred up to take some steps about her.

"Mrs. Vanstone first came to me in November last, when she and her maid occupied my apartments. On that occasion, and again on this, she has given me no cause to complain of her. She has behaved like a lady, and paid me my due. I am writing, as a mother of a family, under a sense of responsibility--I am not writing with an interested motive.

"After proper warning given, Mrs. Vanstone (who is now quite alone) leaves me to-morrow. She has not concealed from me that her circumstances are fallen very low, and that she cannot afford to remain in my house. This is all she has told me--I know nothing of where she is going, or what she means to do next. But I have every reason to believe she desires to destroy all traces by which she might be found, after leaving this place--for I discovered her in tears yesterday, burning letters which were doubtless letters from her friends. In looks and conduct she has altered most shockingly in the last week. I believe there is some dreadful trouble on her mind; and I am afraid, from what I see of her, that she is on the eve of a serious illness. It is very sad to see such a young woman so utterly deserted and friendless as she is now.

"Excuse my troubling you with this letter; it is on my conscience to write it. If you know any of her relations, please warn them that time is not to be wasted. If they lose to-morrow, they may lose the last chance of finding her.

"Your humble servant,

"CATHERINE RUDDOCK."

X.

From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Ruddock.

"Lincoln's Inn Fields, June 2d.

"MADAM--MY only connection with Mrs. Noel Vanstone was a professional one, and that connection is now at an end. I am not acquainted with any of her friends; and I cannot undertake to interfere personally, either with her present or future proceedings.

"Regretting my inability to afford you any assistance, I remain, your obedient servant,

"JOHN LOSCOMBE."