THE LAST SCENE - AARON'S BUILDINGS

CHAPTER I.

ON the seventh of June, the owners of the merchantman Deliverance received news that the ship had touched at Plymouth to land passengers, and had then continued her homeward voyage to the Port of London. Five days later, the vessel was in the river, and was towed into the East India Docks.

Having transacted the business on shore for which he was personally responsible, Captain Kirke made the necessary arrangements, by letter, for visiting his brother-in-law's parsonage in Suffolk, on the seventeenth of the month. As usual in such cases, he received a list of commissions to execute for his sister on the day before he left London. One of these commissions took him into the neighborhood of Camden Town. He drove to his destination from the Docks; and then, dismissing the vehicle, set forth to walk back southward, toward the New Road.

He was not well acquainted with the district; and his attention wandered further and further away from the scene around him as he went on. His thoughts, roused by the prospect of seeing his sister again, had led his memory back to the night when he had parted from her, leaving the house on foot. The spell so strangely laid on him, in that past time, had kept its hold through all after-events. The face that had haunted him on the lonely road had haunted him again on the lonely sea. The woman who had followed him, as in a dream, to his sister's door, had followed him--thought of his thought, and spirit of his spirit--to the deck of his ship. Through storm and calm on the voyage out, through storm and calm on the voyage home, she had been with him. In the ceaseless turmoil of the London streets, she was with him now. He knew what the first question on his lips would be, when he had seen his sister and her boys. "I shall try to talk of something else," he thought; "but when Lizzie and I am alone, it will come out in spite of me."

The necessity of waiting to let a string of carts pass at a turning before he crossed awakened him to present things. He looked about in a momentary confusion. The street was strange to him; he had lost his way.

The first foot passenger of whom he inquired appeared to have no time to waste in giving information. Hurriedly directing him to cross to the other side of the road, to turn down the first street he came to on his right hand, and then to ask again, the stranger unceremoniously hastened on without waiting to be thanked.

Kirke followed his directions and took the turning on his right. The street was short and narrow, and the houses on either side were of the poorer order. He looked up as he passed the corner to see what the name of the place might be. It was called "Aaron's Buildings."

Low down on the side of the "Buildings" along which he was walking, a little crowd of idlers was assembled round two cabs, both drawn up before the door of the same house. Kirke advanced to the crowd, to ask his way of any civil stranger among them who might not be in a hurry this time. On approaching the cabs, he found a woman disputing with the drivers; and heard enough to inform him that two vehicles had been sent for by mistake, where only one was wanted.

The house door was open; and when he turned that way next, he looked easily into the passage, over the heads of the people in front of him.

The sight that met his eyes should have been shielded in pity from the observation of the street. He saw a slatternly girl, with a frightened face, standing by an old chair placed in the middle of the passage, and holding a woman on the chair, too weak and helpless to support herself--a woman apparently in the last stage of illness, who was about to be removed, when the dispute outside was ended, in one of the cabs. Her head was drooping when he first saw her, and an old shawl which covered it had fallen forward so as to hide the upper part of her face.

Before he could look away again, the girl in charge of her raised her head and restored the shawl to its place. The action disclosed her face to view, for an instant only, before her head drooped once more on her bosom. In that instant he saw the woman whose beauty was the haunting remembrance of his life--whose image had been vivid in his mind not five minutes since.

The shock of the double recognition--the recognition, at the same moment, of the face, and of the dreadful change in it--struck him speechless and helpless. The steady presence of mind in all emergencies which had become a habit of his life, failed him for the first time. The poverty-stricken street, the squalid mob round the door, swam before his eyes. He staggered back and caught at the iron railings of the house behind him.

"Where are they taking her to?" he heard a woman ask, close at his side.

"To the hospital, if they will have her," was the reply. "And to the work-house, if they won't."

That horrible answer roused him. He pushed his way through the crowd and entered the house.

The misunderstanding on the pavement had been set right, and one of the cabs had driven off.

As he crossed the threshold of the door he confronted the people of the house at the moment when they were moving her. The cabman who had remained was on one side of the chair, and the woman who had been disputing with the two drivers was on the other. They were just lifting her, when Kirke's tall figure darkened the door.

"What are you doing with that lady?" he asked.

The cabman looked up with the insolence of his reply visible in his eyes, before his lips could utter it. But the woman, quicker than he, saw the suppressed agitation in Kirke's face, and dropped her hold of the chair in an instant.

"Do you know her, sir?" asked the woman, eagerly. "Are you one of her friends?"

"Yes," said Kirke, without hesitation.

"It's not my fault, sir," pleaded the woman, shirking under the look he fixed on her. "I would have waited patiently till her friends found her--I would, indeed!"

Kirke made no reply. He turned, and spoke to the cabman.

"Go out," he said, "and close the door after you. I'll send you down your money directly. What room in the house did you take her from, when you brought her here?" he resumed, addressing himself to the woman again.

"The first floor back, sir."

"Show me the way to it."

He stooped, and lifted Magdalen in his arms. Her head rested gently on the sailor's breast; her eyes looked up wonderingly into the sailor's face. She smiled, and whispered to him vacantly. Her mind had wandered back to old days at home; and her few broken words showed that she fancied herself a child again in her father's arms. "Poor papa!" she said, softly. "Why do you look so sorry? Poor papa!"

The woman led the way into the back room on the first floor. It was very small; it was miserably furnished. But the little bed was clean, and the few things in the room were neatly kept. Kirke laid her tenderly on the bed. She caught one of his hands in her burning fingers. "Don't distress mamma about me," she said. "Send for Norah." Kirke tried gently to release his hand; but she only clasped it the more eagerly. He sat down by the bedside to wait until it pleased her to release him. The woman stood looking at them and crying, in a corner of the room. Kirke observed her attentively. "Speak," he said, after an interval, in low, quiet tones. "Speak in her presence; and tell me the truth."

With many words, with many tears, the woman spoke.

She had let her first floor to the lady a fortnight since. The lady had paid a week's rent, and had given the name of Gray. She had been out from morning till night, for the first three days, and had come home again, on every occasion, with a wretchedly weary, disappointed look. The woman of the house had suspected that she was in hiding from her friends, under a false name; and that she had been vainly trying to raise money, or to get some employment, on the three days when she was out for so long, and when she looked so disappointed on coming home. However that might be, on the fourth day she had fallen ill, with shivering fits and hot fits, turn and turn about. On the fifth day she was worse; and on the sixth, she was too sleepy at one time, and too light-headed at another, to be spoken to. The chemist (who did the doctoring in those parts) had come and looked at her, and had said he thought it was a bad fever. He had left a "saline draught," which the woman of the house had paid for out of her own pocket, and had administered without effect. She had ventured on searching the only box which the lady had brought with her; and had found nothing in it but a few necessary articles of linen--no dresses, no ornaments, not so much as the fragment of a letter which might help in discovering her friends. Between the risk of keeping her under these circumstances, and the barbarity of turning a sick woman into the street, the landlady herself had not hesitated. She would willingly have kept her tenant, on the chance of the lady's recovery, and on the chance of her friends turning up. But not half an hour since, her

husband--who never came near the house, except to take her money--had come to rob her of her little earnings, as usual. She had been obliged to tell him that no rent was in hand for the first floor, and that none was likely to be in hand until the lady recovered, or her friends found her. On hearing this, he had mercilessly insisted--well or ill--that the lady should go. There was the hospital to take her to; and if the hospital shut its doors, there was the workhouse to try next. If she was not out of the place in an hour's time, he threatened to come back and take her out himself. His wife knew but too well that he was brute enough to be as good as his word; and no other choice had been left her but to do as she had done, for the sake of the lady herself.

The woman told her shocking story, with every appearance of being honestly ashamed of it. Toward the end, Kirke felt the clasp of the burning fingers slackening round his hand. He looked back at the bed again. Her weary eyes were closing; and, with her face still turned toward the sailor, she was sinking into sleep.

"Is there any one in the front room?" said Kirke, in a whisper. "Come in there; I have something to say to you."

The woman followed him through the door of communication between the rooms.

"How much does she owe you?" he asked.

The landlady mentioned the sum. Kirke put it down before her on the table.

"Where is your husband?" was his next question.

"Waiting at the public-house, sir, till the hour is up."

"You can take him the money or not, as you think right," said Kirke, quietly. "I have only one thing to tell you, as far as your husband is concerned. If you want to see every bone in his skin broken, let him come to the house while I am in it. Stop! I have something more to say. Do you know of any doctor in the neighborhood who can be depended on?"

"Not in our neighborhood, sir. But I know of one within half an hour's walk of us."

"Take the cab at the door; and, if you find him at home, bring him back in it. Say I am waiting here for his opinion on a very serious case. He shall be well

paid, and you shall be well paid. Make haste!"

The woman left the room.

Kirke sat down alone, to wait for her return. He hid his face in his hands, and tried to realize the strange and touching situation in which the accident of a moment had placed him.

Hidden in the squalid by-ways of London under a false name; cast, friendless and helpless, on the mercy of strangers, by illness which had struck her prostrate, mind and body alike--so he met her again, the woman who had opened a new world of beauty to his mind; the woman who had called Love to life in him by a look! What horrible misfortune had struck her so cruelly, and struck her so low? What mysterious destiny had guided him to the last refuge of her poverty and despair, in the hour of her sorest need? "If it is ordered that I am to see her again, I shall see her." Those words came back to him now--the memorable words that he had spoken to his sister at parting. With that thought in his heart, he had gone where his duty called him. Months and months had passed; thousands and thousands of miles, protracting their desolate length on the unresting waters had rolled between them. And through the lapse of time, and over the waste of oceans--day after day, and night after night, as the winds of heaven blew, and the good ship toiled on before them--he had advanced nearer and nearer to the end that was waiting for him; he had journeyed blindfold to the meeting on the threshold of that miserable door. "What has brought me here?" he said to himself in a whisper. "The mercy of chance? No. The mercy of God."

He waited, unregardful of the place, unconscious of the time, until the sound of footsteps on the stairs came suddenly between him and his thoughts. The door opened, and the doctor was shown into the room.

"Dr. Merrick," said the landlady, placing a chair for him.

"Mr. Merrick," said the visitor, smiling quietly as he took the chair. "I am not a physician--I am a surgeon in general practice."

Physician or surgeon, there was something in his face and manner which told Kirke at a glance that he was a man to be relied on.

After a few preliminary words on either side, Mr. Merrick sent the landlady into the bedroom to see if his patient was awake or asleep. The woman returned, and said she was "betwixt the two, light in the head again, and burning hot." The doctor went at once into the bedroom, telling the landlady

to follow him, and to close the door behind her.

A weary time passed before he came back into the front room. When he re-appeared, his face spoke for him, before any question could be asked.

"Is it a serious illness?" said Kirke his voice sinking low, his eyes anxiously fixed on the doctor's face.

"It is a dangerous illness," said Mr. Merrick, with an emphasis on the word.

He drew his chair nearer to Kirke and looked at him attentively.

"May I ask you some questions which are not strictly medical?" he inquired.

Kirke bowed.

"Can you tell me what her life has been before she came into this house, and before she fell ill?"

"I have no means of knowing. I have just returned to England after a long absence."

"Did you know of her coming here?"

"I only discovered it by accident."

"Has she no female relations? No mother? no sister? no one to take care of her but yourself?"

"No one--unless I can succeed in tracing her relations. No one but myself."

Mr. Merrick was silent. He looked at Kirke more attentively than ever. "Strange!" thought the doctor. "He is here, in sole charge of her--and is this all he knows?"

Kirke saw the doubt in his face; and addressed himself straight to that doubt, before another word passed between them,

"I see my position here surprises you," he said, simply. "Will you consider it the position of a relation--the position of her brother or her father--until her friends can be found?" His voice faltered, and he laid his hand earnestly on the doctor's arm. "I have taken this trust on myself," he said; "and as God shall judge me, I will not be unworthy of it!"

The poor weary head lay on his breast again, the poor fevered fingers clasped his hand once more, as he spoke those words.

"I believe you," said the doctor, warmly. "I believe you are an honest man.--Pardon me if I have seemed to intrude myself on your confidence. I respect your reserve--from this moment it is sacred to me. In justice to both of us, let me say that the questions I have asked were not prompted by mere curiosity. No common cause will account for the illness which has laid my patient on that bed. She has suffered some long-continued mental trial, some wearing and terrible suspense--and she has broken down under it. It might have helped me if I could have known what the nature of the trial was, and how long or how short a time elapsed before she sank under it. In that hope I spoke."

"When you told me she was dangerously ill," said Kirke, "did you mean danger to her reason or to her life?"

"To both," replied Mr. Merrick. "Her whole nervous system has given way; all the ordinary functions of her brain are in a state of collapse. I can give you no plainer explanation than that of the nature of the malady. The fever which frightens the people of the house is merely the effect. The cause is what I have told you. She may lie on that bed for weeks to come; passing alternately, without a gleam of consciousness, from a state of delirium to a state of repose. You must not be alarmed if you find her sleep lasting far beyond the natural time. That sleep is a better remedy than any I can give, and nothing must disturb it. All our art can accomplish is to watch her, to help her with stimulants from time to time, and to wait for what Nature will do."

"Must she remain here? Is there no hope of our being able to remove her to a better place?"

"No hope whatever, for the present. She has already been disturbed, as I understand, and she is seriously the worse for it. Even if she gets better, even if she comes to herself again, it would still be a dangerous experiment to move her too soon--the least excitement or alarm would be fatal to her. You must make the best of this place as it is. The landlady has my directions; and I will send a good nurse to help her. There is nothing more to be done. So far as her life can be said to be in any human hands, it is as much in your hands now as in mine. Everything depends on the care that is taken of her, under your direction, in this house." With those farewell words he rose and quitted the room.

Left by himself, Kirke walked to the door of communication, and, knocking at it softly, told the landlady he wished to speak with her.

He was far more composed, far more like his own resolute self, after his interview with the doctor, than he had been before it. A man living in the artificial social atmosphere which this man had never breathed would have felt painfully the worldly side of the situation--its novelty and strangeness; the serious present difficulty in which it placed him; the numberless misinterpretations in the future to which it might lead. Kirke never gave the situation a thought. He saw nothing but the duty it claimed from him--a duty which the doctor's farewell words had put plainly before his mind. Everything depended on the care taken of her, under his direction, in that house. There was his responsibility, and he unconsciously acted under it, exactly as he would have acted in a case of emergency with women and children on board his own ship. He questioned the landlady in short, sharp sentences; the only change in him was in the lowered tone of his voice, and in the anxious looks which he cast, from time to time, at the room where she lay.

"Do you understand what the doctor has told you?"

"Yes, sir."

"The house must be kept quiet. Who lives in the house?"

"Only me and my daughter, sir; we live in the parlors. Times have gone badly with us since Lady Day. Both the rooms above this are to let."

"I will take them both, and the two rooms down here as well. Do you know of any active trustworthy man who can run on errands for me?"

"Yes, sir. Shall I go--?"

"No; let your daughter go. You must not leave the house until the nurse comes. Don't send the messenger up here. Men of that sort tread heavily. I'll go down, and speak to him at the door."

He went down when the messenger came, and sent him first to purchase pen, ink, and paper. The man's next errand dispatched him to make inquiries for a person who could provide for deadening the sound of passing wheels in the street by laying down tan before the house in the usual way. This object accomplished, the messenger received two letters to post. The

first was addressed to Kirke's brother-in-law. It told him, in few and plain words, what had happened; and left him to break the news to his wife as he thought best. The second letter was directed to the landlord of the Aldborough Hotel. Magdalen's assumed name at North Shingles was the only name by which Kirke knew her; and the one chance of tracing her relatives that he could discern was the chance of discovering her reputed uncle and aunt by means of inquiries starting from Aldborough.

Toward the close of the afternoon a decent middle-aged woman came to the house, with a letter from Mr. Merrick. She was well known to the doctor as a trustworthy and careful person, who had nursed his own wife; and she would be assisted, from time to time, by a lady who was a member of a religious Sisterhood in the district, and whose compassionate interest had been warmly aroused in the case. Toward eight o'clock that evening the doctor himself would call and see that his patient wanted for nothing.

The arrival of the nurse, and the relief of knowing that she was to be trusted, left Kirke free to think of himself. His luggage was ready packed for his contemplated journey to Suffolk the next day. It was merely necessary to transport it from the hotel to the house in Aaron's Buildings.

He stopped once only on his way to the hotel to look at a toyshop in one of the great thoroughfares. The miniature ships in the window reminded him of his nephew. "My little name-sake will be sadly disappointed at not seeing me to-morrow," he thought. "I must make it up to the boy by sending him something from his uncle." He went into the shop and bought one of the ships. It was secured in a box, and packed and directed in his presence. He put a ca rd on the deck of the miniature vessel before the cover of the box was nailed on, bearing this inscription: "A ship for the little sailor, with the big sailor's love."--"Children like to be written to, ma'am," he said, apologetically, to the woman behind the counter. "Send the box as soon as you can--I am anxious the boy should get it to-morrow."

Toward the dusk of the evening he returned with his luggage to Aaron's Buildings. He took off his boots in the passage and carried his trunk upstairs himself; stopping, as he passed the first floor, to make his inquiries. Mr. Merrick was present to answer them.

"She was awake and wandering," said the doctor, "a few minutes since. But we have succeeded in composing her, and she is sleeping now."

"Have no words escaped her, sir, which might help us to find her friends?"

Mr. Merrick shook his head.

"Weeks and weeks may pass yet," he said, "and that poor girl's story may still be a sealed secret to all of us. We can only wait."

So the day ended--the first of many days that were to come.

CHAPTER II.

THE warm sunlight of July shining softly through a green blind; an open window with fresh flowers set on the sill; a strange bed, in a strange room; a giant figure of the female sex (like a dream of Mrs. Wragge) towering aloft on one side of the bed, and trying to clap its hands; another woman (quickly) stopping the hands before they could make any noise; a mild expostulating voice (like a dream of Mrs. Wragge again) breaking the silence in these words, "She knows me, ma'am, she knows me; if I mustn't be happy, it will be the death of me!"--such were the first sights, such were the first sounds, to which, after six weeks of oblivion, Magdalen suddenly and strangely awoke.

After a little, the sights grew dim again, and the sounds sank into silence. Sleep, the merciful, took her once more, and hushed her back to repose.

Another day--and the sights were clearer, the sounds were louder. Another--and she heard a man's voice, through the door, asking for news from the sick-room. The voice was strange to her; it was always cautiously lowered to the same quiet tone. It inquired after her, in the morning, when she woke--at noon, when she took her refreshment--in the evening, before she dropped asleep again. "Who is so anxious about me?" That was the first thought her mind was strong enough to form--"Who is so anxious about me?"

More days--and she could speak to the nurse at her bedside; she could answer the questions of an elderly man, who knew far more about her than she knew about herself, and who told her he was Mr. Merrick, the doctor; she could sit up in bed, supported by pillows, wondering what had happened to her, and where she was; she could feel a growing curiosity about that quiet voice, which still asked after her, morning, noon, and night, on the other side of the door.

Another day's delay--and Mr. Merrick asked her if she was strong enough to see an old friend. A meek voice, behind him, articulating high in the air, said, "It's only me." The voice was followed by the prodigious bodily apparition of Mrs. Wragge, with her cap all awry, and one of her shoes in the next room. "Oh, look at her! look at her!" cried Mrs. Wragge, in an ecstasy, dropping on her knees at Magdalen's bedside, with a thump that shook the house. "Bless her heart, she's well enough to laugh at me already. 'Cheer, boys, cheer--!' I beg your pardon, doctor, my conduct isn't ladylike, I know. It's my head, sir; it isn't me. I must give vent somehow, or my head will

burst!" No coherent sentence, in answer to any sort of question put to her, could be extracted that morning from Mrs. Wragge. She rose from one climax of verbal confusion to another--and finished her visit under the bed, groping inscrutably for the second shoe.

The morrow came--and Mr. Merrick promised that she should see another old friend on the next day. In the evening, when the inquiring voice asked after her, as usual, and when the door was opened a few inches to give the reply, she answered faintly for herself: "I am better, thank you." There was a moment of silence--and then, just as the door was shut again, the voice sank to a whisper, and said, fervently, "Thank God!" Who was he? She had asked them all, and no one would tell her. Who was he?

The next day came; and she heard her door opened softly. Brisk footsteps tripped into the room; a lithe little figure advanced to the bed-side. Was it a dream again? No! There he was in his own evergreen reality, with the copious flow of language pouring smoothly from his lips; with the lambent dash of humor twinkling in his party-colored eyes--there he was, more audacious, more persuasive, more respectable than ever, in a suit of glossy black, with a speckless white cravat, and a rampant shirt frill--the unblushing, the invincible, unchangeable Wragge!

"Not a word, my dear girl!" said the captain, seating himself comfortably at the bedside, in his old confidential way. "I am to do all the talking; and, I think you will own, a more competent man for the purpose could not possibly have been found. I am really delighted--honestly delighted, if I may use such an apparently inappropriate word--to see you again, and to see you getting well. I have often thought of you; I have often missed you; I have often said to myself--never mind what! Clear the stage, and drop the curtain on the past. Dum vivimus, vivamus! Pardon the pedantry of a Latin quotation, my dear, and tell me how I look. Am I, or am I not, the picture of a prosperous man?"

Magdalen attempted to answer him. The captain's deluge of words flowed over her again in a moment.

"Don't exert yourself," he said. "I'll put all your questions for you. What have I been about? Why do I look so remarkably well off? And how in the world did I find my way to this house? My dear girl, I have been occupied, since we last saw each other, in slightly modifying my old professional habits. I have shifted from Moral Agriculture to Medical Agriculture. Formerly I preyed on the public sympathy, now I prey on the public stomach. Stomach and sympathy, sympathy and stomach--look them both fairly in the face when

you reach the wrong side of fifty, and you will agree with me that they come to much the same thing. However that may be, here I am--incredible as it may appear--a man with an income, at last. The founders of my fortune are three in number. Their names are Aloes, Scammony, and Gamboge. In plainer words, I am now living--on a Pill. I made a little money (if you remember) by my friendly connection with you. I made a little more by the happy decease (Requiescat in Pace!) of that female relative of Mrs. Wragge's from whom, as I told you, my wife had expectations. Very good. What do you think I did? I invested the whole of my capital, at one fell swoop, in advertisements, and purchased my drugs and my pill-boxes on credit. The result is now before you. Here I am, a Grand Financial Fact. Here I am, with my clothes positively paid for; with a balance at my banker's; with my servant in livery, and my gig at the door; solvent, flourishing, popular--and all on a Pill."

Magdalen smiled. The captain's face assumed an expression of mock gravity; he looked as if there was a serious side to the question, and as if he meant to put it next.

"It's no laughing matter to the public, my dear," he said. "They can't get rid of me and my Pill; they must take us. There is not a single form of appeal in the whole range of human advertisement which I am not making to the unfortunate public at this moment. Hire the last new novel, there I am, inside the boards of the book. Send for the last new Song--the instant you open the leaves, I drop out of it. Take a cab--I fly in at the window in red. Buy a box of tooth-powder at the chemist's--I wrap it up for you in blue. Show yourself at the theater--I flutter down on you in yellow. The mere titles of my advertisements are quite irresistible. Le t me quote a few from last week's issue. Proverbial Title: 'A Pill in time saves Nine.' Familiar Title: 'Excuse me, how is your Stomach?' Patriotic Title: 'What are the three characteristics of a true-born Englishman? His Hearth, his Home, and his Pill.' Title in the form of a nursery dialogue: 'Mamma, I am not well.' 'What is the matter, my pet?' 'I want a little Pill.' Title in the form of a Historical Anecdote: 'New Discovery in the Mine of English History. When the Princes were smothered in the Tower, their faithful attendant collected all their little possessions left behind them. Among the touching trifles dear to the poor boys, he found a tiny Box. It contained the Pill of the Period. Is it necessary to say how inferior that Pill was to its Successor, which prince and peasant alike may now obtain?'--Et cetera, et cetera. The place in which my Pill is made is an advertisement in itself. I have got one of the largest shops in London. Behind one counter (visible to the public through the lucid medium of plate-glass) are four-and-twenty young men, in white aprons, making the Pill. Behind another counter are four-and-twenty young men, in white

cravats, making the boxes. At the bottom of the shop are three elderly accountants, posting the vast financial transactions accruing from the Pill in three enormous ledgers. Over the door are my name, portrait, and autograph, expanded to colossal proportions, and surrounded in flowing letters, by the motto of the establishment, 'Down with the Doctors!' Even Mrs. Wragge contributes her quota to this prodigious enterprise. She is the celebrated woman whom I have cured of indescribable agonies from every complaint under the sun. Her portrait is engraved on all the wrappers, with the following inscription beneath it: 'Before she took the Pill you might have blown this patient away with a feather. Look at her now!!!' Last, not least, my dear girl, the Pill is the cause of my finding my way to this house. My department in the prodigious Enterprise already mentioned is to scour the United Kingdom in a gig, establishing Agencies everywhere. While founding one of those Agencies, I heard of a certain friend of mine, who had lately landed in England, after a long sea-voyage. I got his address in London--he was a lodger in this house. I called on him forthwith, and was stunned by the news of your illness. Such, in brief, is the history of my existing connection with British Medicine; and so it happens that you see me at the present moment sitting in the present chair, now as ever, yours truly, Horatio Wragge." In these terms the captain brought his personal statement to a close. He looked more and more attentively at Magdalen, the nearer he got to the conclusion. Was there some latent importance attaching to his last words which did not appear on the face of them? There was. His visit to the sick-room had a serious object, and that object he had now approached.

In describing the circumstances under which he had become acquainted with Magdalen's present position, Captain Wragge had skirted, with his customary dexterity, round the remote boundaries of truth. Emboldened by the absence of any public scandal in connection with Noel Vanstone's marriage, or with the event of his death as announced in the newspaper obituary, the captain, roaming the eastern circuit, had ventured back to Aldborough a fortnight since, to establish an agency there for the sale of his wonderful Pill. No one had recognized him but the landlady of the hotel, who at once insisted on his entering the house and reading Kirke's letter to her husband. The same night Captain Wragge was in London, and was closeted with the sailor in the second-floor room at Aaron's Buildings.

The serious nature of the situation, the indisputable certainty that Kirke must fail in tracing Magdalen's friends unless he first knew who she really was, had decided the captain on disclosing part, at least, of the truth. Declining to enter into any particulars--for family reasons, which Magdalen might explain on her recovery, if she pleased--he astounded Kirke by telling him that the friendless woman whom he had rescued, and whom he had

only known up to that moment as Miss Bygrave--was no other than the youngest daughter of Andrew Vanstone. The disclosure, on Kirke's side, of his father's connection with the young officer in Canada, had followed naturally on the revelation of Magdalen's real name. Captain Wragge had expressed his surprise, but had made no further remark at the time. A fortnight later, however, when the patient's recovery forced the serious difficulty on the doctor of meeting the questions which Magdalen was sure to ask, the captain's ingenuity had come, as usual, to the rescue.

"You can't tell her the truth," he said, "without awakening painful recollections of her stay at Aldborough, into which I am not at liberty to enter. Don't acknowledge just yet that Mr. Kirke only knew her as Miss Bygrave of North Shingles when he found her in this house. Tell her boldly that he knew who she was, and that he felt (what she must feel) that he had a hereditary right to help and protect her as his father's son. I am, as I have already told you," continued the captain, sticking fast to his old assertion, "a distant relative of the Combe-Raven family; and, if there is nobody else at hand to help you through this difficulty, my services are freely at your disposal."

No one else was at hand, and the emergency was a serious one. Strangers undertaking the responsibility might ignorantly jar on past recollections, which it would, perhaps, be the death of her to revive too soon. Near relatives might, by their premature appearance at the bedside, produce the same deplorable result. The alternative lay between irritating and alarming her by leaving her inquiries unanswered, or trusting Captain Wragge. In the doctor's opinion, the second risk was the least serious risk of the two--and the captain was now seated at Magdalen's bedside in discharge of the trust confided to him.

Would she ask the question which it had been the private object of all Captain Wragge's preliminary talk lightly and pleasantly to provoke? Yes; as soon as his silence gave her the opportunity, she asked it: "Who was that friend of his living in the house?"

"You ought by rights to know him as well as I do," said the captain. "He is the son of one of your father's old military friends, when your father was quartered with his regiment in Canada. Your cheeks mustn't flush up! If they do, I shall go away."

She was astonished, but not agitated. Captain Wragge had begun by interesting her in the remote past, which she only knew by hearsay, before he ventured on the delicate ground of her own experience.

In a moment more she advanced to her next question: "What was his name?"

"Kirke," proceeded the captain. "Did you never hear of his father, Major Kirke, commanding officer of the regiment in Canada? Did you never hear that the major helped your father through a great difficulty, like the best of good fellows and good friends?"

Yes; she faintly fancied she had heard something about her father and an officer who had once been very good to him when he was a young man. But she could not look back so long. "Was Mr. Kirke poor?" Even Captain Wragge's penetration was puzzled by that question. He gave the true answer at hazard. "No," he said, "not poor."

Her next inquiry showed what she had been thinking of. "If Mr. Kirke was not poor, why did he come to live in that house?"

"She has caught me!" thought the captain. "There is only one way out of it--I must administer another dose of truth. Mr. Kirke discovered you here by chance," he proceeded, aloud, "very ill, and not nicely attended to. Somebody was wanted to take care of you while you were not able to take care of yourself. Why not Mr. Kirke? He was the son of your father's old friend--which is the next thing to being your old friend. Who had a better claim to send for the right doctor, and get the right nurse, when I was not here to cure you with my wonderful Pill? Gently! gently! you mustn't take hold of my superfine black coat-sleeve in that unceremonious manner."

He put her hand back on the bed, but she was not to be checked in that way. She persisted in asking another question.--How came Mr. Kirke to know her? She had never seen him; she had never heard of him in her life.

"Very likely," said Captain Wragge. "But your never having seen him is no reason why he should not have seen you."

"When did he see me?"

The captain corked up his doses of truth on the spot without a moment's hesitation. "Some time ago, my dear. I can't exactly say when."

"Only once?"

Captain Wragge suddenly saw his way to the administration of another

dose. "Yes," he said, "only once."

She reflected a little. The next question involved the simultaneous expression of two ideas, and the next question cost her an effort.

"He only saw me once," she said, "and he only saw me some time ago. How came he to remember me when he found me here?"

"Aha!" said the captain. "Now you have hit the right nail on the head at last. You can't possibly be more surprised at his remembering you than I am. A word of advice, my dear. When you are well enough to get up and see Mr. Kirke, try how that sharp question of yours sounds in his ears, and insist on his answering it himself." Slipping out of the dilemma in that characteristically adroit manner, Captain Wragge got briskly on his legs again and took up his hat.

"Wait!" she pleaded. "I want to ask you--"

"Not another word," said the captain. "I have given you quite enough to think of for one day. My time is up, and my gig is waiting for me. I am off, to scour the country as usual. I am off, to cultivate the field of public indigestion with the triple plowshare of aloes, scammony and gamboge." He stopped and turned round at the door. "By-the-by, a message from my unfortunate wife. If you will allow her to come and see you again, Mrs. Wragge solemnly promises not to lose her shoe next time. I don't believe her. What do you say? May she come?"

"Yes; whenever she likes," said Magdalen. "If I ever get well again, may poor Mrs. Wragge come and stay with me?"

"Certainly, my dear. If you have no objection, I will provide her beforehand with a few thousand impressions in red, blue, and yellow of her own portrait ('You might have blown this patient away with a feather before she took the Pill. Look at her now!'). She is sure to drop herself about perpetually wherever she goes, and the most gratifying results, in an advertising point of view, must inevitably follow. Don't think me mercenary--I merely understand the age I live in." He stopped on his way out, for the second time, and turned round once more at the door. "You have been a remarkably good girl," he said, "and you deserve to be rewarded for it. I'll give you a last piece of information before I go. Have you heard anybody inquiring after you, for the last day or two, outside your door? Ah! I see you have. A word in your ear, my dear. That's Mr. Kirke." He tripped away from the bedside as briskly as ever. Magdalen heard him advertising himself to the nurse before he

closed the door. "If you are ever asked about it," he said, in a confidential whisper, "the name is Wragge, and the Pill is to be had in neat boxes, price thirteen pence half-penny, government stamp included. Take a few copies of the portrait of a female patient, whom you might have blown away with a feather before she took the Pill, and whom you are simply requested to contemplate now. Many thanks. Good-morning."

The door closed and Magdalen was alone again. She felt no sense of solitude; Captain Wragge had left her with something new to think of. Hour after hour her mind dwelt wonderingly on Mr. Kirke, until the evening came, and she heard his voice again through the half-opened door.

"I am very grateful," she said to him, before the nurse could answer his inquiries--"very, very grateful for all your goodness to me."

"Try to get well," he replied, kindly. "You will more than reward me, if you try to get well."

The next morning Mr. Merrick found her impatient to leave her bed, and be moved to the sofa in the front room. The doctor said he supposed she wanted a change. "Yes," she replied; "I want to see Mr. Kirke." The doctor consented to move her on the next day, but he positively forbade the additional excitement of seeing anybody until the day after. She attempted a remonstrance--Mr. Merrick was impenetrable. She tried, when he was gone, to win the nurse by persuasion--the nurse was impenetrable, too.

On the next day they wrapped her in shawls, and carried her in to the sofa, and made her a little bed on it. On the table near at hand were some flowers and a number of an illustrated paper. She immediately asked who had put them there. The nurse (failing to notice a warning look from the doctor) said Mr. Kirke had thought that she might like the flowers, and that the pictures in the paper might amuse her. After that reply, her anxiety to see Mr. Kirke became too ungovernable to be trifled with. The doctor left the room at once to fetch him.

She looked eagerly at the opening door. Her first glance at him as he came in raised a doubt in her mind whether she now saw that tall figure and that open sun-burned face for the first time. But she was too weak and too agitated to follow her recollections as far back as Aldborough. She resigned the attempt, and only looked at him. He stopped at the foot of the sofa and said a few cheering words. She beckoned to him to come nearer, and offered him her wasted hand. He tenderly took it in his, and sat down by her. They were both silent. His face told her of the sorrow and the sympathy which his

silence would fain have concealed. She still held his hand--consciously now--as persistently as she had held it on the day when he found her. Her eyes closed, after a vain effort to speak to him, and the tears rolled slowly over her wan white cheeks.

The doctor signed to Kirke to wait and give her time. She recovered a little and looked at him. "How kind you have been to me!" she murmured. "And how little I have deserved it!"

"Hush! hush!" he said. "You don't know what a happiness it was to me to help you."

The sound of his voice seemed to strengthen her, and to give her courage. She lay looking at him with an eager interest, with a gratitude which artlessly ignored all the conventional restraints that interpose between a woman and a man. "Where did you see me," she said, suddenly, "before you found me here?"

Kirke hesitated. Mr. Merrick came to his assistance.

"I forbid you to say a word about the past to Mr. Kirke," interposed the doctor; "and I forbid Mr. Kirke to say a word about it to you. You are beginning a new life to-day, and the only recollections I sanction are recollections five minutes old."

She looked at the doctor and smiled. "I must ask him one question," she said, and turned back again to Kirke. "Is it true that you had only seen me once before you came to this house?"

"Quite true!" He made the reply with a sudden change of color which she instantly detected. Her brightening eyes looked at him more earnestly than ever, as she put her next question.

"How came you to remember me after only seeing me once?"

His hand unconsciously closed on hers, and pressed it for the first time. He attempted to answer, and hesitated at the first word. "I have a good memory," he said at last; and suddenly looked away from her with a confusion so strangely unlike his customary self-possession of manner that the doctor and the nurse both noticed it.

Every nerve in her body felt that momentary pressure of his hand, with the exquisite susceptibility which accompanies the first faltering advance on the

way to health. She looked at his changing color, she listened to his hesitating words, with every sensitive perception of her sex and age quickened to seize intuitively on the truth. In the moment when he looked away from her, she gently took her hand from him, and turned her head aside on the pillow. "Can it be?" she thought, with a flutter of delicious fear at her heart, with a glow of delicious confusion burning on her cheeks. "Can it be?"

The doctor made another sign to Kirke. He understood it, and rose immediately. The momentary discomposure in his face and manner had both disappeared. He was satisfied in his own mind that he had successfully kept his secret, and in the relief of feeling that conviction he had become himself again.

"Good-by till to-morrow," he said, as he left the room.

"Good-by," she answered, softly, without looking at him.

Mr. Merrick took the chair which Kirke had resigned, and laid his hand on her pulse. "Just what I feared," remarked the doctor; "too quick by half."

She petulantly snatched away her wrist. "Don't!" she said, shrinking from him. "Pray don't touch me!"

Mr. Merrick good-humoredly gave up his place to the nurse. "I'll return in half an hour," he whispered, "and carry her back to bed. Don't let her talk. Show her the pictures in the newspaper, and keep her quiet in that way."

When the doctor returned, the nurse reported that the newspaper had not been wanted. The patient's conduct had been exemplary. She had not been at all restless, and she had never spoken a word.

The days passed, and the time grew longer and longer which the doctor allowed her to spend in the front room. She was soon able to dispense with the bed on the sofa--she could be dressed, and could sit up, supported by pillows, in an arm-chair. Her hours of emancipation from the bedroom represented the great daily event of her life. They were the hours she passed in Kirke's society.

She had a double interest in him now--her interest in the man whose protecting care had saved her reason and her life; her interest in the man whose heart's deepest secret she had surprised. Little by little they grew as easy and familiar with each other as old friends; little by little she presumed

on all her privileges, and wound her way unsuspected into the most intimate knowledge of his nature.

Her questions were endless. Everything that he could tell her of himself and his life she drew from him delicately and insensibly: he, the least self-conscious of mankind, became an egotist in her dexterous hands. She found out his pride in his ship, and practiced on it without remorse. She drew him into talking of the fine qualities of the vessel, of the great things the vessel had done in emergencies, as he had never in his life talked yet to any living creature on shore. She found him out in private seafaring anxieties and unutterable seafaring exultations which he had kept a secret from his own mate. She watched his kindling face with a delicious sense of triumph in adding fuel to the fire; she trapped him into forgetting all considerations of time and place, and striking as hearty a stroke on the rickety little lodging-house table, in the fervor of his talk, as if his hand had descended on the solid bulwark of his ship. His confusion at the discovery of his own forgetfulness secretly delighted her; she could have cried with pleasure when he penitently wondered what he could possibly have been thinking of.

At other times she drew him from dwelling on the pleasures of his life, and led him into talking of its perils--the perils of that jealous mistress the sea, which had absorbed so much of his existence, which had kept him so strangely innocent and ignorant of the world on shore. Twice he had been shipwrecked. Times innumerable he and all with him had been threatened with death, and had escaped their doom by the narrowness of a hair-breadth. He was always unwilling at the outset to speak of this dark and dreadful side of his life: it was only by adroitly tempting him, by laying little snares for him in his talk, that she lured him into telling her of the terrors of the great deep. She sat listening to him with a breathless interest, looking at him with a breathless wonder, as those fearful stories--made doubly vivid by the simple language in which he told them--fell, one by one, from his lips. His noble unconsciousness of his own heroism--the artless modesty with which he described his own acts of dauntless endurance and devoted courage, without an idea that they were anything more than plain acts of duty to which he was bound by the vocation that he followed--raised him to a place in her estimation so hopelessly high above her that she became uneasy and impatient until she had pulled down the idol again which she herself had set up. It was on these occasions that she most rigidly exacted from him all those little familiar attentions so precious to women in their intercourse with men. "This hand," she thought, with an exquisite delight in secretly following the idea while he was close to her--"this hand that has rescued the drowning from death is shifting my pillows so tenderly that I hardly know when they are moved. This hand that has seized men mad with

mutiny, and driven them back to their duty by main force, is mixing my lemonade and peeling my fruit more delicately and more neatly than I could do it for myself. Oh, if I could be a man, how I should like to be such a man as this!"

She never allowed her thoughts, while she was in his presence, to lead her beyond that point. It was only when the night had separated them that she ventured to let her mind dwell on the self-sacrificing devotion which had so mercifully rescued her. Kirke little knew how she thought of him, in the secrecy of her own chamber, during the quiet hours that elapsed before she sank to sleep. No suspicion crossed his mind of the influence which he was exerting over her--of the new spirit which he was breathing into that new life, so sensitively open to impression in the first freshness of its recovered sense. "She has nobody else to amuse her, poor thing," he used to think, sadly, sitting alone in his small second-floor room. "If a rough fellow like me can beguile the weary hours till her friends come here, she is heartily welcome to all that I can tell her."

He was out of spirits and restless now whenever he was by himself. Little by little he fell into a habit of taking long, lonely walks at night, when Magdalen thought he was sleeping upstairs. Once he went away abruptly in the day-time--on business, as he said. Something had passed between Magdalen and himself the evening before which had led her into telling him her age. "Twenty last birthday," he thought. "Take twenty from forty-one. An easy sum in subtraction--as easy a sum as my little nephew could wish for." He walked to the Docks, and looked bitterly at the shipping. "I mustn't forget how a ship is made," he said. "It won't be long before I am back at the old work again." On leaving the Docks he paid a visit to a brother sailor--a married man. In the course of conversation he asked how much older his friend might be than his friend's wife. There was six years' difference between them. "I suppose that's difference enough?" said Kirke. "Yes," said his friend; "quite enough. Are you looking out for a wife at last? Try a seasoned woman of thirty-five--that's your mark, Kirke, as near as I can calculate."

The time passed smoothly and quickly--the present time, in which she was recovering so happily--the present time, which he was beginning to distrust already.

Early one morning Mr. Merrick surprised Kirke by a visit in his little room on the second floor.

"I came to the conclusion yesterday," said the doctor, entering abruptly on

his business, "that our patient was strong enough to justify us at last in running all risks, and communicating with her friends; and I have accordingly followed the clew which that queer fellow, Captain Wragge, put into our hands. You remember he advised us to apply to Mr. Pendril, the lawyer? I saw Mr. Pendril two days ago, and was referred by him--not overwillingly, as I thought--to a lady named Miss Garth. I heard enough from her to satisfy me that we have exercised a wise caution in acting as we have done. It is a very, very sad story; and I am bound to say that I, for one, make great allowances for the poor girl downstairs. Her only relation in the world is her elder sister. I have suggested that the sister shall write to her in the first instance, and then, if the letter does her no harm, follow it personally in a d ay or two. I have not given the address, by way of preventing any visits from being paid here without my permission. All I have done is to undertake to forward the letter, and I shall probably find it at my house when I get back. Can you stop at home until I send my man with it? There is not the least hope of my being able to bring it myself. All you need do is to watch for an opportunity when she is not in the front room, and to put the letter where she can see it when she comes in. The handwriting on the address will break the news before she opens the letter. Say nothing to her about it--take care that the landlady is within call--and leave her to herself. I know I can trust you to follow my directions, and that is why I ask you to do us this service. You look out of spirits this morning. Natural enough. You're used to plenty of fresh air, captain, and you're beginning to pine in this close place."

"May I ask a question, doctor? Is she pining in this close place, too? When her sister comes, will her sister take her away?"

"Decidedly, if my advice is followed. She will be well enough to be moved in a week or less. Good-day. You are certainly out of spirits, and your hand feels feverish. Pining for the blue water, captain--pining for the blue water!" With that expression of opinion, the doctor cheerfully went out.

In an hour the letter arrived. Kirke took it from the landlady reluctantly, and almost roughly, without looking at it. Having ascertained that Magdalen was still engaged at her toilet, and having explained to the landlady the necessity of remaining within call, he went downstairs immediately, and put the letter on the table in the front room. Magdalen heard the sound of the familiar step on the floor. "I shall soon be ready," she called to him, through the door.

He made no reply; he took his hat and went out. After a momentary hesitation, he turned his face eastward, and called on the ship-owners who

employed him, at their office in Cornhill.

CHAPTER III.

MAGDALEN'S first glance round the empty room showed her the letter on the table. The address, as the doctor had predicted, broke the news the moment she looked at it.

Not a word escaped her. She sat down by the table, pale and silent, with the letter in her lap. Twice she attempted to open it, and twice she put it back again. The bygone time was not alone in her mind as she looked at her sister's handwriting: the fear of Kirke was there with it. "My past life!" she thought. "What will he think of me when he knows my past life?"

She made another effort, and broke the seal. A second letter dropped out of the inclosure, addressed to her in a handwriting with which she was not familiar. She put the second letter aside and read the lines which Norah had written:

"Ventnor, Isle of Wight, August 24th.

"MY DEAREST MAGDALEN--When you read this letter, try to think we have only been parted since yesterday; and dismiss from your mind (as I have dismissed from mine) the past and all that belongs to it.

"I am strictly forbidden to agitate you, or to weary you by writing a long letter. Is it wrong to tell you that I am the happiest woman living? I hope not, for I can't keep the secret to myself.

"My darling, prepare yourself for the greatest surprise I have ever caused you. I am married. It is only a week to-day since I parted with my old name--it is only a week since I have been the happy wife of George Bartram, of St. Crux.

"There were difficulties at first in the way of our marriage, some of them, I am afraid, of my making. Happily for me, my husband knew from the beginning that I really loved him: he gave me a second chance of telling him so, after I had lost the first, and, as you see, I was wise enough to take it. You ought to be especially interested, my love, in this marriage, for you are the cause of it. If I had not gone to Aldborough to search for the lost trace of you--if George had not been brought there at the same time by circumstances in which you were concerned, my husband and I might never have met. When we look back to our first impressions of each other, we look

back to you.

"I must keep my promise not to weary you; I must bring this letter (sorely against my will) to an end. Patience! patience! I shall see you soon. George and I are both coming to London to take you back with us to Ventnor. This is my husband's invitation, mind, as well as mine. Don't suppose I married him, Magdalen, until I had taught him to think of you as I think--to wish with my wishes, and to hope with my hopes. I could say so much more about this, so much more about George, if I might only give my thoughts and my pen their own way; but I must leave Miss Garth (at her own special request) a blank space to fill up on the last page of this letter; and I must only add one word more before I say good-by--a word to warn you that I have another surprise in store, which I am keeping in reserve until we meet. Don't attempt to guess what it is. You might guess for ages, and be no nearer than you are now to the discovery of the truth. Your affectionate sister,

"NORAH BARTRAM."

(Added by Miss Garth.)

"MY DEAR CHILD--If I had ever lost my old loving recollection of you, I should feel it in my heart again now, when I know that it has pleased God to restore you to us from the brink of the grave. I add these lines to your sister's letter because I am not sure that you are quite so fit yet, as she thinks you, to accept her proposal. She has not said a word of her husband or herself which is not true. But Mr. Bartram is a stranger to you; and if you think you can recover more easily and more pleasantly to yourself under the wing of your old governess than under the protection of your new brother-in-law, come to me first, and trust to my reconciling Norah to the change of plans. I have secured the refusal of a little cottage at Shanklin, near enough to your sister to allow of your seeing each other whenever you like, and far enough away, at the same time, to secure you the privilege, when you wish it, of being alone. Send me one line before we meet to say Yes or No, and I will write to Shanklin by the next post.

"Always yours affectionately,

"HARRIET GARTH"

The letter dropped from Magdalen's hand. Thoughts which had never risen in her mind yet rose in it now.

Norah, whose courage under undeserved calamity had been the courage of resignation--Norah, who had patiently accepted her hard lot; who from first to last had meditated no vengeance and stooped to no deceit--Norah had reached the end which all her sister's ingenuity, all her sister's resolution, and all her sister's daring had failed to achieve. Openly and honorably, with love on one side and love on the other, Norah had married the man who possessed the Combe-Raven money--and Magdalen's own scheme to recover it had opened the way to the event which had brought husband and wife together.

As the light of that overwhelming discovery broke on her mind, the old strife was renewed; and Good and Evil struggled once more which should win her--but with added forces this time; with the new spirit that had been breathed into her new life; with the nobler sense that had grown with the growth of her gratitude to the man who had saved her, fighting on the better side. All the higher impulses of her nature, which had never, from first to last, let her err with impunity--which had tortured her, before her marriage and after it, with the remorse that no woman inherently heartless and inherently wicked can feel--all the nobler elements in her character, gathered their forces for the crowning struggle and strengthened her to meet, with no unworthy shrinking, the revelation that had opened on her view. Clearer and clearer, in the light of its own immortal life, the truth rose before her from the ashes of her dead passions, from the grave of her buried hopes. When she looked at the letter again--when she read the words once more which told her that the recovery of the lost fortune was her sister's triumph, not hers, she had victoriously trampled down all little jealousies and all mean regrets; she could say in he r hearts of hearts, "Norah has deserved it!"

The day wore on. She sat absorbed in her own thoughts, and heedless of the second letter which she had not opened yet, until Kirke's return.

He stopped on the landing outside, and, opening the door a little way only, asked, without entering the room, if she wanted anything that he could send her. She begged him to come in. His face was worn and weary; he looked older than she had seen him look yet. "Did you put my letter on the table for me?" she asked.

"Yes. I put it there at the doctor's request."

"I suppose the doctor told you it was from my sister? She is coming to see me, and Miss Garth is coming to see me. They will thank you for all your goodness to me better than I can."

"I have no claim on their thanks," he answered, sternly. "What I have done was not done for them, but for you." He waited a little, and looked at her. His face would have betrayed him in that look, his voice would have betrayed him in the next words he spoke, if she had not guessed the truth already. "When your friends come here," he resumed, "they will take you away, I suppose, to some better place than this."

"They can take me to no place," she said, gently, "which I shall think of as I think of the place where you found me. They can take me to no dearer friend than the friend who saved my life."

There was a moment's silence between them.

"We have been very happy here," he went on, in lower and lower tones. "You won't forget me when we have said good-by?"

She turned pale as the words passed his lips, and, leaving her chair, knelt down at the table, so as to look up into his face, and to force him to look into hers.

"Why do you talk of it?" she asked. "We are not going to say good-by, at least not yet."

"I thought--" he began.

"Yes?"

"I thought your friends were coming here--"

She eagerly interrupted him. "Do you think I would go away with anybody," she said, "even with the dearest relation I have in the world, and leave you here, not knowing and not caring whether I ever saw you again? Oh, you don't think that of me!" she exclaimed, with the passionate tears springing into her eyes-"I'm sure you don't think that of me!"

"No," he said; "I never have thought, I never can think, unjustly or unworthily of you."

Before he could add another word she left the table as suddenly as she had approached it, and returned to her chair. He had unconsciously replied in terms that reminded her of the hard necessity which still remained unfulfilled--the necessity of telling him the story of the past. Not an idea of concealing that story from his knowledge crossed her mind. "Will he love me,

when he knows the truth, as he loves me now?" That was her only thought as she tried to approach the subject in his presence without shrinking from it.

"Let us put my own feelings out of the question," she said. "There is a reason for my not going away, unless I first have the assurance of seeing you again. You have a claim--the strongest claim of any one--to know how I came here, unknown to my friends, and how it was that you found me fallen so low."

"I make no claim," he said, hastily. "I wish to know nothing which distresses you to tell me."

"You have always done your duty," she rejoined, with a faint smile. "Let me take example from you, if I can, and try to do mine."

"I am old enough to be your father," he said, bitterly. "Duty is more easily done at my age than it is at yours."

His age was so constantly in his mind now that he fancied it must be in her mind too. She had never given it a thought. The reference he had just made to it did not divert her for a moment from the subject on which she was speaking to him.

"You don't know how I value your good opinion of me," she said, struggling resolutely to sustain her sinking courage. "How can I deserve your kindness, how can I feel that I am worthy of your regard, until I have opened my heart to you? Oh, don't encourage me in my own miserable weakness! Help me to tell the truth--force me to tell it, for my own sake if not for yours!"

He was deeply moved by the fervent sincerity of that appeal.

"You shall tell it," he said. "You are right--and I was wrong." He waited a little, and considered. "Would it be easier to you," he asked, with delicate consideration for her, "to write it than to tell it?"

She caught gratefully at the suggestion. "Far easier," she replied. "I can be sure of myself--I can be sure of hiding nothing from you, if I write it. Don't write to me on your side!" she added, suddenly, seeing with a woman's instinctive quickness of penetration the danger of totally renouncing her personal influence over him. "Wait till we meet, and tell me with your own lips what you think."

"Where shall I tell it?"

"Here!" she said eagerly. "Here, where you found me helpless--here, where you have brought me back to life, and where I have first learned to know you. I can bear the hardest words you say to me if you will only say them in this room. It is impossible I can be away longer than a month; a month will be enough and more than enough. If I come back--" She stopped confusedly. "I am thinking of myself," she said, "when I ought to be thinking of you. You have your own occupations and your own friends. Will you decide for us? Will you say how it shall be?"

"It shall be as you wish. If you come back in a month, you will find me here."

"Will it cause you no sacrifice of your own comfort and your own plans?"

"It will cause me nothing," he replied, "but a journey back to the City." He rose and took his hat. "I must go there at once," he added, "or I shall not be in time."

"It is a promise between us?" she said, and held out her hand.

"Yes," he answered, a little sadly; "it is a promise."

Slight as it was, the shade of melancholy in his manner pained her. Forgetting all other anxieties in the anxiety to cheer him, she gently pressed the hand he gave her. "If that won't tell him the truth," she thought, "nothing will."

It failed to tell him the truth; but it forced a question on his mind which he had not ventured to ask himself before. "Is it her gratitude, or her love; that is speaking to me?" he wondered. "If I was only a younger man, I might almost hope it was her love." That terrible sum in subtraction which had first presented itself on the day when she told him her age began to trouble him again as he left the house. He took twenty from forty-one, at intervals, all the way back to the ship-owners' office in Cornhill.

Left by herself, Magdalen approached the table to write the line of answer which Miss Garth requested, and gratefully to accept the proposal that had been made to her.

The second letter which she had laid aside and forgotten was the first object that caught her eye on changing her place. She opened it immediately, and, not recognizing the handwriting, looked at the signature. To her unutterable astonishment, her correspondent proved to be no less a person than--old

Mr. Clare!

The philosopher's letter dispensed with all the ordinary forms of address, and entered on the subject without prefatory phrases of any kind, in these uncompromising terms:

"I have more news for you of that contemptible cur, my son. Here it is in the fewest possible words.

"I always told you, if you remember, that Frank was a Sneak. The very first trace recovered of him, after his running away from his employers in China, presents him in that character. Where do you think he turns up next? He turns up, hidden behind a couple of flour barrels, on board an English vessel bound homeward from Hong-Kong to London.

"The name of the ship was the Deliverance, and the commander was one Captain Kirke. Instead of acting like a sensible man, and throwing Frank overboard, Captain Kirke was fool enough to listen to his story. He made the most of his misfortunes, you may be sure. He was half starved; he was an Englishman lost in a strange country, without a friend to help him; his only chance of getting home was to sneak into the hold of an English vessel--and he had sneaked in, accordingly, at Hong-Kong, two days since. That was his story. Any other l out in Frank's situation would have been rope's ended by any other captain. Deserving no pity from anybody, Frank was, as a matter of course, coddle d and compassionated on the spot. The captain took him by the hand, the crew pitied him, and the passengers patted him on the back. He was fed, clothed, and presented with his passage home. Luck enough so far, you will say. Nothing of the sort; nothing like luck enough for my despicable son.

"The ship touched at the Cape of Good Hope. Among his other acts of folly Captain Kirke took a woman passenger on board at that place--not a young woman by any means--the elderly widow of a rich colonist. Is it necessary to say that she forthwith became deeply interested in Frank and his misfortunes? Is it necessary to tell you what followed? Look back at my son's career, and you will see that what followed was all of a piece with what went before. He didn't deserve your poor father's interest in him--and he got it. He didn't deserve your attachment--and he got it. He didn't deserve the best place in one of the best offices in London; he didn't deserve an equally good chance in one of the best mercantile houses in China; he didn't deserve food, clothing, pity, and a free passage home--and he got them all. Last, not least, he didn't even deserve to marry a woman old enough to be his grandmother--and he has done it! Not five minutes since I sent his wedding-

cards out to the dust-hole, and tossed the letter that came with them into the fire. The last piece of information which that letter contains is that he and his wife are looking out for a house and estate to suit them. Mark my words! Frank will get one of the best estates in England; a seat in the House of Commons will follow as a matter of course; and one of the legislators of this Ass-ridden country will be--MY LOUT!

"If you are the sensible girl I have always taken you for, you have long since learned to rate Frank at his true value, and the news I send you will only confirm your contempt for him. I wish your poor father could but have lived to see this day! Often as I have missed my old gossip, I don't know that I ever felt the loss of him so keenly as I felt it when Frank's wedding-cards and Frank's letter came to this house. Your friend, if you ever want one,

"FRANCIS CLARE, Sen."

With one momentary disturbance of her composure, produced by the appearance of Kirke's name in Mr. Clare's singular narrative, Magdalen read the letter steadily through from beginning to end. The time when it could have distressed her was gone by; the scales had long since fallen from her eyes. Mr. Clare himself would have been satisfied if he had seen the quiet contempt on her face as she laid aside his letter. The only serious thought it cost her was a thought in which Kirke was concerned. The careless manner in which he had referred in her presence to the passengers on board his ship, without mentioning any of them by their names, showed her that Frank must have kept silence on the subject of the engagement once existing between them. The confession of that vanished delusion was left for her to make, as part of the story of the past which she had pledged herself unreservedly to reveal.

She wrote to Miss Garth, and sent the letter to the post immediately.

The next morning brought a line of rejoinder. Miss Garth had written to secure the cottage at Shanklin, and Mr. Merrick had consented to Magdalen's removal on the following day. Norah would be the first to arrive at the house; and Miss Garth would follow, with a comfortable carriage to take the invalid to the railway. Every needful arrangement had been made for her; the effort of moving was the one effort she would have to make.

Magdalen read the letter thankfully, but her thoughts wandered from it, and followed Kirke on his return to the City. What was the business which had once already taken him there in the morning? And why had the promise exchanged between them obliged him to go to the City again, for the second

time in one day?

Was it by any chance business relating to the sea? Were his employers tempting him to go back to his ship?

CHAPTER IV.

THE first agitation of the meeting between the sisters was over; the first vivid impressions, half pleasurable, half painful, had softened a little, and Norah and Magdalen sat together hand in hand, each rapt in the silent fullness of her own joy. Magdalen was the first to speak.

"You have something to tell me, Norah?"

"I have a thousand things to tell you, my love; and you have ten thousand things to tell me.--Do you mean that second surprise which I told you of in my letter?"

"Yes. I suppose it must concern me very nearly, or you would hardly have thought of mentioning it in your first letter?"

"It does concern you very nearly. You have heard of George's house in Essex? You must be familiar, at least, with the name of St. Crux?--What is there to start at, my dear? I am afraid you are hardly strong enough for any more surprises just yet?"

"Quite strong enough, Norah. I have something to say to you about St. Crux--I have a surprise, on my side, for you."

"Will you tell it me now?"

"Not now. You shall know it when we are at the seaside; you shall know it before I accept the kindness which has invited me to your husband's house."

"What can it be? Why not tell me at once?"

"You used often to set me the example of patience, Norah, in old times; will you set me the example now?"

"With all my heart. Shall I return to my own story as well? Yes? Then we will go back to it at once. I was telling you that St. Crux is George's house, in Essex, the house he inherited from his uncle. Knowing that Miss Garth had a curiosity to see the place, he left word (when he went abroad after the admiral's death) that she and any friends who came with her were to be admitted, if she happened to find herself in the neighborhood during his absence. Miss Garth and I, and a large party of Mr. Tyrrel's friends, found

ourselves in the neighborhood not long after George's departure. We had all been invited to see the launch of Mr. Tyrrel's new yacht from the builder's yard at Wivenhoe, in Essex. When the launch was over, the rest of the company returned to Colchester to dine. Miss Garth and I contrived to get into the same carriage together, with nobody but my two little pupils for our companions. We gave the coachman his orders, and drove round by St. Crux. The moment Miss Garth mentioned her name we were let in, and shown all over the house. I don't know how to describe it to you. It is the most bewildering place I ever saw in my life--"

"Don't attempt to describe it, Norah. Go on with your story instead."

"Very well. My story takes me straight into one of the rooms at St. Crux--a room about as long as your street here--so dreary, so dirty, and so dreadfully cold that I shiver at the bare recollection of it. Miss Garth was for getting out of it again as speedily as possible, and so was I. But the housekeeper declined to let us off without first looking at a singular piece of furniture, the only piece of furniture in the comfortless place. She called it a tripod, I think. (There is nothing to be alarmed at, Magdalen; I assure you there is nothing to be alarmed at!) At any rate, it was a strange, three-legged thing, which supported a great panful of charcoal ashes at the top. It was considered by all good judges (the housekeeper told us) a wonderful piece of chasing in metal; and she especially pointed out the beauty of some scroll-work running round the inside of the pan, with Latin mottoes on it, signifying--I forget what. I felt not the slightest interest in the thing myself, but I looked close at the scroll-work to satisfy the housekeeper. To confess the truth, she was rather tiresome with her mechanically learned lecture on fine metal work; and, while she was talking, I found myself idly stirring the soft feathery white ashes backward and forward with my hand, pretending to listen, with my mind a hundred miles away from her. I don't know how long or how short a time I had been playing with the ashes, when my fingers suddenly encountered a piece of crumpled paper hidden deep among them. When I brought it to the surface, it proved to be a letter--a long letter full of cramped, close writing.--You have anticipated my story, Magdalen, before I can end it! You know as well as I do that the letter which my idle fingers found was the Secret Trust. Hold out your hand, my dear. I have got George's permission to show it to you, and there it is!"

She put the Trust into her sister's hand. Magdalen took it from her mechanically. "You!" she said, looking at her sister with the remembrance of all that she had vainly ventured, of all that she had vainly suffered, at St. Crux--"you have found it!"

"Yes," said Norah, gayly; "the Trust has proved no exception to the general perversity of all lost things. Look for them, and they remain invisible. Leave them alone, and they reveal themselves! You and your lawyer, Magdalen, were both justified in supposing that your interest in this discovery was an interest of no common kind. I spare you all our consultations after I had produced the crumpled paper from the ashes. It ended in George's lawyer being written to, and in George himself being recalled from the Continent. Miss Garth and I both saw him immediately on his return. He did what neither of us could do--he solved the mystery of the Trust being hidden in the charcoal ashes. Admiral Bartram, you must know, was all his life subject to fits of somnambulism. He had been found walking in his sleep not long before his death--just at the time, too, when he was sadly troubled in his mind on the subject of that very letter in your hand. George's idea is that he must have fancied he was doing in his sleep what he would have died rather than do in his waking moments--destroying the Trust. The fire had been lighted in the pan not long before, and he no doubt saw it still burning in his dream. This was George's explanation of the strange position of the letter when I discovered it. The question of what was to be done with the letter itself came next, and was no easy question for a woman to understand. But I determined to master it, and I did master it, because it related to you."

"Let me try to master it, in my turn," said Magdalen. "I have a particular reason for wishing to know as much about this letter as you know yourself. What has it done for others, and what is it to do for me?"

"My dear Magdalen, how strangely you look at it! how strangely you talk of it! Worthless as it may appear, that morsel of paper gives you a fortune."

"Is my only claim to the fortune the claim which this letter gives me?"

"Yes; the letter is your only claim. Shall I try if I can explain it in two words? Taken by itself, the letter might, in the lawyer's opinion, have been made a matter for dispute, though I am sure George would have sanctioned no proceeding of that sort. Taken, however, with the postscript which Admiral Bartram attached to it (you will see the lines if you look under the signature on the third page), it becomes legally binding, as well as morally binding, on the admiral's representatives. I have exhausted my small stock of legal words, and must go on in my own language instead of in the lawyer's. The end of the thing was simply this. All the money went back to Mr. Noel Vanstone's estate (another legal word! my vocabulary is richer than I thought), for one plain reason--that it had not been employed as Mr. Noel Vanstone directed. If Mrs. Girdlestone had lived, or if George had married

me a few months earlier, results would have been just the other way. As it is, half the money has been already divided between Mr. Noel Vanstone's next of kin; which means, translated into plain English, my husband, and his poor bedridden sister--who took the money formally, one day, to satisfy the lawyer, and who gave it back again generously, the next, to satisfy herself. So much for one half of this legacy. The other half, my dear, is all yours. How strangely events happen, Magdalen! It is only two years since you and I were left disinherited orphans--and we are sharing our poor father's fortune between us, after all!"

"Wait a little, Norah. Our shares come to us in very different ways."

"Do they? Mine comes to me by my husband. Yours comes to you--" She stopped confusedly, and changed color. "Forgive me, my own love!" she said, putting Magdalen's hand to her lips. "I have forgotten what I ought to have remembered. I have thoughtlessly distressed you!"

"No!" said Magdalen; "you have encouraged me."

"Encouraged you?"

"You shall see."

With those words, she rose quietly from the sofa, and walked to the open window. Before Norah could follow her, she had torn the Trust to pieces, and had cast the fragments into the street.

She came back to the sofa and laid her head, with a deep sigh of relief, on Norah's bosom. "I will owe nothing to my past life," she said. "I have parted with it as I have parted with those torn morsels of paper. All the thoughts and all the hopes belonging to it are put away from me forever!"

"Magdalen, my husband will never allow you! I will never allow you myself--"

"Hush! hush! What your husband thinks right, Norah, you and I will think right too. I will take from you what I would never have taken if that letter had given it to me. The end I dreamed of has come. Nothing is changed but the position I once thought we might hold toward each other. Better as it is, my love--far, far better as it is!"

So she made the last sacrifice of the old perversity and the old pride. So she entered on the new and nobler life.

* * * * * *

A month had passed. The autumn sunshine was bright even in the murky streets, and the clocks in the neighborhood were just striking two, as Magdalen returned alone to the house in Aaron's Buildings.

"Is he waiting for me?" she asked, anxiously, when the landlady let her in.

He was waiting in the front room. Magdalen stole up the stairs and knocked at the door. He called to her carelessly and absently to come in, plainly thinking that it was only the servant who applied for permission to enter the room.

"You hardly expected me so soon?" she said speaking on the threshold, and pausing there to enjoy his surprise as he started to his feet and looked at her.

The only traces of illness still visible in her face left a delicacy in its outline which added refinement to her beauty. She was simply dressed in muslin. Her plain straw bonnet had no other ornament than the white ribbon with which it was sparingly trimmed. She had never looked lovelier in her best days than she looked now, as she advanced to the table at which he had been sitting, with a little basket of flowers that she had brought with her from the country, and offered him her hand.

He looked anxious and careworn when she saw him closer. She interrupted his first inquiries and congratulations to ask if he had remained in London since they had parted--if he had not even gone away, for a few days only, to see his friends in Suffolk? No; he had been in London ever since. He never told her that the pretty parsonage house in Suffolk wanted all those associations with herself in which the poor four walls at Aaron's Buildings were so rich. He only said he had been in London ever since.

"I wonder," she asked, looking him attentively in the face, "if you are as happy to see me again as I am to see you?"

"Perhaps I am even happier, in my different way," he answered, with a smile.

She took off her bonnet and scarf, and seated herself once more in her own arm-chair. "I suppose this street is very ugly," she said; "and I am sure nobody can deny that the house is very small. And yet--and yet it feels like coming home again. Sit there where you used to sit; tell me about yourself. I want to know all that you have done, all that you have thought even, while I

have been away." She tried to resume the endless succession of questions by means of which she was accustomed to lure him into speaking of himself. But she put them far less spontaneously, far less adroitly, than usual. Her one all-absorbing anxiety in entering that room was not an anxiety to be trifled with. After a quarter of an hour wasted in constrained inquiries on one side, in reluctant replies on the other, she ventured near the dangerous subject at last.

"Have you received the letters I wrote to you from the seaside?" she asked, suddenly looking away from him for the first time.

"Yes," he said; "all."

"Have you read them?"

"Every one of them--many times over."

Her heart beat as if it would suffocate her. She had kept her promise bravely. The whole story of her life, from the time of the home-wreck at Combe-Raven to the time when she had destroyed the Secret Trust in her sister's presence, had been all laid before him. Nothing that she had done, nothing even that she had thought, had been concealed from his knowledge. As he would have kept a pledged engagement with her, so she had kept her pledged engagement with him. She had not faltered in the resolution to do this; and now she faltered over the one decisive question which she had come there to ask. Strong as the desire in her was to know if she had lost or won him, the fear of knowing was at that moment stronger still. She waited and trembled; she waited, and said no more.

"May I speak to you about your letters?" he asked. "May I tell you--?"

If she had looked at him as he said those few words, she would have seen what he thought of her in his face. She would have seen, innocent as he was in this world's knowledge, that he knew the priceless value, the all-ennobling virtue, of a woman who speaks the truth. But she had no courage to look at him--no courage to raise her eyes from her lap.

"Not just yet," she said, faintly. "Not quite so soon after we have met again."

She rose hurriedly from her chair, and walked to the window, turned back again into the room, and approached the table, close to where he was sitting. The writing materials scattered near him offered her a pretext for changing the subject, and she seized on it directly. "Were you writing a

letter," she asked, "when I came in?"

"I was thinking about it," he replied. "It was not a letter to be written without thinking first." He rose as he answered her to gather the writing materials together and put them away.

"Why should I interrupt you?" she said. "Why not let me try whether I can't help you instead? Is it a secret?"

"No, not a secret."

He hesitated as he answered her. She instantly guessed the truth.

"Is it about your ship?"

He little knew how she had been thinking in her absence from him of the business which he believed that he had concealed from her. He little knew that she had learned already to be jealous of his ship. "Do they want you to return to your old life?" she went on. "Do they want you to go back to the sea? Must you say Yes or No at once?"

"At once."

"If I had not come in when I did would you have said Yes?"

She unconsciously laid her hand on his arm, forgetting all inferior considerations in her breathless anxiety to hear his next words. The confession of his love was within a hair-breadth of escaping him; but he checked the utterance of it even yet. "I don't care for myself," he thought; "but how can I be certain of not distressing her?"

"Would you have said Yes?" she repeated.

"I was doubting," he answered--"I was doubting between Yes and No."

Her hand tightened on his arm; a sudden trembling seized her in every limb, she could bear it no longer. All her heart went out to him in her next words:

"Were you doubting for my sake?"

"Yes," he said. "Take my confession in return for yours--I was doubting for your sake."

She said no more; she only looked at him. In that look the truth reached him at last. The next instant she was folded in his arms, and was shedding delicious tears of joy, with her face hidden on his bosom.

"Do I deserve my happiness?" she murmured, asking the one question at last. "Oh, I know how the poor narrow people who have never felt and never suffered would answer me if I asked them what I ask you. If they knew my story, they would forget all the provocation, and only remember the offense; they would fasten on my sin, and pass all my suffering by. But you are not one of them! Tell me if you have any shadow of a misgiving! Tell me if you doubt that the one dear object of all my life to come is to live worthy of you! I asked you to wait and see me; I asked you, if there was any hard truth to be told, to tell it me here with your own lips. Tell it, my love, my husband!--tell it me now!"

She looked up, still clinging to him as she clung to the hope of her better life to come.

"Tell me the truth!" she repeated.

"With my own lips?"

"Yes!" she answered, eagerly. "Say what you think of me with your own lips."

He stooped and kissed her.