

PART II.

I.

AN epoch in my narrative has now arrived. Up to the time of my marriage, I have appeared as an active agent in the different events I have described. After that period, and--with one or two exceptional cases--throughout the whole year of my probation, my position changed with the change in my life, and became a passive one.

During this interval year, certain events happened, some of which, at the time, excited my curiosity, but none my apprehension--some affected me with a temporary disappointment, but none with even a momentary suspicion. I can now look back on them, as so many timely warnings which I treated with fatal neglect. It is in these events that the history of the long year through which I waited to claim my wife as my own, is really comprised. They marked the lapse of time broadly and significantly; and to them I must now confine myself, as exclusively as may be, in the present portion of my narrative.

It will be first necessary, however, that I should describe what was the nature of my intercourse with Margaret, during the probationary period which followed our marriage.

Mr. Sherwin's anxiety was to make my visits to North Villa as few as possible: he evidently feared the consequences of my seeing his daughter too often. But on this point, I was resolute enough in asserting my own interests, to overpower any resistance on his part. I required him to concede to me the right of seeing Margaret every day--leaving all arrangements of time to depend on his own convenience. After the due number of objections, he reluctantly acquiesced in my demand. I was bound by no engagement whatever, limiting the number of my visits to Margaret; and I let him see at the outset, that I was now ready in my turn, to impose conditions on him, as he had already imposed them on me.

Accordingly, it was settled that Margaret and I were to meet every day. I usually saw her in the evening. When any alteration in the hour of my visit took place, that alteration was produced by the necessity (which we all recognised alike) of avoiding a meeting with any of Mr. Sherwin's friends.

Those portions of the day or the evening which I spent with Margaret, were

seldom passed altogether in the Elysian idleness of love. Not content with only enumerating his daughter's school-accomplishments to me at our first interview, Mr. Sherwin boastfully referred to them again and again, on many subsequent occasions; and even obliged Margaret to display before me, some of her knowledge of languages--which he never forgot to remind us had been lavishly paid for out of his own pocket. It was at one of these exhibitions that the idea occurred to me of making a new pleasure for myself out of Margaret's society, by teaching her really to appreciate and enjoy the literature which she had evidently hitherto only studied as a task. My fancy revelled by anticipation in all the delights of such an employment as this. It would be like acting the story of Abelard and Heloise over again--reviving all the poetry and romance in which those immortal love-studies of old had begun, with none of the guilt and none of the misery that had darkened their end.

I had a definite purpose, besides, in wishing to assume the direction of Margaret's studies. Whenever the secret of my marriage was revealed, my pride was concerned in being able to show my wife to every one, as the all-sufficient excuse for any imprudence I might have committed for her sake. I was determined that my father, especially, should have no other argument against her than the one ungracious argument of her birth--that he should see her, fitted by the beauty of her mind, as well as by all her other beauties, for the highest station that society could offer. The thought of this gave me fresh ardour in my project; I assumed my new duties without delay, and continued them with a happiness which never once suffered even a momentary decrease.

Of all the pleasures which a man finds in the society of a woman whom he loves, are there any superior, are there many equal, to the pleasure of reading out of the same book with her? On what other occasion do the sweet familiarities of the sweetest of all companionships last so long without cloying, and pass and re-pass so naturally, so delicately, so inexhaustibly between you and her? When is your face so constantly close to hers as it is then?--when can your hair mingle with hers, your cheek touch hers, your eyes meet hers, so often as they can then? That is, of all times, the only time when you can breathe with her breath for hours together; feel every little warming of the colour on her cheek marking its own changes on the temperature of yours; follow every slight fluttering of her bosom, every faint gradation of her sighs, as if her heart was beating, her life glowing, within yours. Surely it is then--if ever--that we realize, almost revive, in ourselves, the love of the first two of our race, when angels walked with them on the same garden paths, and their hearts were pure from the pollution of the fatal tree!

Evening after evening passed away--one more happily than another--in what Margaret and I called our lessons. Never were lessons of literature so like lessons of love. We read oftenest the lighter Italian poets--we studied the poetry of love, written in the language of love. But, as for the steady, utilitarian purpose I had proposed to myself of practically improving Margaret's intellect, that was a purpose which insensibly and deceitfully abandoned me as completely as if it had never existed. The little serious teaching I tried with her at first, led to very poor results. Perhaps, the lover interfered too much with the tutor; perhaps, I had over-estimated the fertility of the faculties I designed to cultivate--but I cared not, and thought not to inquire where the fault lay, then. I gave myself up unreservedly to the exquisite sensations which the mere act of looking on the same page with Margaret procured for me; and neither detected, nor wished to detect, that it was I who read the difficult passages, and left only a few even of the very easiest to be attempted by her.

Happily for my patience under the trial imposed on me by the terms on which Mr. Sherwin's restrictions, and my promise to obey them, obliged me to live with Margaret, it was Mrs. Sherwin who was generally selected to remain in the room with us. By no one could such ungrateful duties of supervision as those imposed on her, have been more delicately and more considerately performed.

She always kept far enough away to be out of hearing when we whispered to each other. We rarely detected her even in looking at us. She had a way of sitting for hours together in the same part of the room, without ever changing her position, without occupation of any kind, without uttering a word, or breathing a sigh. I soon discovered that she was not lost in thought, at these periods (as I had at first supposed): but lost in a strange lethargy of body and mind; a comfortless, waking trance, into which she fell from sheer physical weakness--it was like the vacancy and feebleness of a first convalescence, after a long illness. She never changed: never looked better, never worse. I often spoke to her: I tried hard to show my sympathy, and win her confidence and friendship. The poor lady was always thankful, always spoke to me gratefully and kindly, but very briefly. She never told me what were her sufferings or her sorrows. The story of that lonely, lingering life was an impenetrable mystery for her own family--for her husband and her daughter, as well as for me. It was a secret between her and God.

With Mrs. Sherwin as the guardian to watch over Margaret, it may easily be imagined that I felt none of the heavier oppressions of restraint. Her presence, as the third person appointed to remain with us, was not enough

to repress the little endearments to which each evening's lesson gave rise; but was just sufficiently perceptible to invest them with the character of stolen endearments, and to make them all the more precious on that very account. Mrs. Sherwin never knew, I never thoroughly knew myself till later, how much of the secret of my patience under my year's probation lay in her conduct, while she was sitting in the room with Margaret and me.

In this solitude where I now write--in the change of life and of all life's hopes and enjoyments which has come over me--when I look back to those evenings at North Villa, I shudder as I look. At this moment, I see the room again--as in a dream--with the little round table, the reading lamp, and the open books. Margaret and I are sitting together: her hand is in mine; my heart is with hers. Love, and Youth, and Beauty--the mortal Trinity of this world's worship--are there, in that quiet softly-lit room; but not alone. Away in the dim light behind, is a solitary figure, ever mournful and ever still. It is a woman's form; but how wasted and how weak!--a woman's face; but how ghastly and changeless, with those eyes that are vacant, those lips that are motionless, those cheeks that the blood never tinges, that the freshness of health and happiness shall never visit again! Woeful, warning figure of dumb sorrow and patient pain, to fill the background of a picture of Love, and Beauty, and Youth!

I am straying from my task. Let me return to my narrative: its course begins to darken before me apace, while I now write.

The partial restraint and embarrassment, caused at first by the strange terms on which my wife and I were living together, gradually vanished before the frequency of my visits to North Villa. We soon began to speak with all the ease, all the unpremeditated frankness of a long intimacy. Margaret's powers of conversation were generally only employed to lead me to exert mine. She was never tired of inducing me to speak of my family. She listened with every appearance of interest, while I talked of my father, my sister, or my elder brother; but whenever she questioned me directly about any of them, her inquiries invariably led away from their characters and dispositions, to their personal appearance, their every-day habits, their dress, their intercourse with the gay world, the things they spent their money on, and other topics of a similar nature.

For instance; she always listened, and listened attentively, to what I told her of my father's character, and of the principles which regulated his life. She showed every disposition to profit by the instructions I gave her beforehand, about how she should treat his peculiarities when she was introduced to him. But, on all these occasions, what really interested her most, was to

hear how many servants waited on him; how often he went to Court; how many lords and ladies he knew; what he said or did to his servants, when they committed mistakes; whether he was ever angry with his children for asking him for money; and whether he limited my sister to any given number of dresses in the course of the year?

Again; whenever our conversation turned on Clara, if I began by describing her kindness, her gentleness and goodness, her simple winning manners--I was sure to be led insensibly into a digression about her height, figure, complexion, and style of dress. The latter subject especially interested Margaret; she could question me on it, over and over again. What was Clara's usual morning dress? How did she wear her hair? What was her evening dress? Did she make a difference between a dinner party and a ball? What colours did she prefer? What dressmaker did she employ? Did she wear much jewellery? Which did she like best in her hair, and which were most fashionable, flowers or pearls? How many new dresses did she have in a year; and was there more than one maid especially to attend on her?

Then, again: Had she a carriage of her own? What ladies took care of her when she went out? Did she like dancing? What were the fashionable dances at noblemen's houses? Did young ladies in the great world practise the pianoforte much? How many offers had my sister had? Did she go to Court, as well as my father? What did she talk about to gentlemen, and what did gentlemen talk about to her? If she were speaking to a duke, how often would she say "your Grace" to him? and would a duke get her a chair, or an ice, and wait on her just as gentlemen without titles waited on ladies, when they met them in society?

My replies to these and hundreds of other questions like them, were received by Margaret with the most eager attention. On the favourite subject of Clara's dresses, my answers were an unending source of amusement and pleasure to her. She especially enjoyed overcoming the difficulties of interpreting aright my clumsy, circumlocutory phrases in attempting to describe shawls, gowns, and bonnets; and taught me the exact millinery language which I ought to have made use of with an arch expression of triumph and a burlesque earnestness of manner, that always enchanted me. At that time, every word she uttered, no matter how frivolous, was the sweetest of all music to my ears. It was only by the stern test of after-events that I learnt to analyse her conversation. Sometimes, when I was away from her, I might think of leading her girlish curiosity to higher things; but when we met again, the thought vanished; and it became delight enough for me simply to hear her speak, without once caring or considering what she spoke of.

Those were the days when I lived happy and unreflecting in the broad sunshine of joy which love showered round me--my eyes were dazzled; my mind lay asleep under it. Once or twice, a cloud came threatening, with chill and shadowy influence; but it passed away, and then the sunshine returned to me, the same sunshine that it was before.

II.

The first change that passed over the calm uniformity of the life at North Villa, came in this manner:

One evening, on entering the drawing-room, I missed Mrs. Sherwin; and found to my great disappointment that her husband was apparently settled there for the evening. He looked a little flurried, and was more restless than usual. His first words, as we met, informed me of an event in which he appeared to take the deepest interest.

"News, my dear sir!" he said. "Mr. Mannion has come back--at least two days before I expected him!"

At first, I felt inclined to ask who Mr. Mannion was, and what consequence it could possibly be to me that he had come back. But immediately afterwards, I remembered that this Mr. Mannion's name had been mentioned during my first conversation with Mr. Sherwin; and then I recalled to mind the description I had heard of him, as "confidential clerk;" as forty years of age; and as an educated man, who had made his information of some use to Margaret in keeping up the knowledge she had acquired at school. I knew no more than this about him, and I felt no curiosity to discover more from Mr. Sherwin.

Margaret and I sat down as usual with our books about us.

There had been something a little hurried and abrupt in her manner of receiving me, when I came in. When we began to read, her attention wandered incessantly; she looked round several times towards the door. Mr. Sherwin walked about the room without intermission, except when he once paused on his restless course, to tell me that Mr. Mannion was

coming that evening; and that he hoped I should have no objection to be introduced to a person who was "quite like one of the family, and well enough read to be sure to please a great reader like me." I asked myself rather impatiently, who was this Mr. Mannion, that his arrival at his employer's house should make a sensation? When I whispered something of this to Margaret, she smiled rather uneasily, and said nothing.

At last the bell was rung. Margaret started a little at the sound. Mr. Sherwin sat down; composing himself into rather an elaborate attitude--the door

opened, and Mr. Mannion came in.

Mr. Sherwin received his clerk with the assumed superiority of the master in his words; but his tones and manner flatly contradicted them. Margaret rose hastily, and then as hastily sat down again, while the visitor very respectfully took her hand, and made the usual inquiries. After this, he was introduced to me; and then Margaret was sent away to summon her mother down stairs. While she was out of the room, there was nothing to distract my attention from Mr. Mannion. I looked at him with a curiosity and interest, which I could hardly account for at first.

If extraordinary regularity of feature were alone sufficient to make a handsome man, then this confidential clerk of Mr. Sherwin's was assuredly one of the handsomest men I ever beheld. Viewed separately from the head (which was rather large, both in front and behind) his face exhibited, throughout, an almost perfect symmetry of proportion. His bald forehead was smooth and massive as marble; his high brow and thin eyelids had the firmness and immobility of marble, and seemed as cold; his delicately-formed lips, when he was not speaking, closed habitually, as changelessly still as if no breath of life ever passed them. There was not a wrinkle or line anywhere on his face. But for the baldness in front, and the greyness of the hair at the back and sides of his head, it would have been impossible from his appearance to have guessed his age, even within ten years of what it really was.

Such was his countenance in point of form; but in that which is the outward assertion of our immortality--in expression--it was, as I now beheld it, an utter void. Never had I before seen any human face which baffled all inquiry like his. No mask could have been made expressionless enough to resemble it; and yet it looked like a mask. It told you nothing of his thoughts, when he spoke: nothing of his disposition, when he was silent. His cold grey eyes gave you no help in trying to study him. They never varied from the steady, straightforward look, which was exactly the same for Margaret as it was for me; for Mrs. Sherwin as for Mr. Sherwin--exactly the same whether he spoke or whether he listened; whether he talked of indifferent, or of important matters. Who was he? What was he? His name and calling were poor replies to those questions. Was he naturally cold and unimpressible at heart? or had some fierce passion, some terrible sorrow, ravaged the life within him, and left it dead for ever after? Impossible to conjecture! There was the impenetrable face before you, wholly inexpressive--so inexpressive that it did not even look vacant--a mystery for your eyes and your mind to dwell on--hiding something; but whether vice or virtue you could not tell.

He was dressed as unobtrusively as possible, entirely in black; and was rather above the middle height. His manner was the only part of him that betrayed anything to the observation of others. Viewed in connection with his station, his demeanour (unobtrusive though it was) proclaimed itself as above his position in the world. He had all the quietness and self-possession of a gentleman. He maintained his respectful bearing, without the slightest appearance of cringing; and displayed a decision, both in word and action, that could never be mistaken for obstinacy or over-confidence. Before I had been in his company five minutes, his manner assured me that he must have descended to the position he now occupied.

On his introduction to me, he bowed without saying anything. When he spoke to Mr. Sherwin, his voice was as void of expression as his face: it was rather low in tone, but singularly distinct in utterance. He spoke deliberately, but with no emphasis on particular words, and without hesitation in choosing his terms.

When Mrs. Sherwin came down, I watched her conduct towards him. She could not repress a slight nervous shrinking, when he approached and placed a chair for her. In answering his inquiries after her health, she never once looked at him; but fixed her eyes all the time on Margaret and me, with a sad, anxious expression, wholly indescribable, which often recurred to my memory after that day. She always looked more or less frightened, poor thing, in her husband's presence; but she seemed positively awe-struck before Mr. Mannion.

In truth, my first observation of this so-called clerk, at North Villa, was enough to convince me that he was master there--master in his own quiet, unobtrusive way. That man's character, of whatever elements it might be composed, was a character that ruled. I could not see this in his face, or detect it in his words; but I could discover it in the looks and manners of his employer and his employer's family, as he now sat at the same table with them. Margaret's eyes avoided his countenance much less frequently than the eyes of her parents; but then he rarely looked at her in return--rarely looked at her at all, except when common courtesy obliged him to do so.

If any one had told me beforehand, that I should suspend my ordinary evening's occupation with my young wife, for the sake of observing the very man who had interrupted it, and that man only Mr. Sherwin's clerk, I should have laughed at the idea. Yet so it was. Our books lay neglected on the table--neglected by me, perhaps by Margaret too, for Mr. Mannion.

His conversation, on this occasion at least, baffled all curiosity as completely

as his face. I tried to lead him to talk. He just answered me, and that was all; speaking with great respect of manner and phrase, very intelligibly, but very briefly. Mr. Sherwin--after referring to the business expedition on which he had been absent, for the purchase of silks at Lyons--asked him some questions about France and the French, which evidently proceeded from the most ludicrous ignorance both of the country and the people. Mr. Mannion just set him right; and did no more. There was not the smallest inflection of sarcasm in his voice, not the slightest look of sarcasm in his eye, while he spoke. When we talked among ourselves, he did not join in the conversation; but sat quietly waiting until he might be pointedly and personally addressed again. At these times a suspicion crossed my mind that he might really be studying my character, as I was vainly trying to study his; and I often turned suddenly round on him, to see whether he was looking at me. This was never the case. His hard, chill grey eyes were not on me, and not on Margaret: they rested most frequently on Mrs. Sherwin, who always shrank before them.

After staying little more than half an hour, he rose to go away. While Mr. Sherwin was vainly pressing him to remain longer, I walked to the round table at the other end of the room, on which the book was placed that Margaret and I had intended to read during the evening. I was standing by the table when he came to take leave of me. He just glanced at the volume under my hand, and said in tones too low to be heard at the other end of the room:

"I hope my arrival has not interrupted any occupation to-night, Sir. Mr. Sherwin, aware of the interest I must feel in whatever concerns the family of an employer whom I have served for years, has informed me in confidence--a confidence which I know how to respect and preserve--of your marriage with his daughter, and of the peculiar circumstances under which the marriage has been contracted. I may at least venture to congratulate the young lady on a change of life which must procure her happiness, having begun already by procuring the increase of her mental resources and pleasures." He bowed, and pointed to the book on the table.

"I believe, Mr. Mannion," I said, "that you have been of great assistance in laying a foundation for the studies to which I presume you refer."

"I endeavoured to make myself useful in that way, Sir, as in all others, when my employer desired it." He bowed again, as he said this; and then went out, followed by Mr. Sherwin, who held a short colloquy with him in the hall.

What had he said to me? Only a few civil words, spoken in a very respectful

manner. There had been nothing in his tones, nothing in his looks, to give any peculiar significance to what he uttered. Still, the moment his back was turned, I found myself speculating whether his words contained any hidden meaning; trying to recall something in his voice or manner which might guide me in discovering the real sense he attached to what he said. It seemed as if the most powerful whet to my curiosity, were supplied by my own experience of the impossibility of penetrating beneath the unassailable surface which this man presented to me.

I questioned Margaret about him. She could not tell me more than I knew already. He had always been very kind and useful; he was a clever man, and could talk a great deal sometimes, when he chose; and he had taught her more of foreign languages and foreign literature in a month, than she had learned at school in a year. While she was telling me this, I hardly noticed that she spoke in a very hurried manner, and busied herself in arranging the books and work that lay on the table. My attention was more closely directed to Mrs. Sherwin. To my surprise, I saw her eagerly lean forward while Margaret was speaking, and fix her eyes on her daughter with a look of penetrating scrutiny, of which I could never have supposed a person usually so feeble and unenergetic to be capable. I thought of transferring to her my questionings on the subject of Mr. Mannion; but at that moment her husband entered the room, and I addressed myself for further enlightenment to him.

"Aha!"--cried Mr. Sherwin, rubbing his hands triumphantly--"I knew Mannion would please you. I told you so, my dear Sir, if you remember, before he came. Curious looking person--isn't he?"

"So curious, that I may safely say I never saw a face in the slightest degree resembling his in my life. Your clerk, Mr. Sherwin, is a complete walking mystery that I want to solve. Margaret cannot give me much help, I am afraid. When you came in, I was about to apply to Mrs. Sherwin for a little assistance."

"Don't do any such thing! You'll be quite in the wrong box there. Mrs. S. is as sulky as a bear, whenever Mannion and she are in company together. Considering her behaviour to him, I wonder he can be so civil to her as he is."

"What can you tell me about him yourself, Mr. Sherwin?"

"I can tell you there's not a house of business in London has such a managing man as he is: he's my factotum--my right hand, in short; and my

left too, for the matter of that. He understands my ways of doing business; and, in fact, carries things out in first-rate style. Why, he'd be worth his weight in gold, only for the knack he has of keeping the young men in the shop in order. Poor devils! they don't know how he does it; but there's a particular look of Mr. Mannion's that's as bad as transportation and hanging to them, whenever they see it. I'll pledge you my word of honour he's never had a day's illness, or made a single mistake, since he's been with me. He's a quiet, steady-going, regular dragon at his work--he is! And then, so obliging in other things. I've only got to say to him: 'Here's Margaret at home for the holidays;' or, 'Here's Margaret a little out of sorts, and going to be nursed at home for the half-year--what's to be done about keeping up her lessons? I can't pay for a governess (bad lot, governesses!) and school too.'--I've only got to say that; and up gets Mannion from his books and his fireside at home, in the evening--which begins to be something, you know, to a man of his time of life--and turns tutor for me, gratis; and a first-rate tutor, too! That's what I call having a treasure! And yet, though he's been with us for years, Mrs. S. there won't take to him!--I defy her or anybody else to say why, or wherefore!"

"Do you know how he was employed before he came to you?"

"Ah! now you've hit it--that's where you're right in saying he's a mystery. What he did before I knew him, is more than I can tell--a good deal more. He came to me with a capital recommendation and security, from a gentleman whom I knew to be of the highest respectability. I had a vacancy in the back office, and tried him, and found out what he was worth, in no time--I flatter myself I've a knack at that with everybody. Well: before I got used to his curious-looking face, and his quiet ways, I wanted badly enough to know something about him, and who his connections were. First, I asked his friend who had recommended him--the friend wasn't at liberty to answer for anything but his perfect trustworthiness. Then I asked Mannion himself point-blank about it, one day. He just told me that he had reasons for keeping his family affairs to himself--nothing more--but you know the way he has with him; and, damn it, he put the stopper on me, from that time to this. I wasn't going to risk losing the best clerk that ever man had, by worrying him about his secrets. They didn't interfere with business, and didn't interfere with me; so I put my curiosity in my pocket. I know nothing about him, but that he's my right-hand man, and the honestest fellow that ever stood in shoes. He may be the Great Mogul himself, in disguise, for anything I care! In short, you may be able to find out all about him, my dear Sir; but I can't."

"There does not seem much chance for me, Mr. Sherwin, after what you

have said."

"Well: I'm not so sure of that--plenty of chances here, you know. You'll see him often enough: he lives near, and drops in constantly of evenings. We settle business matters that won't come into business hours, in my private snuggerly up stairs. In fact, he's one of the family; treat him as such, and get anything out of him you can--the more the better, as far as regards that. Ah! Mrs. S., you may stare, Ma'am; but I say again, he's one of the family; may be, he'll be my partner some of these days--you'll have to get used to him then, whether you like it or not."

"One more question: is he married or single?"

"Single, to be sure--a regular old bachelor, if ever there was one yet."

During the whole time we had been speaking, Mrs. Sherwin had looked at us with far more earnestness and attention than I had ever seen her display before. Even her languid faculties seemed susceptible of active curiosity on the subject of Mr. Mannion--the more so, perhaps, from her very dislike of him. Margaret had moved her chair into the background, while her father was talking; and was apparently little interested in the topic under discussion. In the first interval of silence, she complained of headache, and asked leave to retire to her room.

After she left us, I took my departure: for Mr. Sherwin evidently had nothing more to tell me about his clerk that was worth hearing. On my way home, Mr. Mannion occupied no small share of my thoughts. The idea of trying to penetrate the mystery connected with him was an idea that pleased me; there was a promise of future excitement in it of no ordinary kind. I determined to have a little private conversation with Margaret about him; and to make her an ally in my new project. If there really had been some romance connected with Mr. Mannion's early life--if that strange and striking face of his was indeed a sealed book which contained a secret story, what a triumph and a pleasure, if Margaret and I should succeed in discovering it together!

When I woke the next morning, I could hardly believe that this tradesman's clerk had so interested my curiosity that he had actually shared my thoughts with my young wife, during the evening before. And yet, when I next saw him, he produced exactly the same impression on me again.

III.

Some weeks passed away; Margaret and I resumed our usual employments and amusements; the life at North Villa ran on as smoothly and obscurely as usual--and still I remained ignorant of Mr. Mannion's history and Mr. Mannion's character. He came frequently to the house, in the evening; but was generally closeted with Mr. Sherwin, and seldom accepted his employer's constant invitation to him to join the party in the drawing-room. At those rare intervals when we did see him, his appearance and behaviour were exactly the same as on the night when I had met him for the first time; he spoke just as seldom, and resisted just as resolutely and respectfully the many attempts made on my part to lead him into conversation and familiarity. If he had really been trying to excite my interest, he could not have succeeded more effectually. I felt towards him much as a man feels in a labyrinth, when every fresh failure in gaining the centre, only produces fresh obstinacy in renewing the effort to arrive at it.

From Margaret I gained no sympathy for my newly-aroused curiosity. She appeared, much to my surprise, to care little about Mr. Mannion; and always changed the conversation, if it related to him, whenever it depended upon her to continue the topic or not.

Mrs. Sherwin's conduct was far from resembling her daughter's, when I spoke to her on the same subject. She always listened intently to what I said; but her answers were invariably brief, confused, and sometimes absolutely incomprehensible. It was only after great difficulty that I induced her to confess her dislike of Mr. Mannion. Whence it proceeded she could never tell. Did she suspect anything? In answering this question, she always stammered, trembled, and looked away from me. "How could she suspect anything? If she did suspect, it would be very wrong without good reason: but she ought not to suspect, and did not, of course."

I never obtained any replies from her more intelligible than these. Attributing their confusion to the nervous agitation which more or less affected her when she spoke on any subject, I soon ceased making any efforts to induce her to explain herself; and determined to search for the clue to Mr. Mannion's character, without seeking assistance from any one.

Accident at length gave me an opportunity of knowing something of his habits and opinions; and so far, therefore, of knowing something about the man himself.

One night, I met him in the hall at North Villa, about to leave the house at the same time that I was, after a business-consultation in private with Mr. Sherwin. We went out together. The sky was unusually black; the night atmosphere unusually oppressive and still. The roll of distant thunder sounded faint and dreary all about us. The sheet lightning, flashing quick and low in the horizon, made the dark firmament look like a thick veil, rising and falling incessantly, over a heaven of dazzling light behind it. Such few foot-passengers as passed us, passed running--for heavy, warning drops were falling already from the sky. We quickened our pace; but before we had walked more than two hundred yards, the rain came down, furious and drenching; and the thunder began to peal fearfully, right over our heads.

"My house is close by," said my companion, just as quietly and deliberately as usual--"pray step in, Sir, until the storm is over."

I followed him down a bye street; he opened a door with his own key; and the next instant I was sheltered under Mr. Mannion's roof.

He led me at once into a room on the ground floor. The fire was blazing in the grate; an arm-chair, with a reading easel attached, was placed by it; the lamp was ready lit; the tea-things were placed on the table; the dark, thick curtains were drawn close over the window; and, as if to complete the picture of comfort before me, a large black cat lay on the rug, basking luxuriously in the heat of the fire. While Mr. Mannion went out to give some directions, as he said, to his servant, I had an opportunity of examining the apartment more in detail. To study the appearance of a man's dwelling-room, is very often nearly equivalent to studying his own character.

The personal contrast between Mr. Sherwin and his clerk was remarkable enough, but the contrast between the dimensions and furnishing of the rooms they lived in, was to the full as extraordinary. The apartment I now surveyed was less than half the size of the sitting-room at North Villa. The paper on the walls was of a dark red; the curtains were of the same colour; the carpet was brown, and if it bore any pattern, that pattern was too quiet and unpretending to be visible by candlelight. One wall was entirely occupied by rows of dark mahogany shelves, completely filled with books, most of them cheap editions of the classical works of ancient and modern literature. The opposite wall was thickly hung with engravings in maple-wood frames from the works of modern painters, English and French. All the minor articles of furniture were of the plainest and neatest order--even the white china tea-pot and tea-cup on the table, had neither pattern nor colouring of any kind. What a contrast was this room to the drawing-room

at North Villa!

On his return, Mr. Mannion found me looking at his tea-equipage. "I am afraid, Sir, I must confess myself an epicure and a prodigal in two things," he said; "an epicure in tea, and a prodigal (at least for a person in my situation) in books. However, I receive a liberal salary, and can satisfy my tastes, such as they are, and save money too. What can I offer you, Sir?"

Seeing the preparations on the table, I asked for tea. While he was speaking to me, there was one peculiarity about him that I observed. Almost all men, when they stand on their own hearths, in their own homes, instinctively alter more or less from their out-of-door manner: the stiffest people expand, the coldest thaw a little, by their own firesides. It was not so with Mr. Mannion. He was exactly the same man at his own house that he was at Mr. Sherwin's.

There was no need for him to have told me that he was an epicure in tea; the manner in which he made it would have betrayed that to anybody. He put in nearly treble the quantity which would generally be considered sufficient for two persons; and almost immediately after he had filled the tea-pot with boiling water, began to pour from it into the cups--thus preserving all the aroma and delicacy of flavour in the herb, without the alloy of any of the coarser part of its strength. When we had finished our first cups, there was no pouring of dregs into a basin, or of fresh water on the leaves. A middle-aged female servant, neat and quiet, came up and took away the tray, bringing it to us again with the tea-pot and tea-cups clean and empty, to receive a fresh infusion from fresh leaves. These were trifles to notice; but I thought of other tradesmen's clerks who were drinking their gin-and-water jovially, at home or at a tavern, and found Mr. Mannion a more exasperating mystery to me than ever.

The conversation between us turned at first on trivial subjects, and was but ill sustained on my part--there were peculiarities in my present position which made me thoughtful. Once, our talk ceased altogether; and, just at that moment, the storm began to rise to its height. Hail mingled with the rain, and rattled heavily against the window. The thunder, bursting louder and louder with each successive peal, seemed to shake the house to its foundations. As I listened to the fearful crashing and roaring that seemed to fill the whole measureless void of upper air, and then looked round on the calm, dead-calm face of the man beside me--without one human emotion of any kind even faintly pictured on it--I felt strange, unutterable sensations creeping over me; our silence grew oppressive and sinister; I began to wish, I hardly knew why, for some third person in the room--for somebody else to

look at and to speak to.

He was the first to resume the conversation. I should have imagined it impossible for any man, in the midst of such thunder as now raged above our heads, to think or talk of anything but the storm. And yet, when he spoke, it was merely on a subject connected with his introduction to me at North Villa. His attention seemed as far from being attracted or impressed by the mighty elemental tumult without, as if the tranquillity of the night were uninvaded by the slightest murmur of sound.

"May I inquire, Sir," he began, "whether I am right in apprehending that my conduct towards you, since we first met at Mr. Sherwin's house, may have appeared strange, and even discourteous, in your eyes?"

"In what respect, Mr. Mannion?" I asked, a little startled by the abruptness of the question.

"I am perfectly sensible, Sir, that you have kindly set me the example, on many occasions, in trying to better our acquaintance. When such advances are made by one in your station to one in mine, they ought to be immediately and gratefully responded to."

Why did he pause? Was he about to tell me he had discovered that my advances sprang from curiosity to know more about him than he was willing to reveal? I waited for him to proceed.

"I have only failed," he continued, "in the courtesy and gratitude you had a right to expect from me, because, knowing how you were situated with Mr. Sherwin's daughter, I thought any intrusion on my part, while you were with the young lady, might not be so acceptable as you, Sir, in your kindness, were willing to lead me to believe."

"Let me assure you," I answered; relieved to find myself unsuspected, and really impressed by his delicacy--"let me assure you that I fully appreciate the consideration you have shown--"

Just as the last words passed my lips, the thunder pealed awfully over the house. I said no more: the sound silenced me.

"As my explanation has satisfied you, Sir," he went on; his clear and deliberate utterance rising discordantly audible above the long, retiring roll of the last burst of thunder--"may I feel justified in speaking on the subject of your present position in my employer's house, with some freedom? I

mean, if I may say so without offence, with the freedom of a friend."

I begged he would use all the freedom he wished; feeling really desirous that he should do so, apart from any purpose of leading him to talk unreservedly on the chance of hearing him talk of himself. The profound respect of manner and phrase which he had hitherto testified--observed by a man of his age, to a man of mine--made me feel ill at ease. He was most probably my equal in acquirements: he had the manners and tastes of a gentleman, and might have the birth too, for aught I knew to the contrary. The difference between us was only in our worldly positions. I had not enough of my father's pride of caste to think that this difference alone, made it right that a man whose years nearly doubled mine, whose knowledge perhaps surpassed mine, should speak to me as Mr. Mannion had spoken up to this time.

"I may tell you then," he resumed, "that while I am anxious to commit no untimely intrusion on your hours at North Villa, I am at the same time desirous of being something more than merely inoffensive towards you. I should wish to be positively useful, as far as I can. In my opinion Mr. Sherwin has held you to rather a hard engagement--he is trying your discretion a little too severely I think, at your years and in your situation. Feeling thus, it is my sincere wish to render what connection and influence I have with the family, useful in making the probation you have still to pass through, as easy as possible. I have more means of doing this, Sir, than you might at first imagine."

His offer took me a little by surprise. I felt with a sort of shame, that candour and warmth of feeling were what I had not expected from him. My attention insensibly wandered away from the storm, to attach itself more and more closely to him, as he went on:

"I am perfectly sensible," he resumed, "that such a proposition as I now make to you, proceeding from one little better than a stranger, may cause surprise and even suspicion, at first. I can only explain it, by asking you to remember that I have known the young lady since childhood; and that, having assisted in forming her mind and developing her character, I feel towards her almost as a second father, and am therefore naturally interested in the gentleman who has chosen her for a wife."

Was there a tremor at last in that changeless voice, as he spoke? I thought so; and looked anxiously to catch the answering gleam of expression, which might now, for the first time, be softening his iron features, animating the blank stillness of his countenance. If any such expression had been visible, I

was too late to detect it. Just as I looked at him he stooped down to poke the fire. When he turned towards me again, his face was the same impenetrable face, his eye the same hard, steady, inexpressive eye as before.

"Besides," he continued, "a man must have some object in life for his sympathies to be employed on. I have neither wife nor child; and no near relations to think of--I have nothing but my routine of business in the day, and my books here by my lonely fireside, at night. Our life is not much; but it was made for a little more than this. My former pupil at North Villa is my pupil no longer. I can't help feeling that it would be an object in existence for me to occupy myself with her happiness and yours; to have two young people, in the heyday of youth and first love, looking towards me occasionally for the promotion of some of their pleasures--no matter how trifling. All this will seem odd and incomprehensible to you. If you were of my age, Sir, and in my position, you would understand it."

Was it possible that he could speak thus, without his voice faltering, or his eye softening in the slightest degree? Yes: I looked at him and listened to him intently; but here was not the faintest change in his face or his tones--there was nothing to show outwardly whether he felt what he said, or whether he did not. His words had painted such a picture of forlornness on my mind, that I had mechanically half raised my hand to take his, while he was addressing me; but the sight of him when he ceased, checked the impulse almost as soon as it was formed. He did not appear to have noticed either my involuntary gesture, or its immediate repression; and went on speaking.

"I have said perhaps more than I ought," he resumed. "If I have not succeeded in making you understand my explanation as I could wish, we will change the subject, and not return to it again, until you have known me for a much longer time."

"On no account change the subject, Mr. Mannion," I said; unwilling to let it be implied that I would not put trust in him. "I am deeply sensible of the kindness of your offer, and the interest you take in Margaret and me. We shall both, I am sure, accept your good offices--"

I stopped. The storm had decreased a little in violence: but my attention was now struck by the wind, which had risen as the thunder and rain had partially lulled. How drearily it was moaning down the street! It seemed, at that moment, to be wailing over me; to be wailing over him; to be wailing over all mortal things! The strange sensations I then felt, moved me to listen in silence; but I checked them, and spoke again.

"If I have not answered you as I should," I continued, "you must attribute it partly to the storm, which I confess rather discomposes my ideas; and partly to a little surprise--a very foolish surprise, I own--that you should still be able to feel so strong a sympathy with interests which are generally only considered of importance to the young."

"It is only in their sympathies, that men of my years can, and do, live their youth over again," he said. "You may be surprised to hear a tradesman's clerk talk in this manner; but I was not always what I am now. I have gathered knowledge, and suffered in the gathering. I have grown old before my time--my forty years are like the fifty of other men--"

My heart beat quicker--was he, unasked, about to disclose the mystery which evidently hung over his early life? No: he dropped the subject at once, when he continued. I longed to ask him to resume it, but could not. I feared the same repulse which Mr. Sherwin had received: and remained silent.

"What I was," he proceeded, "matters little; the question is what can I do for you? Any aid I can give, may be poor enough; but it may be of some use notwithstanding. For instance, the other day, if I mistake not, you were a little hurt at Mr. Sherwin's taking his daughter to a party to which the family had been invited. This was very natural. You could not be there to watch over her in your real character, without disclosing a secret which must be kept safe; and you could not know what young men she might meet, who would imagine her to be Miss Sherwin still, and would regulate their conduct accordingly. Now, I think I might be of use here. I have some influence--perhaps in strict truth I ought to say great influence--with my employer; and, if you wished it, I would use that influence to back yours, in inducing him to forego, for the future, any intention of taking his daughter into society, except when you desire it. Again: I think I am not wrong in assuming that you infinitely prefer the company of Mrs. Sherwin to that of Mr. Sherwin, during your interviews with the young lady?"

How he had found that out? At any rate, he was right; and I told him so candidly.

"The preference is on many accounts a very natural one," he said; "but if you suffered it to appear to Mr. Sherwin, it might, for obvious reasons, produce a most unfavourable effect. I might interfere in the matter, however, without suspicion; I should have many opportunities of keeping him away from the room, in the evening, which I could use if you wished it. And more than that, if you wanted longer and more frequent communication with North

Villa than you now enjoy, I might be able to effect this also. I do not mention what I could do in these, and in other matters, in any disparagement, Sir, of the influence which you have with Mr. Sherwin, in your own right; but because I know that in what concerns your intercourse with his daughter, my employer has asked, and will ask my advice, from the habit of doing so in other things. I have hitherto declined giving him this advice in your affairs; but I will give it, and in your favour and the young lady's, if you and she choose."

I thanked him--but not in such warm terms as I should have employed, if I had seen even the faintest smile on his face, or had heard any change in his steady, deliberate tones, as he spoke. While his words attracted, his immovable looks repelled me, in spite of myself.

"I must again beg you"--he proceeded--"to remember what I have already said, in your estimate of the motives of my offer. If I still appear to be interfering officiously in your affairs, you have only to think that I have presumed impertinently on the freedom you have allowed me, and to treat me no longer on the terms of to-night. I shall not complain of your conduct, and shall try hard not to consider you unjust to me, if you do."

Such an appeal as this was not to be resisted: I answered him at once and unreservedly. What right had I to draw bad inferences from a man's face, voice, and manner, merely because they impressed me, as out of the common? Did I know how much share the influence of natural infirmity, or the outward traces of unknown sorrow and suffering, might have had in producing the external peculiarities which had struck me? He would have every right to upbraid me as unjust--and that in the strongest terms--unless I spoke out fairly in reply.

"I am quite incapable, Mr. Mannion," I said, "of viewing your offer with any other than grateful feelings. You will find I shall prove this by employing your good offices for Margaret and myself in perfect faith, and sooner perhaps than you may imagine."

He bowed and said a few cordial words, which I heard but imperfectly--for, as I addressed him, a blast of wind fiercer than usual, rushed down the street, shaking the window shutter violently as it passed, and dying away in a low, melancholy, dirging swell, like a spirit-cry of lamentation and despair.

When he spoke again, after a momentary silence, it was to make some change in the conversation. He talked of Margaret--dwelling in terms of high praise rather on her moral than on her personal qualities. He spoke of Mr.

Sherwin, referring to solid and attractive points in his character which I had not detected. What he said of Mrs. Sherwin appeared to be equally dictated by compassion and respect--he even hinted at her coolness towards himself, considerably attributing it to the involuntary caprice of settled nervousness and ill-health. His language, in touching on these subjects, was just as unaffected, just as devoid of any peculiarities, as I had hitherto found it when occupied by other topics.

It was growing late. The thunder still rumbled at long intervals, with a dull, distant sound; and the wind showed no symptoms of subsiding. But the pattering of the rain against the window ceased to be audible. There was little excuse for staying longer; and I wished to find none. I had acquired quite knowledge enough of Mr. Mannion to assure me, that any attempt on my part at extracting from him, in spite of his reserve, the secrets which might be connected with his early life, would prove perfectly fruitless. If I must judge him at all, I must judge him by the experience of the present, and not by the history of the past. I had heard good, and good only, of him from the shrewd master who knew him best, and had tried him longest. He had shown the greatest delicacy towards my feelings, and the strongest desire to do me service--it would be a mean return for those acts of courtesy, to let curiosity tempt me to pry into his private affairs.

I rose to go. He made no effort to detain me; but, after unbarring the shutter and looking out of the window, simply remarked that the rain had almost entirely ceased, and that my umbrella would be quite sufficient protection against all that remained. He followed me into the passage to light me out. As I turned round upon his door-step to thank him for his hospitality, and to bid him good night, the thought came across me, that my manner must have appeared cold and repelling to him--especially when he was offering his services to my acceptance. If I had really produced this impression, he was my inferior in station, and it would be cruel to leave it. I tried to set myself right at parting.

"Let me assure you again," I said, "that it will not be my fault if Margaret and I do not thankfully employ your good offices, as the good offices of a well-wisher and a friend."

The lightning was still in the sky, though it only appeared at long intervals. Strangely enough, at the moment when I addressed him, a flash came, and seemed to pass right over his face. It gave such a hideously livid hue, such a spectral look of ghastliness and distortion to his features, that he absolutely seemed to be glaring and grinning on me like a fiend, in the one instant of its duration. For the moment, it required all my knowledge of the settled

calmness of his countenance, to convince me that my eyes must have been only dazzled by an optical illusion produced by the lightning.

When the darkness had come again, I bade him good night--first mechanically repeating what I had just said, almost in the same words.

I walked home thoughtful. That night had given me much matter to think of.

IV.

About the time of my introduction to Mr. Mannion--or, to speak more correctly, both before and after that period--certain peculiarities in Margaret's character and conduct, which came to my knowledge by pure accident, gave me a little uneasiness and even a little displeasure. Neither of these feelings lasted very long, it is true; for the incidents which gave rise to them were of a trifling nature in themselves. While I now write, however, these domestic occurrences are all vividly present to my recollection. I will mention two of them as instances. Subsequent events, yet to be related, will show that they are not out of place at this part of my narrative.

One lovely autumn morning, I called rather before the appointed time at North Villa. As the servant opened the front garden-gate, the idea occurred to me of giving Margaret a surprise, by entering the drawing room unexpectedly, with a nosegay gathered for her from her own flower-bed. Telling the servant not to announce me, I went round to the back garden, by a gate which opened into it at the side of the house. The progress of my flower-gathering led me on to the lawn under one of the drawing-room windows, which was left a little open. The voices of my wife and her mother reached me from the room. It was this part of their conversation which I unintentionally overheard:--

"I tell you, mamma, I must and will have the dress, whether papa chooses or not."

This was spoken loudly and resolutely; in such tones as I had never heard from Margaret before.

"Pray--pray, my dear, don't talk so," answered the weak, faltering voice of Mrs. Sherwin; "you know you have had more than your year's allowance of dresses already."

"I won't be allowanced. His sister isn't allowanced: why should I be?"

"My dear love, surely there is some difference--"

"I'm sure there isn't, now I am his wife. I shall ride some day in my carriage, just as his sister does. He gives me my way in everything; and so ought you."

"It isn't me, Margaret: if I could do anything, I'm sure I would; but I really couldn't ask your papa for another new dress, after his having given you so many this year, already."

"That's the way it always is with you, mamma--you can't do this, and you can't do that--you are so excessively tiresome! But I will have the dress, I'm determined. He says his sister wears light blue crape of an evening; and I'll have light blue crape, too--see if I don't! I'll get it somehow from the shop, myself. Papa never takes any notice, I'm sure, what I have on; and he needn't find out anything about what's gone out of the shop, until they 'take stock,' or whatever it is he calls it. And then, if he flies into one of his passions--"

"My dear! my dear! you really ought not to talk so of your papa--it is very wrong, Margaret, indeed--what would Mr. Basil say if he heard you?"

I determined to go in at once, and tell Margaret that I had heard her--resolving, at the same time, to exert some firmness, and remonstrate with her, for her own good, on much of what she had said, which had really surprised and displeased me. On my unexpected entrance, Mrs. Sherwin started, and looked more timid than ever. Margaret, however, came forward to meet me with her wonted smile, and held out her hand with her wonted grace. I said nothing until we had got into our accustomed corner, and were talking together in whispers as usual. Then I began my remonstrance--very tenderly, and in the lowest possible tones. She took precisely the right way to stop me in full career, in spite of all my resolution. Her beautiful eyes filled with tears directly--the first I had ever seen in them: caused, too, by what I had said!--and she murmured a few plaintive words about the cruelty of being angry with her for only wanting to please me by being dressed as my sister was, which upset every intention I had formed but the moment before. I involuntarily devoted myself to soothing her for the rest of the morning. Need I say how the matter ended? I never mentioned the subject more; and I made her a present of the new dress.

Some weeks after the little home-breeze which I have just related, had died away into a perfect calm, I was accidentally witness of another domestic dilemma in which Margaret bore a principal share. On this occasion, as I walked up to the house (in the morning again), I found the front door open. A pail was on the steps--the servant had evidently been washing them, had been interrupted in her work, and had forgotten to close the door when she left it. The nature of the interruption I soon discovered as I entered the hall.

"For God's sake, Miss!" cried the housemaid's voice, from the dining-room,

"for God's sake, put down the poker! Missus will be here directly; and it's her cat!"

"I'll kill the vile brute! I'll kill the hateful cat! I don't care whose it is!--my poor dear, dear, dear bird!" The voice was Margaret's. At first, its tones were tones of fury; they were afterwards broken by hysterical sobs.

"Poor thing," continued the servant, soothingly, "I'm sorry for it, and for you too, Miss! But, oh! do please to remember it was you left the cage on the table, in the cat's reach--"

"Hold your tongue, you wretch! How dare you hold me?--let me go!"

"Oh, you mustn't--you mustn't indeed! It's missus's cat, recollect--poor missus's, who's always ill, and hasn't got nothing else to amuse her."

"I don't care! The cat has killed my bird, and the cat shall be killed for doing it!--it shall!--it shall!--it shall!!! I'll call in the first boy from the street to catch it, and hang it! Let me go! I will go!"

"I'll let the cat go first, Miss, as sure as my name's Susan!"

The next instant, the door was suddenly opened, and puss sprang past me, out of harm's way, closely followed by the servant, who stared breathless and aghast at seeing me in the hall. I went into the dining-room immediately.

On the floor lay a bird-cage, with the poor canary dead inside (it was the same canary that I had seen my wife playing with, on the evening of the day when I first met her). The bird's head had been nearly dragged through the bent wires of the cage, by the murderous claws of the cat. Near the fire-place, with the poker she had just dropped on the floor by her side, stood Margaret. Never had I seen her look so beautiful as she now appeared, in the fury of passion which possessed her. Her large black eyes were flashing grandly through her tears--the blood was glowing crimson in her cheeks--her lips were parted as she gasped for breath. One of her hands was clenched, and rested on the mantel-piece; the other was pressed tight over her bosom, with the fingers convulsively clasping her dress. Grieved as I was at the paroxysm of passion into which she had allowed herself to be betrayed, I could not repress an involuntary feeling of admiration when my eyes first rested on her. Even anger itself looked lovely in that lovely face!

She never moved when she saw me. As I approached her, she dropped down

on her knees by the cage, sobbing with frightful violence, and pouring forth a perfect torrent of ejaculations of vengeance against the cat. Mrs. Sherwin came down; and by her total want of tact and presence of mind, made matters worse. In brief, the scene ended by a fit of hysterics.

To speak to Margaret on that day, as I wished to speak to her, was impossible. To approach the subject of the canary's death afterwards, was useless. If I only hinted in the gentlest way, and with the strongest sympathy for the loss of the bird, at the distress and astonishment she had caused me by the extremities to which she had allowed her passion to hurry her, a burst of tears was sure to be her only reply--just the reply, of all others, which was best calculated to silence me. If I had been her husband in fact, as well as in name; if I had been her father, her brother, or her friend, I should have let her first emotions have their way, and then have expostulated with her afterwards. But I was her lover still; and, to my eyes, Margaret's tears made virtues even of Margaret's faults.

Such occurrences as these, happening but at rare intervals, formed the only interruptions to the generally even and happy tenour of our intercourse. Weeks and weeks glided away, and not a hasty or a hard word passed between us. Neither, after one preliminary difference had been adjusted, did any subsequent disagreement take place between Mr. Sherwin and me. This last element in the domestic tranquillity of North Villa was, however, less attributable to his forbearance, or to mine, than to the private interference of Mr. Mannion.

For some days after my interview with the managing clerk, at his own house, I had abstained from calling his offered services into requisition. I was not conscious of any reason for this course of conduct. All that had been said, all that had happened during the night of the storm, had produced a powerful, though vague impression on me. Strange as it may appear, I could not determine whether my brief but extraordinary experience of my new friend had attracted me towards him, or repelled me from him. I felt an unwillingness to lay myself under an obligation to him, which was not the result of pride, or false delicacy, or sullenness, or suspicion--it was an inexplicable unwillingness, that sprang from the fear of encountering some heavy responsibility; but of what nature I could not imagine. I delayed and held back, by instinct; and, on his side, Mr. Mannion made no further advances. He maintained the same manner, and continued the same habits, during his intercourse with the family at North Villa, which I had observed as characterising him before I took shelter from the storm, in his house. He

never referred again to the conversation of that evening, when we now met.

Margaret's behaviour, when I mentioned to her Mr. Mannion's willingness to be useful to us both, rather increased than diminished the vague uncertainties which perplexed me, on the subject of accepting or rejecting his overtures.

I could not induce her to show the smallest interest about him. Neither his house, his personal appearance, his peculiar habits, or his secrecy in relation to his early life--nothing, in short, connected with him--appeared to excite her attention or curiosity in the slightest degree. On the evening of his return from the continent, she had certainly shown some symptoms of interest in his arrival at North Villa, and some appearance of attention to him, when he joined our party. Now, she seemed completely and incomprehensibly changed on this point. Her manner became almost petulant, if I persisted long in making Mr. Mannion a topic of conversation--it was as if she resented his sharing my thoughts with her in the slightest degree. As to the difficult question whether we should engage him in our interests or not, that was a matter which she always seemed to think too trifling to be discussed between us at all.

Ere long, however, circumstances decided me as to the course I should take with Mr. Mannion.

A ball was given by one of Mr. Sherwin's rich commercial friends, to which he announced his intention of taking Margaret. Besides the jealousy which I felt--naturally enough, in my peculiar situation--at the idea of my wife going out as Miss Sherwin, and dancing in the character of a young unmarried lady with any young gentlemen who were introduced to her, I had also the strongest possible desire to keep Margaret out of the society of her own class, until my year's probation was over, and I could hope to instal her permanently in the society of my class. I had privately mentioned to her my ideas on this subject, and found that she fully agreed with them. She was not wanting in ambition to ascend to the highest degree in the social scale; and had already begun to look with indifference on the society which was offered to her by those in her own rank.

To Mr. Sherwin I could confide nothing of this. I could only object, generally, to his taking Margaret out, when neither she nor I desired it. He declared that she liked parties--that all girls did--that she only pretended to dislike them, to please me--and that he had made no engagement to keep her moping at home a whole year on my account. In the case of the particular ball now under discussion, he was determined to have his own way; and he

bluntly told me as much.

Irritated by his obstinacy and gross want of consideration for my defenceless position, I forgot all doubts and scruples; and privately applied to Mr. Mannion to exert the influence which he had promised to use, if I wished it, in my behalf.

The result was as immediate as it was conclusive. The very next evening, Mr. Sherwin came to us with a note which he had just written, and informed me that it was an excuse for Margaret's non-appearance at the ball. He never mentioned Mr. Mannion's name, but sulkily and shortly said, that he had reconsidered the matter, and had altered his first decision for reasons of his own.

Having once taken a first step in the new direction, I soon followed it up, without hesitation, by taking many others. Whenever I wished to call oftener than once a-day at North Villa, I had but to tell Mr. Mannion, and the next morning I found the permission immediately accorded to me by the ruling power. The same secret machinery enabled me to regulate Mr. Sherwin's incomings and outgoings, just as I chose, when Margaret and I were together in the evening. I could feel almost certain, now, of never having any one with us, but Mrs. Sherwin, unless I desired it--which, as may be easily imagined, was seldom enough.

My new ally's ready interference for my advantage was exerted quietly, easily, and as a matter of course. I never knew how, or when, he influenced his employer, and Mr. Sherwin on his part, never breathed a word of that influence to me. He accorded any extra privilege I might demand, as if he acted entirely under his own will, little suspecting how well I knew what was the real motive power which directed him.

I was the more easily reconciled to employing the services of Mr. Mannion, by the great delicacy with which he performed them. He did not allow me to think--he did not appear to think himself--that he was obliging me in the smallest degree. He affected no sudden intimacy with me; his manners never altered; he still persisted in not joining us in the evening, but at my express invitation; and if I referred in any way to the advantages I derived from his devotion to my interests, he always replied in his brief undemonstrative way, that he considered himself the favoured person, in being permitted to make his services of some use to Margaret and me.

I had told Mr. Mannion, when I was leaving him on the night of the storm, that I would treat his offers as the offers of a friend; and I had now made

good my words, much sooner and much more unreservedly than I had ever intended, when we parted at his own house-door.

V.

The autumn was now over; the winter--a cold, gloomy winter--had fairly come. Five months had nearly elapsed since Clara and my father had departed for the country. What communication did I hold with them, during that interval?

No personal communication with either--written communication only with my sister. Clara's letters to me were frequent. They studiously avoided anything like a reproach for my long absence; and were confined almost exclusively to such details of country life as the writer thought likely to interest me. Their tone was as affectionate--nay, more affectionate, if possible--than usual; but Clara's gaiety and quiet humour, as a correspondent, were gone. My conscience taught me only too easily and too plainly how to account for this change--my conscience told me who had altered the tone of my sister's letters, by altering all the favourite purposes and favourite pleasures of her country life.

I was selfishly enough devoted to my own passions and my own interests, at this period of my life; but I was not so totally dead to every one of the influences which had guided me since childhood, as to lose all thought of Clara and my father, and the ancient house that was associated with my earliest and happiest recollections. Sometimes, even in Margaret's beloved presence, a thought of Clara put away from me all other thoughts. And, sometimes, in the lonely London house, I dreamed--with the strangest sleeping oblivion of my marriage, and of all the new interests which it had crowded into my life--of country rides with my sister, and of quiet conversations in the old gothic library at the Hall. Under such influences as these, I twice resolved to make amends for my long absence, by joining my father and my sister in the country, even though it were only for a few days--and, each time, I failed in my resolution. On the second occasion, I had actually mustered firmness enough to get as far as the railway station; and only at the last moment faltered and hung back. The struggle that it cost me to part for any length of time from Margaret, I had overcome; but the apprehension, as vivid as it was vague, that something--I knew not what--might happen to her in my absence, turned my steps backward at starting. I felt heartily ashamed of my own weakness; but I yielded to it nevertheless.

At last, a letter arrived from Clara, containing a summons to the country, which I could not disobey.

"I have never asked you," she wrote, "to come and see us for my sake; for I would not interfere with any of your interests or any of your plans; but I now ask you to come here for your own sake--just for one week, and no more, unless you like to remain longer. You remember papa telling you, in your room in London, that he believed you kept some secret from him. I am afraid this is preying on his mind: your long absence is making him uneasy about you. He does not say so; but he never sends any message, when I write; and if I speak about you, he always changes the subject directly. Pray come here, and show yourself for a few days--no questions will be asked, you may be sure. It will do so much good; and will prevent--what I hope and pray may never happen--a serious estrangement between papa and you. Recollect, Basil, in a month or six weeks we shall come back to town; and then the opportunity will be gone."

As I read these lines, I determined to start for the country at once, while the effect of them was still fresh on my mind. Margaret, when I took leave of her, only said that she should like to be going with me--"it would be such a sight for her, to see a grand country house like ours!" Mr. Sherwin laughed as coarsely as usual, at the difficulties I made about only leaving his daughter for a week. Mrs. Sherwin very earnestly, and very inaccountably as I then thought, recommended me not to be away any longer than I had proposed. Mr. Mannion privately assured me, that I might depend on him in my absence from North Villa, exactly as I had always depended on him, during my presence there. It was strange that his parting words should be the only words which soothed and satisfied me on taking leave of London.

The winter afternoon was growing dim with the evening darkness, as I drove up to the Hall. Snow on the ground, in the country, has always a cheerful look to me. I could have wished to see it on the day of my arrival at home; but there had been a thaw for the last week--mud and water were all about me--a drizzling rain was falling--a raw, damp wind was blowing--a fog was rising, as the evening stole on--and the ancient leafless elms in the park avenue groaned and creaked above my head drearily, as I approached the house.

My father received me with more ceremony than I liked. I had known, from a boy, what it meant when he chose to be only polite to his own son. What construction he had put on my long absence and my persistence in keeping my secret from him, I could not tell; but it was evident that I had lost my usual place in his estimation, and lost it past regaining merely by a week's visit. The estrangement between us, which my sister had feared, had begun already.

I had been chilled by the desolate aspect of nature, as I approached the Hall; my father's reception of me, when I entered the house, increased the comfortless and melancholy impressions produced on my mind; it required all the affectionate warmth of Clara's welcome, all the pleasure of hearing her whisper her thanks, as she kissed me, for my readiness in following her advice, to restore my equanimity. But even then, when the first hurry and excitement of meeting had passed away, in spite of her kind words and looks, there was something in her face which depressed me. She seemed thinner, and her constitutional paleness was more marked than usual. Cares and anxieties had evidently oppressed her--was I the cause of them?

The dinner that evening proceeded very heavily and gloomily. My father only talked on general and commonplace topics, as if a mere acquaintance had been present. When my sister left us, he too quitted the room, to see some one who had arrived on business. I had no heart for the company of the wine bottles, so I followed Clara.

At first, we only spoke of her occupations since she had been in the country; I was unwilling, and she forbore, to touch on my long stay in London, or on my father's evident displeasure at my protracted absence. There was a little restraint between us, which neither had the courage to break through. Before long, however, an accident, trifling enough in itself, obliged me to be more candid; and enabled her to speak unreservedly on the subject nearest to her heart.

I was seated opposite to Clara, at the fire-place, and was playing with a favourite dog which had followed me into the room. While I was stooping towards the animal, a locket containing some of Margaret's hair, fell out of its place in my waistcoat, and swung towards my sister by the string which attached it round my neck. I instantly hid it again; but not before Clara, with a woman's quickness, had detected the trinket as something new, and drawn the right inference, as to the use to which I devoted it.

An expression of surprise and pleasure passed over her face; she rose, and putting her hands on my shoulders, as if to keep me still in the place I occupied, looked at me intently.

"Basil!" she exclaimed, "if that is all the secret you have been keeping from us, how glad I am! When I see a new locket drop out of my brother's waistcoat--" she continued, observing that I was too confused to speak--"and when I find him colouring very deeply, and hiding it again in a great hurry, I should be no true woman if I did not make my own discoveries, and begin to talk about them directly."

I made an effort--a very poor one--to laugh the thing off. Her expression grew serious and thoughtful, while she still fixed her eyes on me. She took my hand gently, and whispered in my ear: "Are you going to be married, Basil? Shall I love my new sister almost as much as I love you?"

At that moment the servant came in with tea. The interruption gave me a minute for consideration. Should I tell her all? Impulse answered, yes--reflection, no. If I disclosed my real situation, I knew that I must introduce Clara to Margaret. This would necessitate taking her privately to Mr. Sherwin's house, and exposing to her the humiliating terms of dependence and prohibition on which I lived with my own wife. A strange medley of feelings, in which pride was uppermost, forbade me to do that. Then again, to involve my sister in my secret, would be to involve her with me in any consequences which might be produced by its disclosure to my father. The mere idea of making her a partaker in responsibilities which I alone ought to bear, was not to be entertained for a moment. As soon as we were left together again, I said to her:

"Will you not think the worse of me, Clara, if I leave you to draw your own conclusions from what you have seen? only asking you to keep strict silence on the subject to every one. I can't speak yet, love, as I wish to speak: you will know why, some day, and say that my reserve was right. In the meantime, can you be satisfied with the assurance, that when the time comes for making my secret known, you shall be the first to know it--the first I put trust in?"

"As you have not starved my curiosity altogether," said Clara, smiling, "but have given it a little hope to feed on for the present, I think, woman though I am, I can promise all you wish. Seriously, Basil," she continued, "that telltale locket of yours has so pleasantly brightened some very gloomy thoughts of mine about you, that I can now live happily on expectation, without once mentioning your secret again, till you give me leave to do so."

Here my father entered the room, and we said no more. His manner towards me had not altered since dinner; and it remained the same during the week of my stay at the Hall. One morning, when we were alone, I took courage, and determined to try the dangerous ground a little, with a view towards my guidance for the future; but I had no sooner begun by some reference to my stay in London, and some apology for it, than he stopped me at once.

"I told you," he said, gravely and coldly, "some months ago, that I had too much faith in your honour to intrude on affairs which you choose to keep

private. Until you have perfect confidence in me, and can speak with complete candour, I will hear nothing. You have not that confidence now--you speak hesitatingly--your eyes do not meet mine fairly and boldly. I tell you again, I will hear nothing which begins with such common-place excuses as you have just addressed to me. Excuses lead to prevarications, and prevarications to--what I will not insult you by imagining possible in your case. You are of age, and must know your own responsibilities and mine. Choose at once, between saying nothing, and saying all."

He waited a moment after he had spoken, and then quitted the room. If he could only have known how I suffered, at that instant, under the base necessities of concealment, I might have confessed everything; and he must have pitied, though he might not have forgiven me.

This was my first and last attempt at venturing towards the revelation of my secret to my father, by hints and half-admissions. As to boldly confessing it, I persuaded myself into a sophistical conviction that such a course could do no good, but might do much harm. When the wedded happiness I had already waited for, and was to wait for still, through so many months, came at last, was it not best to enjoy my married life in convenient secrecy, as long as I could?--best, to abstain from disclosing my secret to my father, until necessity absolutely obliged, or circumstances absolutely invited me to do so? My inclinations conveniently decided the question in the affirmative; and a decision of any kind, right or wrong, was enough to tranquillise me at that time.

So far as my father was concerned, my journey to the country did no good. I might have returned to London the day after my arrival at the Hall, without altering his opinion of me--but I stayed the whole week nevertheless, for Clara's sake.

In spite of the pleasure afforded by my sister's society, my visit was a painful one. The selfish longing to be back with Margaret, which I could not wholly repress; my father's coldness; and the winter gloom and rain which confined us almost incessantly within doors, all tended in their different degrees to prevent my living at ease in the Hall. But, besides these causes of embarrassment, I had the additional mortification of feeling, for the first time, as a stranger in my own home.

Nothing in the house looked to me what it used to look in former years. The rooms, the old servants, the walks and views, the domestic animals, all appeared to have altered, or to have lost something, since I had seen them last. Particular rooms that I had once been fond of occupying, were

favourites no longer: particular habits that I had hitherto always practised in the country, I could only succeed in resuming by an effort which vexed and fretted me. It was as if my life had run into a new channel since my last autumn and winter at the Hall, and now refused to flow back at my bidding into its old course. Home seemed home no longer, except in name.

As soon as the week was over, my father and I parted exactly as we had met. When I took leave of Clara, she refrained from making any allusion to the shortness of my stay; and merely said that we should soon meet again in London. She evidently saw that my visit had weighed a little on my spirits, and was determined to give to our short farewell as happy and hopeful a character as possible. We now thoroughly understood each other; and that was some consolation on leaving her.

Immediately on my return to London I repaired to North Villa.

Nothing, I was told, had happened in my absence, but I remarked some change in Margaret. She looked pale and nervous, and was more silent than I had ever known her to be before, when we met. She accounted for this, in answer to my inquiries, by saying that confinement to the house, in consequence of the raw, wintry weather, had a little affected her; and then changed the subject. In other directions, household aspects had not deviated from their accustomed monotony. As usual, Mrs. Sherwin was at her post in the drawing-room; and her husband was reading the evening paper, over his renowned old port, in the dining-room. After the first five minutes of my arrival, I adapted myself again to my old way of life at Mr. Sherwin's, as easily as if I had never interrupted it for a single day. Henceforth, wherever my young wife was, there, and there only, would it be home for me!

Late in the evening, Mr. Mannion arrived with some business letters for Mr. Sherwin's inspection. I sent for him into the hall to see me, as I was going away. His hand was never a warm one; but as I now took it, on greeting him, it was so deadly cold that it literally chilled mine for the moment. He only congratulated me, in the usual terms, on my safe return; and said that nothing had taken place in my absence--but in his utterance of those few words, I discovered, for the first time, a change in his voice: his tones were lower, and his articulation quicker than usual. This, joined to the extraordinary coldness of his hand, made me inquire whether he was unwell. Yes, he too had been ill while I was away--harassed with hard work, he said. Then apologising for leaving me abruptly, on account of the letters he had brought with him, he returned to Mr. Sherwin, in the dining-room, with a greater appearance of hurry in his manner than I had ever remarked

in it on any former occasion.

I had left Margaret and Mr. Mannion both well--I returned, and found them both ill. Surely this was something that had taken place in my absence, though they all said that nothing had happened. But trifling illnesses seemed to be little regarded at North Villa--perhaps, because serious illness was perpetually present there, in the person of Mrs. Sherwin.

VI.

About six weeks after I had left the Hall, my father and Clara returned to London for the season.

It is not my intention to delay over my life either at home or at North Villa, during the spring and summer. This would be merely to repeat much of what has been already related. It is better to proceed at once to the closing period of my probation; to a period which it taxes my resolution severely to write of at all. A few weeks more of toil at my narrative, and the penance of this poor task-work will be over.

* * * * *

Imagine then, that the final day of my long year of expectation has arrived; and that on the morrow, Margaret, for whose sake I have sacrificed and suffered so much, is at last really to be mine.

On the eve of the great change in my life that was now to take place, the relative positions in which I, and the different persons with whom I was associated, stood towards each other, may be sketched thus:--

My father's coldness of manner had not altered since his return to London. On my side, I carefully abstained from uttering a word before him, which bore the smallest reference to my real situation. Although when we met, we outwardly preserved the usual relations of parent and child, the estrangement between us had now become complete.

Clara did not fail to perceive this, and grieved over it in secret. Other and happier feelings, however, became awakened within her, when I privately hinted that the time for disclosing my secret to my sister was not far off. She grew almost as much agitated as I was, though by very different expectations--she could think of nothing else but the explanation and the surprise in store for her. Sometimes, I almost feared to keep her any longer in suspense; and half regretted having said anything on the subject of the new and absorbing interest of my life, before the period when I could easily have said all.

Mr. Sherwin and I had not latterly met on the most cordial terms. He was dissatisfied with me for not having boldly approached the subject of my marriage in my father's presence; and considered my reasons for still

keeping it secret, as dictated by morbid apprehension, and as showing a total want of proper firmness. On the other hand, he was obliged to set against this omission on my part, the readiness I had shown in meeting his wishes on all remaining points. My life was insured in Margaret's favour; and I had arranged to be called to the bar immediately, so as to qualify myself in good time for every possible place within place-hunting range. My assiduity in making these preparations for securing Margaret's prospects and mine against any evil chances that might happen, failed in producing the favourable effect on Mr. Sherwin, which they must assuredly have produced on a less selfish man. But they obliged him, at least, to stop short at occasional grumblings about my reserve with my father, and to maintain towards me a sort of sulky politeness, which was, after all, less offensive than the usual infliction of his cordiality, with its unfailing accompaniment of dull stories and duller jokes.

During the spring and summer, Mrs. Sherwin appeared to grow feebler and feebler, from continued ill-health. Occasionally, her words and actions--especially in her intercourse with me--suggested fears that her mind was beginning to give way, as well as her body. For instance, on one occasion, when Margaret had left the room for a minute or two, she suddenly hurried up to me, whispering with eager looks and anxious tones:--"Watch over your wife--mind you watch over her, and keep all bad people from her! I've tried to do it--mind you do it, too!" I asked immediately for an explanation of this extraordinary injunction; but she only answered by muttering something about a mother's anxieties, and then returned hastily to her place. It was impossible to induce her to be more explicit, try how I might.

Margaret once or twice occasioned me much perplexity and distress, by certain inconsistencies and variations in her manner, which began to appear shortly after my return to North Villa from the country. At one time, she would become, on a sudden, strangely sullen and silent--at another, irritable and capricious. Then, again, she would abruptly change to the most affectionate warmth of speech and demeanour, anxiously anticipating every wish I could form, eagerly showing her gratitude for the slightest attentions I paid her. These unaccountable alterations of manner vexed and irritated me indescribably. I loved Margaret too well to be able to look philosophically on the imperfections of her character; I knew of no cause given by me for the frequent changes in her conduct, and, if they only proceeded from coquetry, then coquetry, as I once told her, was the last female accomplishment that could charm me in any woman whom I really loved. However, these causes of annoyance and regret--her caprices, and my remonstrances--all passed happily away, as the term of my engagement with Mr. Sherwin approached its end, Margaret's better and lovelier manner returned. Occasionally, she

might betray some symptoms of confusion, some evidences of unusual thoughtfulness--but I remembered how near was the day of the emancipation of our love, and looked on her embarrassment as a fresh charm, a new ornament to the beauty of my maiden wife.

Mr. Mannion continued--as far as attention to my interests went--to be the same ready and reliable friend as ever; but he was, in some other respects, an altered man. The illness of which he had complained months back, when I returned to London, seemed to have increased. His face was still the same impenetrable face which had so powerfully impressed me when I first saw him, but his manner, hitherto so quiet and self-possessed, had now grown abrupt and variable. Sometimes, when he joined us in the drawing-room at North Villa, he would suddenly stop before we had exchanged more than three or four words, murmur something, in a voice unlike his usual voice, about an attack of spasm and giddiness, and leave the room. These fits of illness had something in their nature of the same secrecy which distinguished everything else connected with him: they produced no external signs of distortion, no unusual paleness in his face--you could not guess what pain he was suffering, or where he was suffering it. Latterly, I abstained from ever asking him to join us; for the effect on Margaret of his sudden attacks of illness was, naturally, such as to discompose her seriously for the remainder of the evening. Whenever I saw him accidentally, at later periods of the year, the influence of the genial summer season appeared to produce no alteration for the better in him. I remarked that his cold hand, which had chilled me when I took it on the raw winter night of my return from the country, was as cold as ever, on the warm summer days which preceded the close of my engagement at North Villa.

Such was the posture of affairs at home, and at Mr. Sherwin's, when I went to see Margaret for the last time in my old character, on the last night which yet remained to separate us from each other.

I had been all day preparing for our reception, on the morrow, in a cottage which I had taken for a month, in a retired part of the country, at some distance from London. One month's unalloyed happiness with Margaret, away from the world and all worldly considerations, was the Eden upon earth towards which my dearest hope and anticipations had pointed for a whole year past--and now, now at last, those aspirations were to be realized! All my arrangements at the cottage were completed in time to allow me to return home, just before our usual late dinner hour. During the meal, I provided for my month's absence from London, by informing my father that I proposed visiting one of my country friends. He heard me as coldly and indifferently as usual; and, as I anticipated, did not even ask to what

friend's house I was going. After dinner, I privately informed Clara that on the morrow, before starting, I would, in accordance with my promise, make her the depositary of my long-treasured secret--which, as yet, was not to be divulged to any one besides. This done, I hurried away, between nine and ten o'clock, for a last half-hour's visit to North Villa; hardly able to realise my own situation, or to comprehend the fulness and exaltation of my own joy.

A disappointment was in store for me. Margaret was not in the house; she had gone out to an evening party, given by a maiden aunt of hers, who was known to be very rich, and was, accordingly, a person to be courted and humoured by the family.

I was angry as well as disappointed at what had taken place. To send Margaret out, on this evening of all others, showed a want of consideration towards both of us, which revolted me. Mr. and Mrs. Sherwin were in the room when I entered; and to him I spoke my opinion on the subject, in no very conciliatory terms. He was suffering from a bad attack of headache, and a worse attack of ill-temper, and answered as irritably as he dared.

"My good Sir!" he said, in sharp, querulous tones, "do, for once, allow me to know what's best. You'll have it all your way to-morrow--just let me have mine, for the last time, to-night. I'm sure you've been humoured often enough about keeping Margaret away from parties--and we should have humoured you this time, too; but a second letter came from the old lady, saying she should be affronted if Margaret wasn't one of her guests. I couldn't go and talk her over, because of this infernal headache of mine--Hang it! it's your interest that Margaret should keep in with her aunt; she'll have all the old girl's money, if she only plays her cards decently well. That's why I sent her to the party--her going will be worth some thousands to both of you one of these days. She'll be back by half-past twelve, or before. Mannion was asked; and though he's all out of sorts, he's gone to take care of her, and bring her back. I'll warrant she comes home in good time, when he's with her. So you see there's nothing to make a fuss about, after all."

It was certainly a relief to hear that Mr. Mannion was taking care of Margaret. He was, in my opinion, much fitter for such a trust than her own father. Of all the good services he had done for me, I thought this the best--but it would have been even better still, if he had prevented Margaret from going to the party.

"I must say again," resumed Mr. Sherwin, still more irritably, finding I did not at once answer him, "there's nothing that any reasonable being need

make a fuss about. I've been doing everything for Margaret's interests and yours--and she'll be back by twelve--and Mr. Mannion takes care of her--and I don't know what you would have--and it's devilish hard, so ill as I am too, to cut up rough with me like this--devilish hard!"

"I am sorry for your illness, Mr. Sherwin; and I don't doubt your good intentions, or the advantage of Mr. Mannion's protection for Margaret; but I feel disappointed, nevertheless, that she should have gone out to-night."

"I said she oughtn't to go at all, whatever her aunt wrote--I said that."

This bold speech actually proceeded from Mrs. Sherwin! I had never before heard her utter an opinion in her husband's presence--such an outburst from her, was perfectly inexplicable. She pronounced the words with desperate rapidity, and unwonted power of tone, fixing her eyes all the while on me with a very strange expression.

"Damn it, Mrs. S.!" roared her husband in a fury, "will you hold your tongue? What the devil do you mean by giving your opinion, when nobody wants it? Upon my soul I begin to think you're getting a little cracked. You've been meddling and bothering lately, so that I don't know what the deuce has come to you! I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Basil," he continued, turning snappishly round upon me, "you had better stop that fidgetty temper of yours, by going to the party yourself. The old lady told me she wanted gentlemen; and would be glad to see any friends of mine I liked to send her. You have only to mention my name: Mannion will do the civil in the way of introduction. There! there's an envelope with the address to it--they won't know who you are, or what you are, at Margaret's aunt's--you've got your black dress things on, all right and ready--for Heaven's sake, go to the party yourself, and then I hope you'll be satisfied!"

Here he stopped; and vented the rest of his ill-humour by ringing the bell violently for "his arrow-root," and abusing the servant when she brought it.

I hesitated about accepting his proposal. While I was in doubt, Mrs. Sherwin took the opportunity, when her husband's eye was off her, of nodding her head at me significantly. She evidently wished me to join Margaret at the party--but why? What did her behaviour mean?

It was useless to inquire. Long bodily suffering and weakness had but too palpably produced a corresponding feebleness in her intellect. What should I do? I was resolved to see Margaret that night; but to wait for her between two and three hours, in company with her father and mother at North Villa,

was an infliction not to be endured. I determined to go to the party. No one there would know anything about me. They would be all people who lived in a different world from mine; and whose manners and habits I might find some amusement in studying. At any rate, I should spend an hour or two with Margaret, and could make it my own charge to see her safely home. Without further hesitation, therefore I took up the envelope with the address on it, and bade Mr. and Mrs. Sherwin good-night.

It struck ten as I left North Villa. The moonlight which was just beginning to shine brilliantly on my arrival there, now appeared but at rare intervals; for the clouds were spreading thicker and thicker over the whole surface of the sky, as the night advanced.

VII.

The address to which I was now proceeding, led me some distance away from Mr. Sherwin's place of abode, in the direction of the populous neighbourhood which lies on the western side of the Edgware Road. The house of Margaret's aunt was plainly enough indicated to me, as soon as I entered the street where it stood, by the glare of light from the windows, the sound of dance music, and the nondescript group of cabmen and linkmen, with their little train of idlers in attendance, assembled outside the door. It was evidently a very large party. I hesitated about going in.

My sensations were not those which fit a man for exchanging conventional civilities with perfect strangers; I felt that I showed outwardly the fever of joy and expectation within me. Could I preserve my assumed character of a mere friend of the family, in Margaret's presence?--and on this night too, of all others? It was far more probable that my behaviour, if I went to the party, would betray everything to everybody assembled. I determined to walk about in the neighbourhood of the house, until twelve o'clock; and then to go into the hall, and send up my card to Mr. Mannion, with a message on it, intimating that I was waiting below to accompany him to North Villa with Margaret.

I crossed the street, and looked up again at the house from the pavement opposite. Then lingered a little, listening to the music as it reached me through the windows, and imagining to myself Margaret's occupation at that moment. After this, I turned away; and set forth eastward on my walk, careless in which direction I traced my steps.

I felt little impatience, and no sense of fatigue; for in less than two hours more I knew that I should see my wife again. Until then, the present had no existence for me--I lived in the past and future. I wandered indifferently along lonely bye-streets, and crowded thoroughfares. Of all the sights which attend a night-walk in a great city, not one attracted my notice. Uninformed and unobservant, neither saddened nor startled, I passed through the glittering highways of London. All sounds were silent to me save the love-music of my own thoughts; all sights had vanished before the bright form that moved through my bridal dream. Where was my world, at that moment? Narrowed to the cottage in the country which was to receive us on the morrow. Where were the beings in the world? All merged in one--Margaret.

Sometimes, my thoughts glided back, dreamily and voluptuously, to the day when I first met her. Sometimes, I recalled the summer evenings when we sat and read together out of the same book; and, once more, it was as if I breathed with the breath, and hoped with the hopes, and longed with the old longings of those days. But oftenest it was with the morrow that my mind was occupied. The first dream of all young men--the dream of living rapturously with the woman they love, in a secret retirement kept sacred from friends and from strangers alike, was now my dream; to be realised in a few hours, to be realised with my waking on the morning which was already at hand!

For the last quarter of an hour of my walk, I must have been unconsciously retracing my steps towards the house of Margaret's aunt. I came in sight of it again, just as the sound of the neighbouring church clocks, striking eleven, roused me from my abstraction. More cabs were in the street; more people were gathered about the door, by this time. Was all this bustle, the bustle of arrival or of departure? Was the party about to break up, at an hour when parties usually begin? I determined to go nearer to the house, and ascertain whether the music had ceased, or not.

I had approached close enough to hear the notes of the harp and pianoforte still sounding as gaily as ever, when the house-door was suddenly flung open for the departure of a lady and gentleman. The light from the hall-lamps fell on their faces; and showed me Margaret and Mr. Mannion.

Going home already! An hour and a half before it was time to return! Why?

There could be but one reason. Margaret was thinking of me, and of what I should feel if I called at North Villa, and had to wait for her till past midnight. I ran forward to speak to them, as they descended the steps; but exactly at the same moment, my voice was overpowered, and my further progress barred, by a scuffle on the pavement among the people who stood between us. One man said that his pocket had been picked; others roared to him that they had caught the thief. There was a fight--the police came up--I was surrounded on all sides by a shouting, struggling mob that seemed to have gathered in an instant.

Before I could force myself out of the crowd, and escape into the road, Margaret and Mr. Mannion had hurried into a cab. I just saw the vehicle driving off rapidly, as I got free. An empty cab was standing near me--I jumped into it directly--and told the man to overtake them. After having waited my time so patiently, to let a mere accident stop me from going home with them, as I had resolved, was not to be thought of for a moment. I was

hot and angry, after my contest with the crowd; and could have flogged on the miserable cab-horse with my own hand, rather than have failed in my purpose.

We were just getting closer behind them: I had just put my head out of the window to call to them, and to bid the man who was driving me, call, too--when their cab abruptly turned down a bye-street, in a direction exactly opposite to the direction which led to North Villa.

What did this mean? Why were they not going straight home?

The cabman asked me whether he should not hail them before they got farther away from us; frankly confessing, as he put the question, that his horse was nothing like equal to the pace of the horse ahead. Mechanically, without assignable purpose or motive, I declined his offer, and told him simply to follow at any distance he could. While the words passed my lips, a strange sensation stole over me: I seemed to be speaking as the mere mouthpiece of some other voice. From feeling hot, and moving about restlessly the moment before, I felt unaccountably cold, and sat still now. What caused this?

My cab stopped. I looked out, and saw that the horse had fallen. "We've lots of time, Sir," said the driver, as he coolly stepped off the box, "they are just pulling up further down the road." I gave him some money, and got out immediately--determined to overtake them on foot.

It was a very lonely place--a colony of half-finished streets, and half-inhabited houses, which had grown up in the neighbourhood of a great railway station. I heard the fierce scream of the whistle, and the heaving, heavy throb of the engine starting on its journey, as I advanced along the gloomy Square in which I now found myself. The cab I had been following stood at a turning which led into a long street, occupied towards the farther end, by shops closed for the night, and at the end nearest me, apparently by private houses only. Margaret and Mr. Mannion hastily left the cab, and without looking either to the right or the left, hurried down the street. They stopped at the ninth house. I followed just in time to hear the door closed on them, and to count the number of doors intervening between that door and the Square.

The awful thrill of a suspicion which I hardly knew yet for what it really was, began to creep over me--to creep like a dead-cold touch crawling through and through me to the heart. I looked up at the house. It was an hotel--a neglected, deserted, dreary-looking building. Still acting mechanically; still

with no definite impulse that I could recognise, even if I felt it, except the instinctive resolution to follow them into the house, as I had already followed them through the street--I walked up to the door, and rang the bell.

It was answered by a waiter--a mere lad. As the light in the passage fell on my face, he paused in the act of addressing me, and drew back a few steps. Without stopping for any explanations, I closed the door behind me, and said to him at once:

"A lady and gentleman came into this hotel a little while ago."

"What may your business be?"--He hesitated, and added in an altered tone, "I mean, what may you want with them, Sir?"

"I want you to take me where I can hear their voices, and I want nothing more. Here's a sovereign for you, if you do what I ask."

His eyes fastened covetously on the gold, as I held it before them. He retired a few steps on tiptoe, and listened at the end of the passage. I heard nothing but the thick, rapid beating of my own heart. He came back, muttering to himself: "Master's safe at supper down stairs--I'll risk it! You'll promise to go away directly," he added, whispering to me, "and not disturb the house? We are quiet people here, and can't have anything like a disturbance. Just say at once, will you promise to step soft, and not speak a word?"

"I promise."

"This way then, Sir--and mind you don't forget to step soft."

A strange coldness and stillness, an icy insensibility, a dream-sensation of being impelled by some hidden, irresistible agency, possessed me, as I followed him upstairs. He showed me softly into an empty room; pointed to one of the walls, whispering, "It's only boards papered over--" and then waited, keeping his eyes anxiously and steadily fixed upon all my movements.

I listened; and through the thin partition, I heard voices--her voice, and his voice. I heard and I knew--knew my degradation in all its infamy, knew my wrongs in all their nameless horror. He was exulting in the patience and secrecy which had brought success to the foul plot, foully hidden for months on months; foully hidden until the very day before I was to have claimed as my wife, a wretch as guilty as himself!

I could neither move nor breathe. The blood surged and heaved upward to my brain; my heart strained and writhed in anguish; the life within me raged and tore to get free. Whole years of the direst mental and bodily agony were concentrated in that one moment of helpless, motionless torment. I never lost the consciousness of suffering. I heard the waiter say, under his breath, "My God! he's dying." I felt him loosen my cravat--I knew that he dashed cold water over me; dragged me out of the room; and, opening a window on the landing, held me firmly where the night-air blew upon my face. I knew all this; and knew when the paroxysm passed, and nothing remained of it, but a shivering helplessness in every limb.

Erelong, the power of thinking began to return to me by degrees.

Misery, and shame, and horror, and a vain yearning to hide myself from all human eyes, and weep out my life in secret, overcame me. Then, these subsided; and ONE THOUGHT slowly arose in their stead--arose, and cast down before it every obstacle of conscience, every principle of education, every care for the future, every remembrance of the past, every weakening influence of present misery, every repressing tie of family and home, every anxiety for good fame in this life, and every idea of the next that was to come. Before the fell poison of that Thought, all other thoughts--good or evil--died. As it spoke secretly within me, I felt my bodily strength coming back; a quick vigour leapt hotly through my frame. I turned, and looked round towards the room we had just left--my mind was looking at the room beyond it, the room they were in.

The waiter was still standing by my side, watching me intently. He suddenly started back; and, with pale face and staring eyes, pointed down the stairs.

"You go," he whispered, "go directly! You're well now--I'm afraid to have you here any longer. I saw your look, your horrid look at that room! You've heard what you wanted for your money--go at once; or, if I lose my place for it, I'll call out Murder, and raise the house. And mind this: as true as God's in heaven, I'll warn them both before they go outside our door!"

Hearing, but not heeding him, I left the house. No voice that ever spoke, could have called me back from the course on which I was now bound. The waiter watched me vigilantly from the door, as I went out. Seeing this, I made a circuit, before I returned to the spot where, as I had suspected, the cab they had ridden in was still waiting for them.

The driver was asleep inside. I awoke him; told him I had been sent to say that he was not wanted again that night: and secured his ready departure,

by at once paying him on his own terms. He drove off; and the first obstacle on the fatal path which I had resolved to tread unopposed, was now removed.

As the cab disappeared from my sight, I looked up at the sky. It was growing very dark. The ragged black clouds, fantastically parted from each other in island shapes over the whole surface of the heavens, were fast drawing together into one huge, formless, lowering mass, and had already hidden the moon for, good. I went back to the street, and stationed myself in the pitch darkness of a passage which led down a mews, situated exactly opposite to the hotel.

In the silence and obscurity, in the sudden pause of action while I now waited and watched, my Thought rose to my lips, and my speech mechanically formed it into words. I whispered softly to myself: I will kill him when he comes out. My mind never swerved for an instant from this thought--never swerved towards myself; never swerved towards her. Grief was numbed at my heart; and the consciousness of my own misery was numbed with grief. Death chills all before it--and Death and my Thought were one.

Once, while I stood on the watch, a sharp agony of suspense tried me fiercely.

Just as I had calculated that the time was come which would force them to depart, in order to return to North Villa by the appointed hour, I heard the slow, heavy, regular tramp of a footstep advancing along the street. It was the policeman of the district going his round. As he approached the entrance to the mews he paused, yawned, stretched his arms, and began to whistle a tune. If Mannion should come out while he was there! My blood seemed to stagnate on its course, while I thought that this might well happen. Suddenly, the man ceased whistling, looked steadily up and down the street, and tried the door of a house near him--advanced a few steps--then paused again, and tried another door--then muttered to himself, in drowsy tones--"I've seen all safe here already: it's the other street I forgot just now." He turned, and retraced his way. I fixed my aching eyes vigilantly on the hotel, while I heard the sound of his footsteps grow fainter and fainter in the distance. It ceased altogether; and still there was no change--still the man whose life I was waiting for, never appeared.

Ten minutes after this, so far as I can guess, the door opened; and I heard Mannion's voice, and the voice of the lad who had let me in. "Look about you before you go out," said the waiter, speaking in the passage; "the street's not

safe for you." Disbelieving, or affecting to disbelieve, what he heard, Mannion interrupted the waiter angrily; and endeavoured to reassure his companion in guilt, by asserting that the warning was nothing but an attempt to extort money by way of reward. The man retorted sulkily, that he cared nothing for the gentleman's money, or the gentleman either. Immediately afterwards an inner door in the house banged violently; and I knew that Mannion had been left to his fate.

There was a momentary silence; and then I heard him tell his accomplice that he would go alone to look for the cab, and that she had better close the door and wait quietly in the passage till he came back. This was done. He walked out into the street. It was after twelve o'clock. No sound of a strange footfall was audible--no soul was at hand to witness, and prevent, the coming struggle. His life was mine. His death followed him as fast as my feet followed, while I was now walking on his track.

He looked up and down, from the entrance to the street, for the cab. Then, seeing that it was gone, he hastily turned back. At that instant I met him face to face. Before a word could be spoken, even before a look could be exchanged, my hands were on his throat.

He was a taller and heavier man than I was; and struggled with me, knowing that he was struggling for his life. He never shook my grasp on him for a moment; but he dragged me out into the road--dragged me away eight or ten yards from the street. The heavy gasps of approaching suffocation beat thick on my forehead from his open mouth: he swerved to and fro furiously, from side to side; and struck at me, swinging his clenched fists high above his head. I stood firm, and held him away at arm's length. As I dug my feet into the ground to steady myself, I heard the crunching of stones--the road had been newly mended with granite. Instantly, a savage purpose goaded into fury the deadly resolution by which I was possessed. I shifted my hold to the back of his neck, and the collar of his coat, and hurled him, with the whole impetus of the raging strength that was let loose in me, face downwards, on to the stones.

In the mad triumph of that moment, I had already stooped towards him, as he lay insensible beneath me, to lift him again, and beat out of him, on the granite, not life only, but the semblance of humanity as well; when, in the blank stillness that followed the struggle, I heard the door of the hotel in the street open once more. I left him directly, and ran back from the square--I knew not with what motive, or what idea--to the spot.

On the steps of the house, on the threshold of that accursed place, stood the

woman whom God's minister had given to me in the sight of God, as my wife.

One long pang of shame and despair shot through my heart as I looked at her, and tortured out of its trance the spirit within me. Thousands on thousands of thoughts seemed to be whirling in the wildest confusion through and through my brain--thoughts, whose track was a track of fire--thoughts that struck me with a hellish torment of dumbness, at the very time when I would have purchased with my life the power of a moment's speech. Voiceless and tearless, I went up to her, and took her by the arm, and drew her away from the house. There was some vague purpose in me, as I did this, of never quitting my hold of her, never letting her stir from me by so much as an inch, until I had spoken certain words to her. What words they were, and when I should utter them, I could not tell.

The cry for mercy was on her lips, but the instant our eyes met, it died away in long, low, hysterical moanings. Her cheeks were ghastly, her features were rigid, her eyes glared like an idiot's; guilt and terror had made her hideous to look upon already.

I drew her onward a few paces towards the Square. Then I stopped, remembering the body that lay face downwards on the road. The savage strength of a few moments before, had left me from the time when I first saw her. I now reeled where I stood, from sheer physical weakness. The sound of her pantings and shudderings, of her abject inarticulate murmurings for mercy, struck me with a supernatural terror. My fingers trembled round her arm, the perspiration dripped down my face, like rain; I caught at the railings by my side, to keep myself from falling. As I did so, she snatched her arm from my grasp, as easily as if I had been a child; and, with a cry for help, fled towards the further end of the street.

Still, the strange instinct of never losing hold of her, influenced me. I followed, staggering like a drunken man. In a moment, she was out of my reach; in another, out of my sight. I went on, nevertheless; on, and on, and on, I knew not whither. I lost all ideas of time and distance. Sometimes I went round and round the same streets, over and over again. Sometimes I hurried in one direction, straight forward. Wherever I went, it seemed to me that she was still just before; that her track and my track were one; that I had just lost my hold of her, and that she was just starting on her flight.

I remember passing two men in this way, in some great thoroughfare. They both stopped, turned, and walked a few steps after me. One laughed at me, as a drunkard. The other, in serious tones, told him to be silent; for I was

not drunk, but mad--he had seen my face as I passed under a gas-lamp, and he knew that I was mad.

"MAD!"--that word, as I heard it, rang after me like a voice of judgment. "MAD!"--a fear had come over me, which, in all its frightful complication, was expressed by that one word--a fear which, to the man who suffers it, is worse even than the fear of death; which no human language ever has conveyed, or ever will convey, in all its horrible reality, to others. I had pressed onward, hitherto, because I saw a vision that led me after it--a beckoning shadow, ahead, darker even than the night darkness. I still pressed on, now; but only because I was afraid to stop.

I know not how far I had gone, when my strength utterly failed me, and I sank down helpless, in a lonely place where the houses were few and scattered, and trees and fields were dimly discernible in the obscurity beyond. I hid my face in my hands, and tried to assure myself that I was still in possession of my senses. I strove hard to separate my thoughts; to distinguish between my recollections; to extricate from the confusion within me any one idea, no matter what--and I could not do it. In that awful struggle for the mastery over my own mind, all that had passed, all the horror of that horrible night, became as nothing to me. I raised myself, and looked up again, and tried to steady my reason by the simplest means--even by endeavouring to count all the houses within sight. The darkness bewildered me. Darkness?--Was it dark? or was day breaking yonder, far away in the murky eastern sky? Did I know what I saw? Did I see the same thing for a few moments together? What was this under me? Grass? yes! cold, soft, dewy grass. I bent down my forehead upon it, and tried, for the last time, to steady my faculties by praying; tried if I could utter the prayer which I had known and repeated every day from childhood--the Lord's Prayer. The Divine Words came not at my call--no! not one of them, from the beginning to the end! I started up on my knees. A blaze of lurid sunshine flashed before my eyes; a hell-blaze of brightness, with fiends by millions, raining down out of it on my head; then a rayless darkness--the darkness of the blind--then God's mercy at last--the mercy of utter oblivion.

* * * * *

When I recovered my consciousness, I was lying on the couch in my own study. My father was supporting me on the pillow; the doctor had his fingers on my pulse; and a policeman was telling them where he had found me, and how he had brought me home.